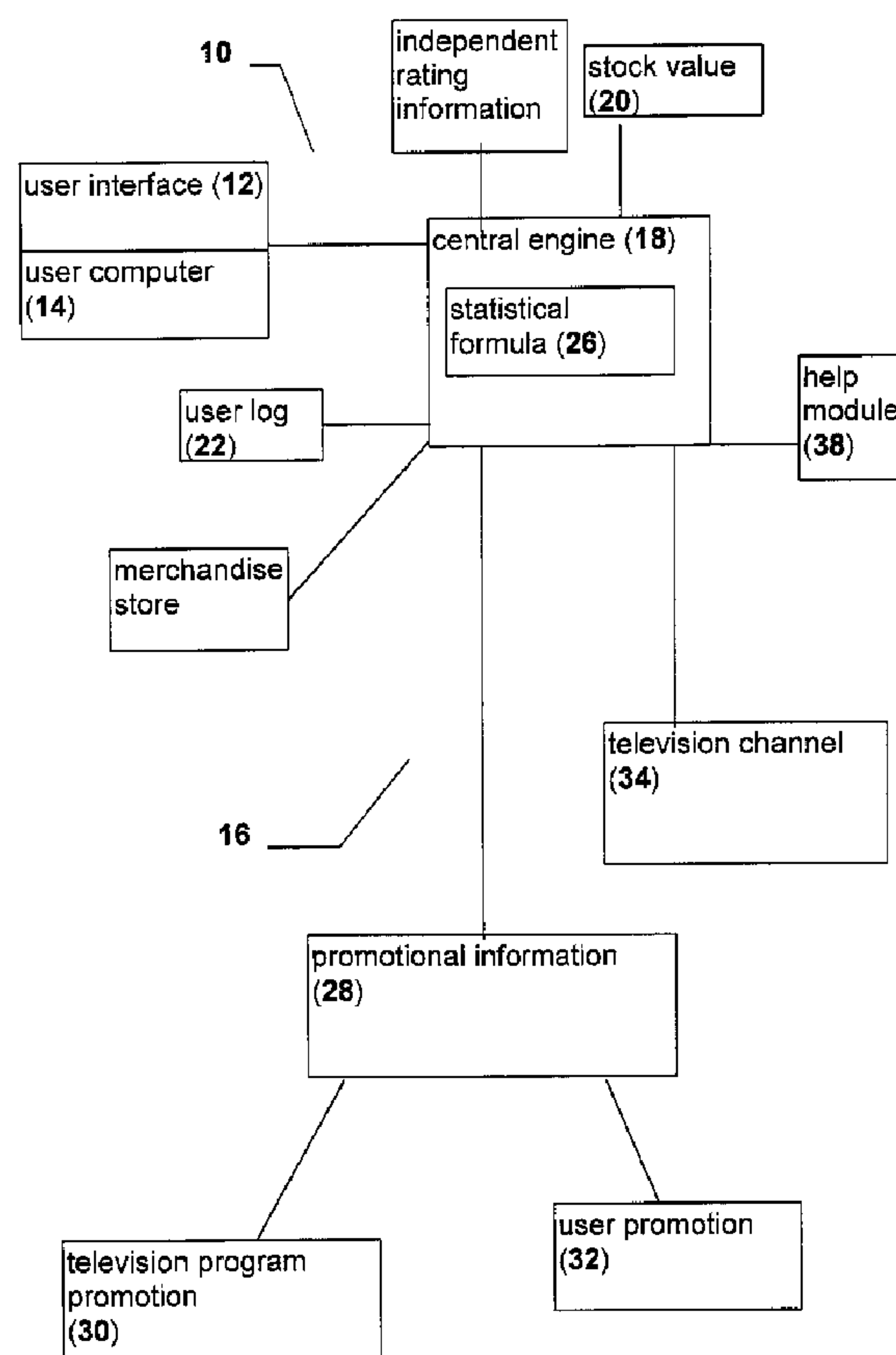




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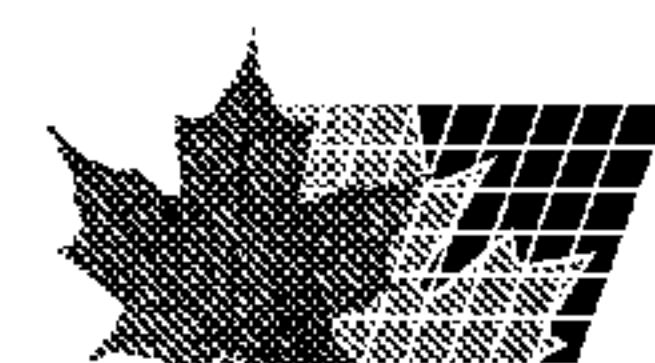
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(54) Titre : DISPOSITIF ET PROCEDE DESTINES A L'INDICE D'ECOUTE VIRTUELLE D'UN PROGRAMME TELEVISE
(54) Title: SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR VIRTUAL TELEVISION PROGRAM RATING



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

A method and a system for combining at least two sources of television program rating information, including at least one source obtained through user input into an electronic interface, to provide a more accurate and focused rating for a particular television



(57) Abrégé(suite)/Abstract(continued):

program. The source of rating information which is obtained through an electronic interface is preferably obtained through the active interaction of the user with a Web browser, for example through an applet or a Web page, or a combination thereof. The advantage of such active interaction is that the user wants to provide the rating information, thereby requiring more involvement by the user than merely passively viewing a television program. Such a system and method is also useful for rating advertisements, for which passive rating methods may not be as effective. Furthermore, more precise demographic information can be obtained through such an interaction with the Web browser, since the user can be requested to enter such precise information. Advertisers are interested in such demographic information, such that the system and method of the present invention may provide useful indicators of the interest of various groups of users in specific television programs. Television networks which schedule television programs are also interested in demographic information in order to be able to select television programs and to promote these television programs more effectively. Thus, the system and method of the present invention is useful for providing more accurate and specific rating information for television programs and advertisements, as well as for promoting these television programs and advertisements.

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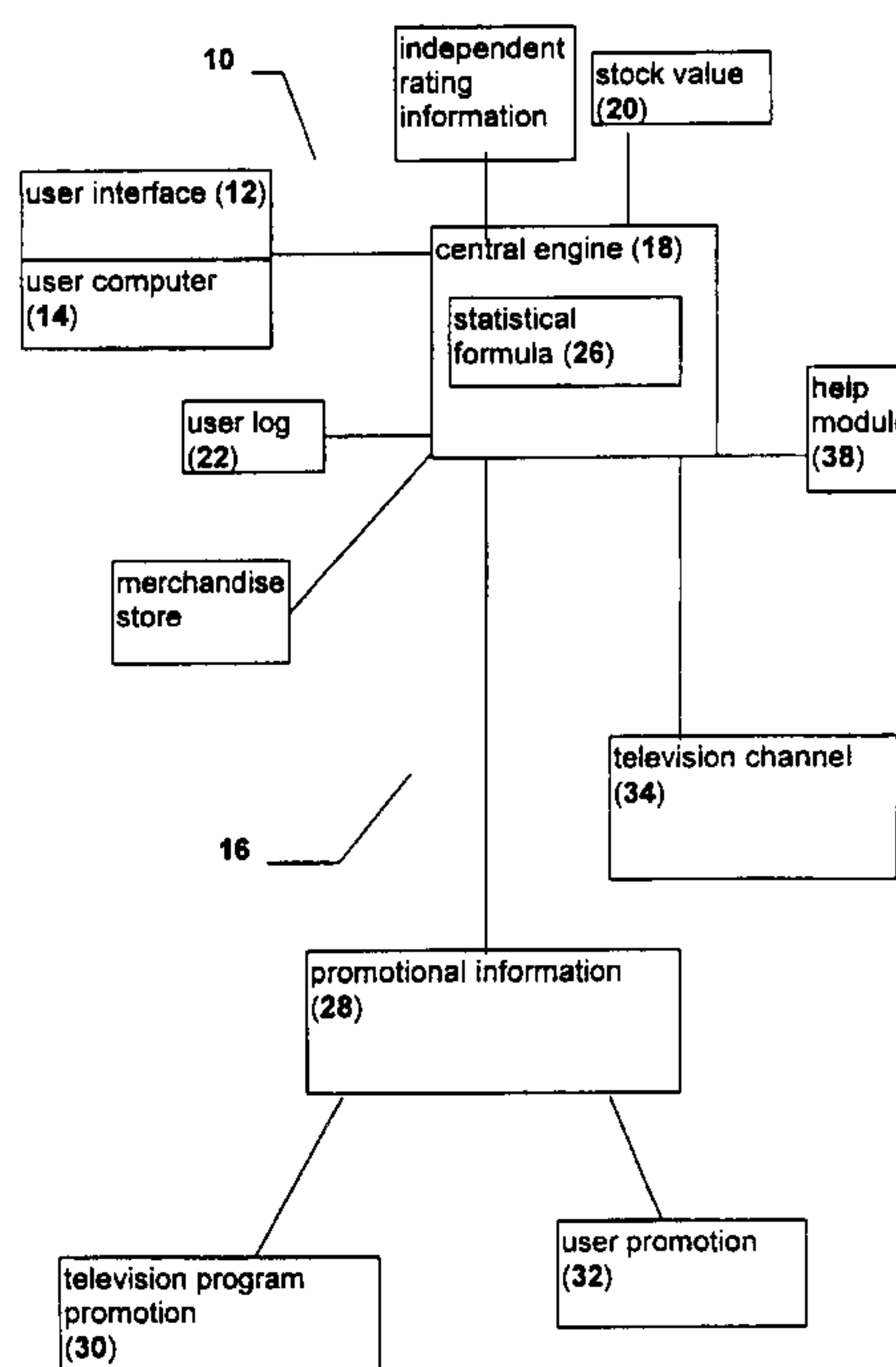
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[Continued on next page]

(54) Title: SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR VIRTUAL TELEVISION PROGRAM RATING



(57) Abstract: A method and a system for combining at least two sources of television program rating information, including at least one source obtained through user input into an electronic interface, to provide a more accurate and focused rating for a particular television program. The source of rating information which is obtained through an electronic interface is preferably obtained through the active interaction of the user with a Web browser, for example through an applet or a Web page, or a combination thereof. The advantage of such active interaction is that the user *wants* to provide the rating information, thereby requiring more involvement by the user than merely passively

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viewing a television program. Such a system and method is also useful for rating advertisements, for which passive rating methods may not be as effective. Furthermore, more precise demographic information can be obtained through such an interaction with the Web browser, since the user can be requested to enter such precise information. Advertisers are interested in such demographic information, such that the system and method of the present invention may provide useful indicators of the interest of various groups of users in specific television programs. Television networks which schedule television programs are also interested in demographic information in order to be able to select television programs and to promote these television programs more effectively. Thus, the system and method of the present invention is useful for providing more accurate and specific rating information for television programs and advertisements, as well as for promoting these television programs and advertisements.

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR VIRTUAL TELEVISION PROGRAM RATING

FIELD AND BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention relates to a system and method for virtual rating of content such as television programs, and in particular, to a system and method for enabling participation of a plurality of users to rate television programs through an electronic interface, preferably in conjunction with at least one additional source of television program rating information. The system and method of the present invention also provide for multi-user participation in an
10 interactive television portal, which preferably features an electronic programming guide with enhanced entertainment and content features.

 The rating of television programs is both inexact and yet highly commercially important. The rating of a program, or the number of viewers watching a particular program, is important for determining advertising revenue which can be charged for that program. Demographic
15 analysis of such rating information is also important, since a program which is intended for children would presumably include advertisements for toys and other items of interest to children, while a television program which is intended for older adults might include advertisements for automobiles and household products, for example. Demographic analysis is used to determine which types of viewers are actually watching a particular program, since a program for children
20 may also be viewed by their caregivers, for example. Such analysis in turn is useful for both determining advertising revenues and the types of advertisements which should be shown to viewers of these television programs.

 However, as noted previously, actually determining these television ratings is very inexact. Currently available methods include the "Nielsen box" of the Nielsen™ rating system (Nielsen
25 Media Research). This "box" is an electronic device which is connected to the television set of a sampled cross-section of television viewers and which detects the television program being watched. Such detection is then used in order to determine the ratings. Other methods include surveys of television viewers. Unfortunately, all of these methods are inexact, as they do not necessarily measure who is watching a particular program, nor do they determine whether a
30 particular program is being actively watched or is merely "background noise". Furthermore, these methods are less suitable for rating advertisements themselves, or even to determine

whether such advertisements have the attention of the viewers. Finally, these methods are passive, in that they cannot be used to actively promote a particular television program.

One attempt to provide an active method for rating movies is disclosed as the “Hollywood Stock Exchange™” (<http://www.hsx.com> as of April 20, 1999), which enables users to buy virtual “stocks” in movies. The price for such virtual stocks is set only according to the estimate of the users as to the gross sales of tickets for the movie before the movie is released, and only according to actual gross sales after the movie is released. Therefore, such a method does not combine at least two sources of rating information in order to determine how much each virtual stock is worth. Furthermore, such a method would not be useful for television programs, which are recurrent and which usually are shown periodically throughout a television season. Thus, the disclosed method is both generally deficient and is also particularly unsuitable for rating television programs.

A more useful system and method would provide an independent measure of the rating for a particular television program, as well as independent demographic analysis of the audience for the program. Such a system and method preferably combines at least two sources of television program rating information, including at least one source obtained through user input into an electronic interface such as a Web browser which would be indicative of the interest of the user in a particular television program, thereby potentially increasing the accuracy of such television program ratings. Such a system and method would also be suitable for determining the level of viewer interest in an advertisement. In addition, such a system and method would also be useful for actually promoting a particular television program. The system and method would also optionally be useful for rating other types of content, such as Web sites, pieces of music such as songs, theater shows, works of art and books, for example. Unfortunately, such a system and method are not currently available.

There is thus a need for, and it would be useful to have, a system and a method for rating a television program, preferably by combining at least two different sources of rating information, including at least one source obtained through user input into an electronic interface such as a Web browser, which would also be useful for determining the interest of viewers in advertisements, which could also be used for promoting television programs, and which could also optionally be used for rating other types of content, such as Web sites, theater shows, pieces of music such as songs, works of art and books, for example. In addition, preferably the system and method would feature an interactive television portal, more preferably including an electronic

programming guide which combines entertainment and content with the required program information.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing and other objects, aspects and advantages will be better understood from the following detailed description of a preferred embodiment of the invention with reference to the drawings, wherein:

FIG. 1 is a schematic block diagram of an exemplary overall system according to the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a flowchart of an exemplary method according to the present invention; and

FIG. 3 is a screenshot of an exemplary screen display for an electronic programming guide according to the present invention.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is of a method and a system for providing an interactive environment for a plurality of users, which enables focused rating information to be gathered from these users about various types of content. These different types of content may optionally include television programs, books, works of art, theater shows, pieces of music such as songs, and Web sites for example, optionally as well as other types of content. According to the examples shown herein, and according to preferred embodiments of the present invention, the content is television programs. According to a particularly preferred embodiment of the present invention, the interactive environment is provided through an interactive television platform, more preferably including the display of one or more television programs through the interactive environment of the present invention.

According to a first preferred aspect of the present invention, the focused rating information is obtained by combining at least two sources of television program rating information, including at least one source obtained through user input into an electronic interface, to provide a more accurate rating for a particular television program. The user input into an electronic interface is preferably embodied as an interactive game, in which the user “invests” in television-related features by purchasing “virtual stocks” in particular television programs, advertisements, and/or actresses and actors with “virtual money”. Since the user is interested in playing the game, the interactive activities optionally provide opportunities for either indirectly assessing the interests of the user and/or for displaying promotional information to the user.

Preferably, the other source of rating information is taken from an actual rating source such as from Nielsen Media Research, for example, while the source obtained through user input into an electronic interface is optionally and preferably calculated as an interest rating extracted from the investments of the players in particular television programs, advertisements, and/or actors or actresses, for example. Alternatively, two internal sources of rating information could optionally be used, in which the other source of internal rating information is obtained through voting or polling, for example.

According to a second preferred aspect of the present invention, the system and method also provide an interactive television portal. The portal preferably includes an electronic programming guide which combines entertainment and content with the required programming information, such as scheduling information for example.

According to the present invention, there is provided a system for rating a television program as a virtual stock by a user, the system comprising: (a) a user log module for storing an amount of the virtual stock owned by the user and for storing an amount of a virtual currency for purchasing the virtual stock; (b) a user interface for displaying the amount of the virtual stock and the amount of the virtual currency to the user; (c) a television program stock value module for storing a price of the virtual stock, the price of the virtual stock at least partially determining the rating; and (d) a central engine connected to the television program stock value module and the user interface, for receiving an order from the user for the virtual stock, for determining the amount of the virtual stock and the amount of the virtual currency in the user log, such that the price of the virtual stock is determined at least partially according to a number of orders being placed for the virtual stock.

According to another embodiment of the present invention, there is provided a method for rating a television program as a virtual stock by a user, the virtual stock having a value, the value corresponding to a rating for the television program, the method comprising the steps of: (a) registering the user; (b) receiving a predetermined amount of virtual currency by the user; (c) logging in by the user; (d) viewing an amount of virtual currency and an amount of virtual stocks owned by the user; (e) placing an order for at least one virtual stock; (f) adjusting the amount of the virtual currency and the amount of virtual stocks according to the order; and (g) calculating the value of the virtual stock from a number of orders for the virtual stock.

According to yet another embodiment of the present invention, there is provided a method for playing an interactive game for promoting a television-related feature to a user through a GUI

(graphical user interface) displayed on a display screen, the method comprising the steps of: (a) providing a virtual stock associated with the television-related feature, the virtual stock having a value, the value corresponding to a rating for the television-related feature; (b) performing a transaction selected from the group consisting of buying and selling with the virtual stock through the GUI; (c) displaying information about a status of the virtual stock on the GUI; (d) exposing the user to promotional information about the television-related feature through the GUI; and (e) extracting statistical and demographic information about the user during the step of exposing the user to promotional information.

According to still another embodiment of the present invention, there is provided a method for displaying an electronic programming guide, the electronic programming guide featuring information about at least one program for at least one channel, the method comprising the steps of: (a) displaying a plurality of icons corresponding to a plurality of channels; (b) selecting an icon corresponding to a channel; (c) dragging the icon to a central display area; and (d) displaying at least one program associated with the channel.

Hereinafter, the term "monetary unit" includes both virtual currency and actual currency of one or more countries.

For purposes of this specification and the accompanying claims the term "entering" refers to any means of supplying data including, but not limited to supply via an input device (e.g. keyboard, display screen, stylus or microphone), supply from a memory device, and transmission of a cookie.

Hereinafter, the term "Web browser" refers to any software program which can display text, graphics, video, sound or other multimedia information, other information, or a combination thereof, from Web pages on World Wide Web sites, or any other UI (user interface). The Web browser is preferably able to operate a program written in the Java or JavaScript programming languages. The term "Web browser" also includes any software application which extracts any amount of data in one or more types of media from HTML (hypertext mark-up language) or any other type of mark-up language, and/or other World Wide Web-based information, including text, images, audio (streaming or downloaded), video (streaming or downloaded), 3D environments (VRML (virtual reality modeling language), MetaStream or others), or any other type of media content present on or through the World Wide Web or the Internet, as well as any type of World Wide Web-based software application.

Hereinafter, the term "Web page" refers to any document written in a mark-up language including, but not limited to, HTML (hypertext mark-up language) or VRML (virtual reality modeling

language), dynamic HTML, XML (extended mark-up language) or related computer languages thereof, or to technologies such as Flash™ technology or that provided by Shockwave™, or any other interactive technology providing duplex two-way information streaming between the GUI of the user and a central system engine, as well as to any collection of such documents reachable through one specific Internet address or at one specific World Wide Web site, or any document obtainable through a particular URL (Uniform Resource Locator). Hereinafter, the term "Web site" refers to at least one Web page, and preferably a plurality of Web pages, virtually connected to form a coherent group. Hereinafter, the term "Web server" refers to a computer or other electronic device which is capable of serving at least one Web page to a Web browser.

Hereinafter, the term "applet" refers to a self-contained software module written in an applet language such as Java or constructed as an ActiveX™ control.

Hereinafter, the term "computer" indicates any type of electronic device which is capable of performing computations, including, but not limited to, personal computers (PC) having an operating system such as DOS, Windows™, OS/2™ or Linux; Macintosh™ computers; computers having JAVA™-OS or BeOS™ as the operating system; thin client computers; "Web TV" electronic devices which combine a television set with at least a partial set of computational functions, preferably including the display of Web pages, as well as any other type of set-top box; console PlayStation™ type devices; and graphical workstations such as the computers of Sun Microsystems™ and Silicon Graphics™, and other computers having some version of the UNIX operating system such as AIX™ or SOLARIS™ of Sun Microsystems™; a PalmPilot™, a PilotPC™, or any other handheld device, portable device for data processing such as a PDA (personal data assistant), a cellular telephone which is WAP-enabled, or an embedded system or device; or any other known and available operating system and computational device.

Hereinafter, the term "Windows™" includes but is not limited to Windows95™, Windows NT™, Windows98™, Windows CE™ and any upgraded versions of these operating systems by Microsoft Corp. (USA).

Hereinafter, the term "display screen" refers to an electronic device which is capable of displaying a GUI (graphical user interface) to a user, including but not limited to a television set, and a monitor or other display device associated with any of the previously described computers.

Hereinafter, the phrase "display a Web page" includes all actions necessary to render at least a portion of the information on the Web page available to the computer user. As such, the phrase includes, but is not limited to, the static visual display of static graphical information, the

audible production of audio information, the animated visual display of animation and the visual display of video stream data.

Hereinafter, the terms “computer user” and “user” both refer to the person who operates the Web browser or other GUI interface and navigates through the system of the present invention by operating a computer.

The method of the present invention could also be described as a plurality of instructions being performed by a data processor, such that the method of the present invention could be implemented as hardware, software, firmware or a combination thereof. For the present invention, a software application could be written in substantially any suitable programming language, which could easily be selected by one of ordinary skill in the art. The programming language chosen should be compatible with the computer according to which the software application is executed. Examples of suitable programming languages include, but are not limited to, C, C++ and Java.

15 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention features a system and method for providing an interactive environment for a plurality of users, which enables focused rating information to be gathered from these users about various types of content. These different types of content may optionally include television programs, books, works of art, pieces of music such as songs, theater shows and Web sites for example. According to the examples shown herein, and according to preferred embodiments of the present invention, the content is television programs. The present invention is preferably implemented as an interactive game, in the user “invests” in television-related features by purchasing “virtual stocks” in particular television programs, advertisements, and/or actresses and actors with “virtual money”. According to a particularly preferred embodiment of the present invention, the interactive environment is provided through an interactive television platform, more preferably including the display of one or more television programs through the interactive environment of the present invention.

According to a first preferred aspect of the present invention, the focused rating information is obtained by combining at least two sources of rating information. Preferably, the additional source of rating information is taken from an actual rating source such as from Nielsen Media Research, for example, while the source obtained through user input into an electronic interface is optionally and preferably calculated as an interest rating extracted from the

investments of the players in particular television programs, advertisements, and/or actors or actresses, for example.

The source of rating information which is obtained through an electronic interface is more preferably obtained through the active interaction of the user with a Web browser, for example through an applet or a Web page, or a combination thereof, which is preferably embodied in the present invention as a game. The user preferably invests in the virtual stocks with some of monetary unit, whether as a virtual currency and/or with an actual currency. The advantage of such active interaction with a game is that the user *wants* to play the game and enjoys this interactive activity, thereby requiring more involvement by the user than merely passively viewing a television program. In turn, the activities of the user through investing in the virtual stocks provide part of the rating information for the rating method of the present invention. Such a system and method is also useful for rating advertisements, for which passive rating methods may not be as effective.

Furthermore, more precise demographic information can be obtained through such an interaction with the Web browser, both because the user can be requested to enter such precise information and particularly because the interactive game of the present invention enables information to be gathered from the user during the process of buying and selling the “virtual stocks”, as well as through interactions with optional promotional activities. Advertisers are interested in such demographic information, such that the system and method of the present invention may provide useful indicators of the interest of various groups of users in specific television programs. Television networks which schedule television programs are also interested in demographic information in order to be able to select television programs and to promote these television programs more effectively. Thus, the system and method of the present invention is useful for providing more accurate and specific rating information for television programs and advertisements, as well as for promoting these television programs and advertisements.

According to a second preferred embodiment of the present invention, there is provided an interactive television portal for use with the previously described interactive television platform, which preferably includes an electronic programming guide. The electronic programming guide more preferably combines entertainment and content with the required television programming information, such as scheduling information for example. Optionally and most preferably, the interactive television portal could also include a live game show, in which the

users would interact with each other through the interactive television portal, in order to trade stocks for television programs and/or bid against each other for such stocks.

According to other preferred embodiments of the present invention, the user may optionally receive assistance from a virtual electronic host, which would preferably be an animated character. This animated character would more preferably be able to speak to the user, answer questions and otherwise provide guidance for operating the system of the present invention.

The principles and operation of a system and a method according to the present invention may be better understood with reference to the drawings and the accompanying description, it being understood that these drawings are given for illustrative purposes only and are not meant to be limiting. Furthermore, although the description below centers around television programs, it is understood that this is intended as an example only and is without any intention of being limiting in any way.

Referring now to the drawings, Figure 1 is a schematic block diagram of an exemplary overall system according to the present invention. Although the system is described with regard to an interface which is provided by a computer connected to a network such as the Internet, it is understood that this is for the purposes of description only and is without any intention of being limiting, as the present invention could also be operative with an interactive television platform as previously described.

A system 10 features an electronic user interface 12, through which the user interacts with system 10. User interface 12 could be a Web browser, displaying a Web page and/or an applet, for example. Alternatively, user interface 12 could be a dedicated client software program, preferably with a GUI (graphical user interface). User interface 12 is operated by a user computer 14, which could substantially any type of computer as previously described. Optionally, user computer 14 could be a dedicated electronic device for the operation of user interface 12, for example as a publicly available kiosk.

User computer 14 is connected to a server computer 16, which again could be substantially any type of suitable computer as previously described, or even a combination of two or more such computers. Server computer 16 preferably operates a number of software modules according to the present invention. Alternatively, as previously described, these software modules could also be implemented as firmware, hardware or a combination thereof. It should be noted that these modules are described only as separate functional entities for the purposes of

clarity, and that these modules could be combined into a single software program, or firmware or hardware device, for example.

A central engine module **18** receives information from the other modules and performs any necessary analyses or calculations, as described in greater detail below. In particular, central engine module **18** manages a television program stock value module **20**, which includes all of the values for different television programs, each of which is represented by a particular “virtual stock”. The value for a particular television program virtual stock is preferably calculated according to a combination of at least two independent sources of rating information, as described in greater detail below. Such a value for the virtual stock is also, in effect, a type of rating for the television program itself. Preferably, the user is required to hold a minimum number of different types of virtual stocks at all times, such as at least fifteen to twenty stocks for example.

Optionally and preferably, other types of virtual stocks include those representing advertisements, actors and actresses, and/or “group stocks”. These group stocks are traded through a particular type of “buy” or “sell” orders, in which investments are bought and sold in all members of the group. For example, a user can invest in global NBC stocks, which in turn will be treated as investing in all television programs broadcast by the NBC television broadcasting company, with a different risk factor and a stock value which is dependent on the stock values for the individual television programs which compose the group.

Central engine module **18** receives orders for buying or selling these virtual stocks from the user through user interface **12** and user computer **14**. Preferably, different types of stock orders are possible. For example, the user could request that the order could be executed immediately. Alternatively and preferably, the user could request that the order only be executed if the stock has a certain value, for example that the stock be at, or below, a certain value for “buy” orders. Other types of stock orders are described in greater detail with regard to Figure 2.

Preferably, the currency which is exchanged as a result of these orders is a virtual currency, which only has value within system **10**. As described in greater detail in Figure 2, the user is preferably given a certain amount of virtual currency when first interacting with system **10** through user interface **12**. The amount of this virtual currency which is owned by the user is preferably stored in a user log **22**. This amount is then either debited or credited, for “buy” or “sell” orders, respectively. In addition, preferably the names and amounts of the virtual stocks

which are owned by the user are also stored in user log 22. More preferably, the user can view the contents of user log 22 through user interface 12.

Optionally and preferably, the values for each television program virtual stock, or hence the ratings for each television program, are displayed to the user through user interface 12.

5 Preferably, these values are displayed continuously during the operation of user interface 12. Alternatively, these values are displayed intermittently, preferably at least upon user request through user interface 12, although these values could also be displayed periodically without such a request. More preferably, these values are displayed in the form of a "ticker tape" at one portion of user interface 12, which simulates the ticker tape display used to show information for
10 actual stocks in actual stock markets.

Central engine module 18 also receives user information from the user through user interface 12 and user computer 14. This user information preferably includes personal information about the user, such as the age and gender of the user, the occupation of the user and the salary range of the user. Of course, optionally other and/or substitute user information could
15 be requested. This user information is optionally and preferably gathered for demographic analysis of the users by central engine module 18 in order to provide a demographic profile of these users.

Central engine 18 also preferably determines the values of the virtual stocks by combining at least two separate sources of rating information. One source of rating information is
20 determined according to the number of "buy" or "sell" orders placed for a particular virtual stock. A second source of rating information is preferably an independent source provided through independent rating information module 24. By "independent", it is meant that the source is outside of, and hence independent of, system 10. More preferably, this independent source is a regular source of television program rating information, such as that available from Nielsen Media
25 Research Inc. or other rating companies.

Preferably, the step of combining these sources of rating information is performed according to a statistical formula module 26, which determines the relative weight of each type of rating information in the final calculation. Optionally, this statistical formula is adjusted for different types of virtual stocks. For example, an advertisement may not have an independent
30 rating, such that the value of the virtual stock would depend entirely upon the "buy" and "sell" orders. Also optionally, individual television actors and actresses could also be associated with

virtual stocks, which also may not have an independent rating. The final calculated value is then provided to central engine 18.

The initial values of any new stocks are preferably determined as follows. First, at least one programming factor related to the television program is converted to a numerical value, preferably according to an empirically determined conversion factor. This numerical value forms the program value, which may be considered to be equivalent to the “company value” for actual companies in actual stock markets. The program value is then divided into a plurality of stock units, the number of which may be static but may alternatively be dynamic.

Examples of these programming factors include, but are not limited to, production network and/or channel type; broadcasting network and/or channel type; program category, type and rank; individual cast and production personnel rating, if available from previous television programs; seasonal or other timing factors, such as premiere season, special event program, one-time showing of the program, rerun of the program and so forth; Nielsen or other outside rating information; editorial factor; and other optional applicable factors.

According to preferred features of the present invention, on the first day of trading of the new stock, a specific portion of the total shares is available for sale to the players (users of system 10). This portion may be static, but again alternatively may be dynamic. Those shares which are not available for sale are more preferably held by the “bank”, or central engine 18. These non-available shares are optionally released upon the occurrence of specific events and/or specific conditions. In addition, more preferably, central engine 18 can determine that a split of stock units should occur.

Optional but preferred features of system 10 include a promotional information module 28. Promotional information module 28 preferably includes various games, quizzes and other interactive activities for the user to operate through user interface 12. These activities can optionally be used to gather additional user information, and to promote new and existing television programs, advertisements, actors and actresses, as well as other personnel. In addition, preferably these activities are used to gather user feedback about proposed, newly launched and/or existing television programs. In order to encourage the user to perform these activities, optionally and more preferably, various prizes and other rewards are offered to the user.

In addition, more preferably promotional information module 28 provides chat and discussion forums which enable different users to interact and to communicate with each other, as well as to discuss their favorite television programs, actors and actresses for example.

Promotional information module **28** optionally and preferably includes two types of promotional information: promotional information for each television program, provided through a television program promotional module **30**; and promotional information for system **10**, provided through a user promotional module **32**.

5 Television program promotional module **30** optionally and preferably provides such information as details of previous episodes of a particular television program; selected details of future episodes, provided as “sneak previews”; gossip and other information about the actors and actresses in a particular television program; and “behind the scenes” information about the production of various television programs. In addition, television program promotional module
10 **30** optionally and more preferably provides such information in the form of graphics, audio and video clips, in particular to obtain user feedback about new advertisements and television programs.

 Television program promotional module **32** is preferably presented to the user in the form of an information center for television programs. This center preferably includes an archive of
15 detailed information on programs, advertisements, production issues, actors and a lot of related information, through which the user can browse to receive real-time, or close to real-time, updated information on the television programs, advertisements, actors and actresses, and virtual stocks of interest. For example, the information could be presented through a series of Web pages, optionally and preferably supported with applets and other browser-related technologies,
20 which would enable the user through browse through a series of hyper-links in order to obtain the information of interest. Of course, system **10** could also optionally be instructed to control the presentation of this information to the user, such that particular television programs could be promoted for example.

 User promotional module **32** promotes system **10** to the user, for example by awarding
25 prizes as previously described; by rating the performance of users according to the amount of virtual currency and/or virtual stock in user log **22**, or according to the biggest gain in virtual currency and/or virtual stock in user log **22**, for example. Optionally and more preferably, user promotional module **32** enables members to invite other individuals to join system **10**. Most preferably, one or more display screens which are shown to the user feature a button or other
30 GUI (graphical user interface) gadget to “invite a friend”. Selecting or otherwise “clicking on” this gadget opens a form for various types of information, which preferably includes but is not limited to, an e-mail address of the friend, information on access to system **10**, and a

system-generated referral code to identify both the user and the friend. A message is then sent to the e-mail address of the friend. Upon registration, the user can specify the referral code, which after verification, more preferably gives both the old and new users with bonus credits.

Other optional but preferred features of system 10 include a television channel module 34 for enabling the user to view entire television programs. Television channel module 34 is preferably provided when user computer 14 is implemented as Web TV, for reasons of bandwidth. Television channel module 34 would enable system 10 to interface to the entire television viewing experience of the user, and to act as a gateway for such viewing. Optionally and preferably, central engine 18 would measure the period of time that a particular television program was displayed through television channel module 34.

The viewing choices of the user could also optionally and more preferably be used for the collection of more accurate statistical and demographic information concerning television programs, since the precise length of time any television program is being viewed could be determined. In addition, the identity of the user who is watching the television program could also optionally be more precisely determined, since the user would have preferably entered a password or other user identifying information in order to access the game of the present invention. Thus, Web TV is a preferred platform for the operation of the system and method of the present invention.

Also optionally and preferably, a merchandise store module 36 is provided to enable the user to purchase merchandise related to television programs. More preferably, prizes in the form of discounts can be used to purchase such merchandise at a reduced price. Also more preferably, the virtual currency can be "spent" at merchandise store module 36 in order to obtain free or reduced price merchandise. Merchandise store module 36 can optionally and more preferably feature an advertising minisite, or separate display (not shown), which would preferably include such information as the production, product information, brand, manufacturer, advertising agency, special appearances or cast members, personnel and other related advertising information. Such information is preferably derived from advertisements which are also rated according to the present invention, and may optionally include any "tie-in" or product connections to merchandise store module 36.

In addition, optionally and preferably a help module 38 is provided in order to help the user through user interface 12. Help module 38 is able to explain the rules and regulations of system 10. Optionally and preferably, help module 38 interacts with the user in the form of an

animated virtual character or host, who is able to “speak” to the user, either through an audio or video stream, and/or through still text or graphics. This virtual electronic host would more preferably be able to speak to the user, answer questions and otherwise provide guidance for operating the system of the present invention.

5 Figure 2 shows a flowchart for describing the method according to the present invention. In step 1, the user registers with the system for the first time. Such registration preferably involves the steps of entering a user name and a user password. More preferably, registration includes the step of entering an e-mail (electronic mail) address for the user. Other optional user information which could be entered includes, but is not limited to, personal information about the
10 user, such as the age and gender of the user, the occupation of the user and the salary range of the user.

In step 2, the registered user receives a predetermined amount of virtual currency, which can be used to buy television program virtual stocks as described in greater detail below.

In step 3, the user logs into the system, preferably by providing a user name and/or user
15 password. It should be noted that steps 1 and 2 are only performed the first time that the user interacts with the system of the present invention, such that the process would optionally begin with step 3 if such registration had been previously performed. However, also optionally, the user could enter the personal information for registration when there is a change in any of the user information which was previously provided to the system

20 Next, in step 4, the user views the user log, in order to determine how much virtual currency is available in the virtual currency account, and how many virtual stocks have been bought and are now stored in the user log. Optionally and preferably, the user also views the value of at least one virtual stock. Also optionally and preferably, in step 5 the user requests help from the system. It should be noted that such help preferably can be requested at any time during
25 the interaction of the user with the system.

In step 6, the user places an order to buy or sell a particular stock or stocks. Preferably, this step could be implemented in a number of different ways. For example, the user could request that the order is executed immediately. Alternatively and preferably, the user could request that the order only be executed if the stock has a certain value, for example that the stock
30 be at, or below, a certain value for “buy” orders. The user could preferably also request that the stock be at, or above, a certain rating value for “sell” orders. The user could preferably also

request that the order be executed at a certain time, for example at the end of the day, or only after the particular television program has been shown again.

Preferably, the user places the order through an order form, which contains the information required for the system to execute the order for stocks. The form preferably includes
5 an opportunity to enter such information as the name of the stock, the amount of stock units, whether the order is to buy or sell, any market price limit which is desired, and any type of expiration period which is desired.

After the order has been executed, the virtual currency account of the user is debited or credited, according to the type of order, in step 7. Preferably, the user is not allowed to spend
10 more virtual currency to buy stocks than the amount of currency which is available in the user log, and cannot sell more virtual stocks than those which are held in the user log. Optionally, the virtual currency account of the user is charged a "transaction fee" for each order, in order to prevent spurious trading or malicious attempts to disrupt the functioning of the system.

In step 8, the system calculates the value of each virtual stock for each television program.
15 Preferably, this step is performed by combining at least two separate sources of rating information. One source of rating information is determined according to the number of "buy" or "sell" orders placed for a particular virtual stock. A second source of rating information is preferably an independent source, which more preferably is a regular source of television program rating information, such as that available from Nielsen Media Research Inc. or other rating
20 companies.

Preferably, the step of combining these sources of rating information is performed according to a statistical formula, which determines the relative weight of each type of rating information in the final calculation. Optionally, this statistical formula is adjusted for different types of virtual stocks.

25 In step 9, the user optionally interacts with various promotional activities, for example for promoting a particular television program, actor or actress, and/or for promoting the system itself. In step 10, preferably the user is awarded a prize for performing such interactions.

The method of the present invention is particularly suitable for implementation as a business method embodied in software, in that the game is a useful commercial tool. For
30 example, as noted previously, the user is optionally and preferably exposed to promotional information through promotional activities. The user is preferably encouraged to participate in these activities by being awarded prizes. Therefore, the user has an incentive to receive such

commercially important information, which could be used to promote a television program, for example. In addition, optionally and preferably, the system of the present invention is able to gather statistical and demographic information about the users with regard to both the television programs and with regard to information about the users themselves, which is also commercially important. Thus, the method of the present invention is a useful business method, which would preferably include the steps of: buying and/or selling virtual stocks as previously described; displaying information about the status of the user on the GUI of the system of the present invention; exposing the user to promotional information through this GUI; and extracting statistical and demographic information about the user during such exposure to promotional information.

Another embodiment of the present invention is the implementation of the method and system of the present invention with Web TV or other interactive television technologies. The term "Web TV" generally refers to interactive television, in which the user interacts with the television screen rather than simply passively viewing the television program. Web TV is a particularly preferred embodiment for implementing both the system and the method of the present invention. The game of the present invention is particularly suitable for Web TV, since the GUI of the game could provide a seamless interface for operation of Web TV. For example, the user could select and view television programs through the GUI of the system of the present invention when implemented with Web TV. In addition, the user could also optionally and preferably create a viewing package of a plurality of television programs which are of interest. The game of the present invention could therefore act as a portal to the television programs, since the user could play the game and at the same time watch the television programs, thereby providing the user with interactive Web TV.

The game is preferably implemented with several interactive television technologies for enriching the experience of the user. For example, the PIP (picture-in-picture) technology could be used to display a "picture" container within another "picture" container. Each container would hold and display video, audio, text and other types of media, such that the user would be presented with a full UI (user interface) which could then be manipulated and/or customized as desired. In the context of the game, the user could view the television program while simultaneously interacting with the game of the present invention. For example, the user could request information about a particular television program and then watch the program itself while examining the information. The PIP technology also enables other types of interactive television

technologies to be incorporated within the game of the present invention, such as VOD (video-on-demand) and RP (remote programming), as described in greater detail below. The user is thus provided with more options for customizing and adjusting the UI, and hence interactions with the game of the present invention, such that these interactions can be measured, analyzed and processed for more accurate statistical and demographic data collection.

The second useful type of interactive television technology, VOD, enables premium and/or pay-per-view television programs to be delivered to the user upon request. The user can request a particular program and then receive it for an individual viewing experience, such that requested television programs are directed to those who are interested in viewing them. In addition, VOD enables the system and method of the present invention to collect more information on the preferences of the user and on other aspects of the viewing habits of the user, such as the time of day that the television programs are viewed, the length of viewing, the general preferred type of television program, and other user information. Such user information can then be used to extract useful statistical and demographic information by the system of the present invention, which is commercially important data to collect, particularly in conjunction with other information about the user which is supplied from other aspects of the game of the present invention.

The third type of useful interactive television technology is RP, which enables the user to construct a preferred viewing schedule for the television programs. Such a schedule can optionally be constructed entirely according to the requests of the user, although optionally the system could add further programming and /or information where required to fill any gaps in the schedule. For example, the system could add commercial advertisements, promotional campaign video, audio or text data, or any other type of media content which the system wishes to promote to the user. All of this media content is optionally selected according to the profile of the user which is obtained from the other interactive technologies described previously, and optionally and preferably also from the interaction by the user with the game of the present invention.

RP is also optionally employed in conjunction with additional hardware devices, such as computers, VCR's and PDA's to enable the user to receive personalized information, television programs, and other types of media content. The RP technology itself optionally and preferably instructs the hardware device to perform certain actions, such as recording a particular television program or receiving stock market or other information, for example.

Interactive television also enables the user to enter direct input into the system and method of the present invention, such that all of the activities of the user within the system can be recorded and/or optionally processed directly in real time. Thus, the total viewing experience and interaction of the user with the game of the present invention can be examined, analyzed and
5 recorded.

Figure 3 shows a screenshot of an exemplary screen display for an electronic programming guide, particularly for an interactive television portal. The present invention is generally useful with implementation with interactive television, since the system of the present invention could optionally feature one or more channels of actual programming material with
10 interactive television. The electronic programming guide of the present invention would be useful for such interactive television systems, since it combines content and entertainment with programming schedule information, such as the time of day and date of the programs for example.

A guide display 40 features a category listing 42 at the left, and a channel listing 44 at the
15 right. Category listing 42 enables the user to select programming from which types of categories is displayed. The user preferably "drags and drops" a channel 46 from channel listing 44 to a central display panel 48 in order to be able to view programming from a particular television channel. Once each channel 46 is located at central display panel 48, channel 46 then features a list of one or more programs 50 within a particular time period. Optionally, the time period can
20 be for 24 hours for each channel 46.

The user can preferably select the date from a date selector 52, shown at the bottom of central display panel 48. The date and time at which programming is shown can optionally and preferably be synchronized for all channels 46 through a synchronization button 54.

Guide display 40 has a number of advantages, in that the user can select which channels
25 46 are of interest, and can also optionally limit the program listings according to one or more categories of television programs. In addition, only information from those channels 46 which are of interest is featured in central display panel 48, thereby enabling the user to immediately view information which is relevant. The selectivity of the display of information clearly differentiates guide display 40 from other program listing displays which are known in the art, such as those
30 which involve a fixed table of program listing information.

Optionally and most preferably, the interactive television portal could also include a live game show, in which the users would interact with each other through the interactive television

portal, in order to trade stocks for television programs and/or bid against each other for such stocks (not shown).

- 5 It will be appreciated that the above descriptions are intended only to serve as examples, and that many other embodiments are possible within the spirit and the scope of the present invention.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A system for rating a television program as a virtual stock by a user, the system comprising:
 - (a) a user log module for storing an amount of the virtual stock owned by the user and for storing an amount of a virtual currency for purchasing the virtual stock;
 - (b) a user interface for displaying said amount of the virtual stock and said amount of said virtual currency to the user;
 - (c) a television program stock value module for storing a price of the virtual stock, said price of the virtual stock at least partially determining the rating; and
 - (d) a central engine connected to said television program stock value module and said user interface, for receiving an order from the user for the virtual stock, for determining said amount of the virtual stock and said amount of said virtual currency in said user log, such that said price of the virtual stock is determined at least partially according to a number of orders being placed for the virtual stock.
2. The system of claim 1, further comprising:
 - (e) an independent rating information module for providing independent rating information about the television program such that said central engine combines said independent rating information and said number of orders for the virtual stock to determine said price of the virtual stock.
3. The system of claim 2, wherein said independent rating information is obtained from a regular television program rating provider.
4. The system of claim 3, wherein said central engine further comprises: a statistical formula module for combining said independent rating information and said number of orders for the virtual stock according to a weighting function.
5. The system of claim 1, wherein said user interface is a Web browser.

6. The system of claim 5, wherein said Web browser displays a GUI (graphical user interface) selected from the group consisting of a Web page and an applet.
7. The system of claim 6, further comprising:
 - (e) a Web TV device for operating said user interface, said Web TV device being connected to said central engine.
8. The system of claim 7, further comprising:
 - (g) a television channel for displaying at least one television program on said Web TV device, said television channel being connected to said central engine, such that said central engine measures a period of time for displaying said at least one television program.
9. The system of claim 8, wherein said television channel forms a portion of an interactive television system, such that said central engine supports an interactive television portal.
10. The system of claim 9, further comprising:
 - (h) an electronic programming guide for displaying information about at least one television channel, said television channel being selected by dragging and dropping an icon corresponding to said television channel.
11. The system of claim 5, further comprising:
 - (f) a help module for providing assistance to the user through said Web browser.
12. The system of claim 11, wherein said assistance is provided through an animated character displayed on said Web browser.
13. The system of claim 1, further comprising:
 - (e) a promotional information module connected to said central engine for displaying promotional information to the user through said user interface.

14. The system of claim 13, wherein said promotional information includes at least one interactive activity for interaction with the user through said user interface.

15. The system of claim 14, wherein the user receives a prize for performing said at least one interactive activity, said prize being stored in said user log.

16. The system of claim 15, further comprising:

(f) a merchandise store module for providing merchandise for purchase by the user according to a merchandise price, such that the user receives a reduction in said merchandise price according to said prize.

17. The system of claim 14, wherein said at least one interactive activity is a game.

18. The system of claim 13, wherein said promotional information module further comprises a television program promotional module for providing promotional information about the television program.

19. The system of claim 13, wherein said promotional information module further comprises a user promotional module for providing promotional information about the system.

20. The system of claim 1, further comprising:

(e) a merchandise store module for providing merchandise for purchase by the user according to a merchandise price, such that the user receives a reduction in said merchandise price according to at least a portion of said amount of said virtual currency.

21. The system of claim 1, wherein said merchandise store module further features an advertising minisite, for displaying information about at least one advertisement having an associated virtual stock.

22. A method for rating a television program as a virtual stock by a user, the virtual stock having a value, the value corresponding to a rating for the television program, the method comprising the steps of:

- (a) registering the user;
- (b) receiving a predetermined amount of virtual currency by the user;
- (c) logging in by the user;
- (d) viewing an amount of virtual currency and an amount of virtual stocks owned by the user;
- (e) placing an order for at least one virtual stock;
- (f) adjusting said amount of said virtual currency and said amount of virtual stocks according to said order;
- (g) calculating the value of the virtual stock from a number of orders for the virtual stock.

23. The method of claim 22, comprising the additional step of:

- (h) receiving independent rating information for the television program wherein the value of the virtual stock is calculated from a number of orders for the virtual stock and said independent rating information.

24. The method of claim 22, wherein the user is required to purchase a minimum number of virtual stocks.

25. The method of claim 22, wherein step (a) further comprises the step of:

- (i) entering a user name and a user password.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein step (a) further comprises the steps of:

- (ii) entering an e-mail (electronic mail) address for the user; and
- (iii) entering personal information about the user selected from the group consisting of age and gender of the user, occupation of the user and salary range of the user.

27. The method of claim 22, wherein step (d) further comprises the step of requesting help by the user.

28. The method of claim 22, wherein step (e) further comprises the step of viewing a value of at least one virtual stock.

29. The method of claim 28, wherein step (e) includes the step of buying the virtual stock.

30. The method of claim 29, wherein step (e) further includes the step of requesting that the step of buying the virtual stock is performed only if said value of the virtual stock is at or below a predetermined amount.

31. The method of claim 28, wherein step (e) includes the step of selling the virtual stock.

32. The method of claim 31, wherein step (e) further includes the step of requesting that the step of selling the virtual stock is performed only if said value of the virtual stock is at or above a predetermined amount.

33. The method of claim 31, wherein step (e) further comprises the step of subtracting a transaction fee from said amount of virtual currency for each order.

34. The method of claim 28, wherein step (e) is executed immediately.

35. The method of claim 28, wherein step (e) is executed after the television program corresponding to the virtual stock has been shown.

36. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of combining these sources of rating information is performed according to a statistical formula for determining relative weight of said independent rating information and said number of orders for the virtual stock.

37. The method of claim 22, further comprising the steps of:
(h) interacting with a promotional activity by the user; and

- (i) receiving a prize for performing step (h).

38. A method for playing an interactive game for promoting a television-related feature to a user through a GUI (graphical user interface) displayed on a display screen, the method comprising the steps of:

- (a) providing a virtual stock associated with the television-related feature, said virtual stock having a value, said value corresponding to a rating for the television-related feature;
- (b) performing a transaction selected from the group consisting of buying and selling with said virtual stock through the GUI;
- (c) displaying information about a status of said virtual stock on the GUI;
- (d) exposing the user to promotional information about the television-related feature through the GUI; and
- (e) extracting statistical and demographic information about the user during the step of exposing the user to promotional information.

39. The method of claim 38, wherein the television-related feature is selected from the group consisting of a television program, an actor, an actress, an advertisement and a combination thereof.

40. A method for rating a content, selected from the group consisting of a television program, a book, a piece of music, a theater show, a work of art and a Web site, as a virtual stock by a user, the virtual stock having a value, the value corresponding to a rating for the content, the method comprising the steps of:

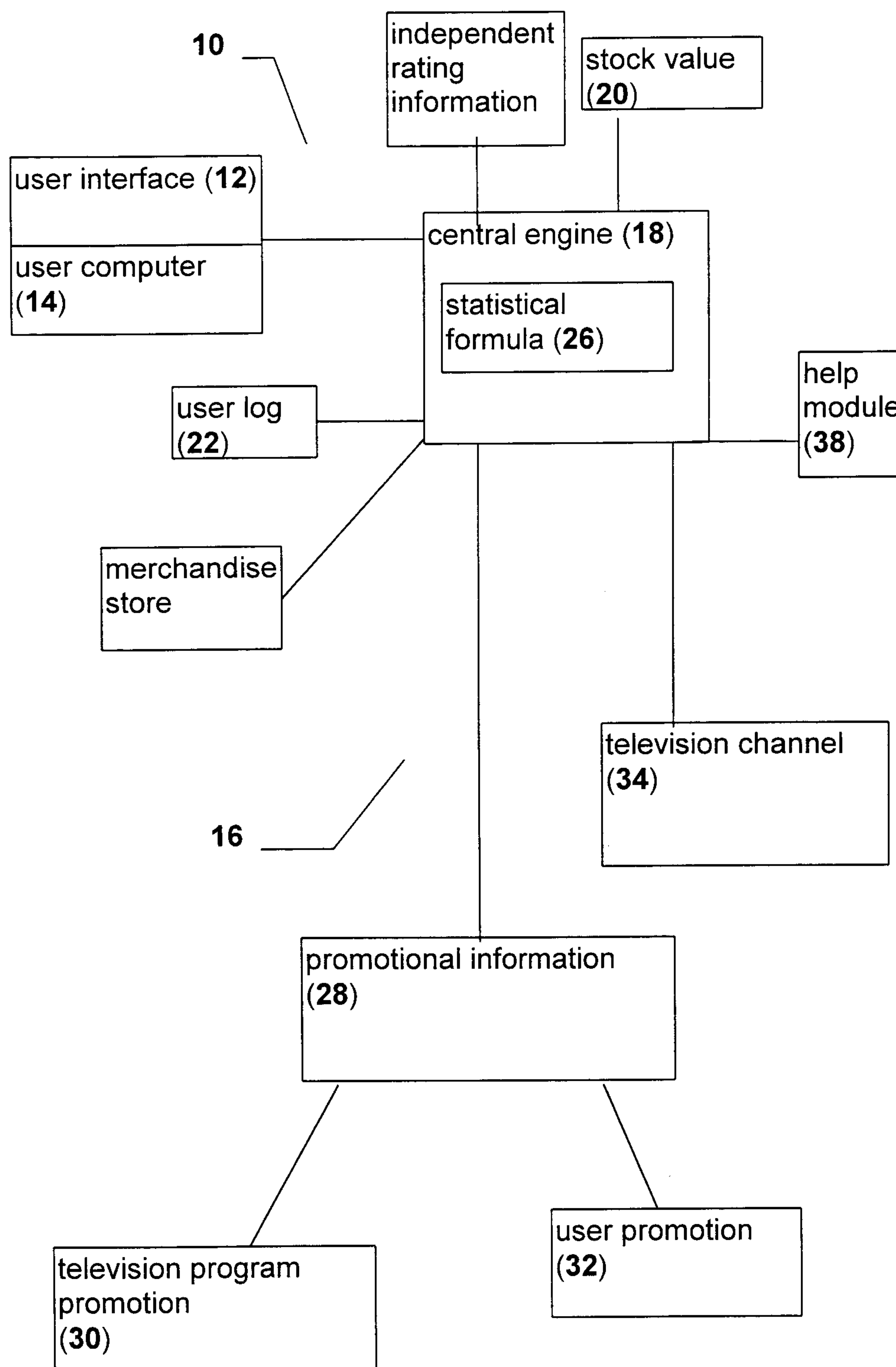
- (a) receiving a predetermined amount of monetary units by the user;
- (b) placing an order for at least one virtual stock;
- (c) adjusting said amount of said monetary units and said amount of virtual stocks according to said order; and
- (d) calculating the value of the virtual stock from a number of orders for the virtual stock.

41. A method for displaying an electronic programming guide, the electronic programming guide featuring information about at least one program for at least one channel, the method comprising the steps of:

- (a) displaying a plurality of icons corresponding to a plurality of channels;
- (b) selecting an icon corresponding to a channel;
- (c) dragging said icon to a central display area; and
- (d) displaying at least one program associated with said channel.

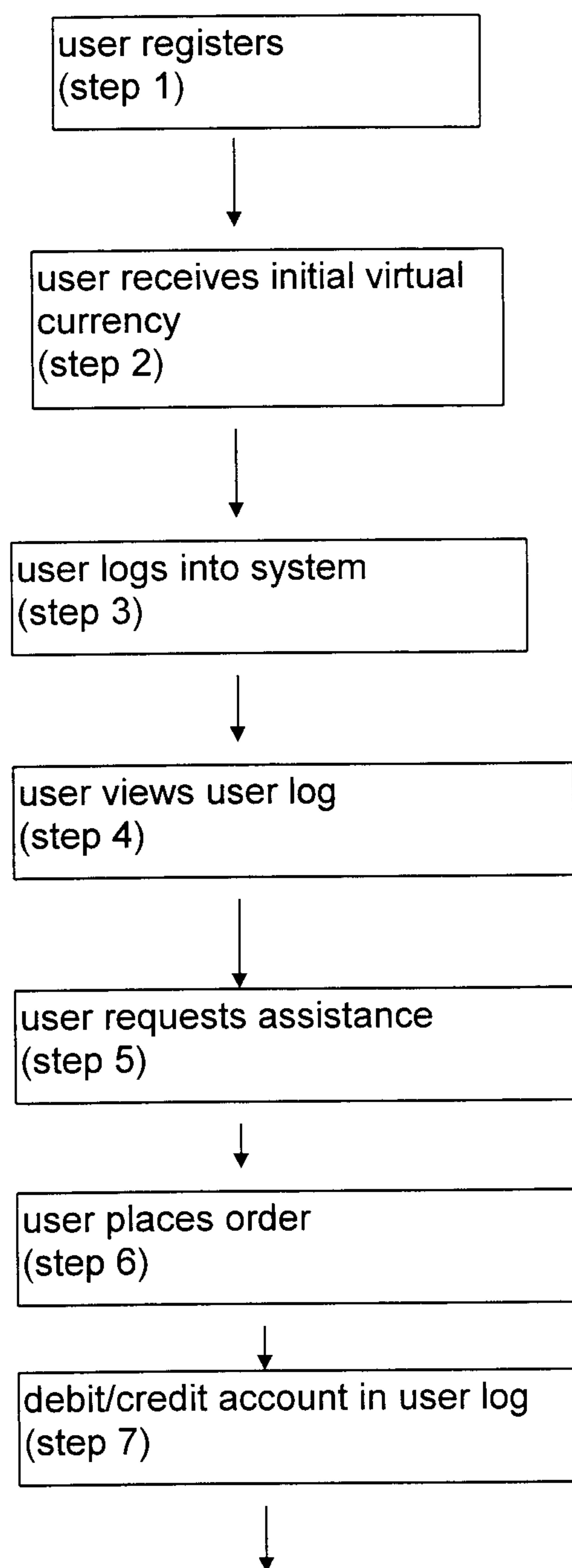
1/4

Figure 1



2/4

Figure 2



3/4

Figure 2 (con't)

