

(12) INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization

International Bureau



(10) International Publication Number
WO 2013/090085 A1

(43) International Publication Date
20 June 2013 (20.06.2013)

W I P O | P C T

(51) International Patent Classification:

G01C 21/36 (2006.01)

(21) International Application Number:

PCT/US2012/067858

(22) International Filing Date:

5 December 2012 (05.12.2012)

(25) Filing Language:

English

(26) Publication Language:

English

(30) Priority Data:

13/327,544 15 December 2011 (15.12.2011) US

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(81) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every
kind of national protection available): AE, AG, AL, AM,
AO, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BH, BN, BR, BW, BY,
BZ, CA, CH, CL, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM,
DO, DZ, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, GT,

HN, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KM, KN, KP,
KR, KZ, LA, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LY, MA, MD,
ME, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MY, MZ, NA, NG, NI,
NO, NZ, OM, PA, PE, PG, PH, PL, PT, QA, RO, RS, RU,
RW, SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, SM, ST, SV, SY, TH, TJ,
TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, ZA,
ZM, ZW.

(84) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every
kind of regional protection available): ARIPO (BW, GH,
GM, KE, LR, LS, MW, MZ, NA, RW, SD, SL, SZ, TZ,
UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, RU, TJ,
TM), European (AL, AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK,
EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV,
MC, MK, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, RS, SE, SI, SK, SM,
TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW,
ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Declarations under Rule 4.17:

- as to applicant's entitlement to apply for and be granted a patent (Rule 4.17(H))
- as to the applicant's entitlement to claim the priority of the earlier application (Rule 4.17(in))

Published:

- with international search report (Art. 21(3))

(54) Title: NAVIGATIONAL SOUNDSCAPING

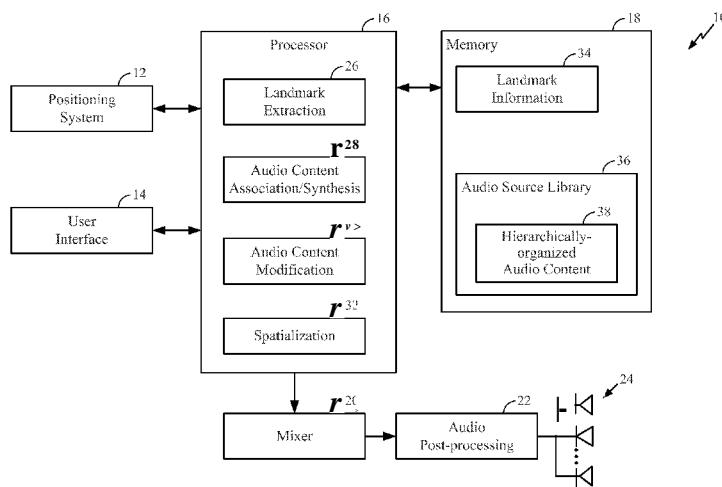


FIG. 1

(57) Abstract: A navigational system generates audio cues that are perceived in a three-dimensional space, allowing users to aurally perceive the locations of mapped objects such as landmarks. The audio cues can be produced alone, or in some applications, produced in conjunction with a visual navigational map display to improve the overall efficacy of the system. The audio navigation system includes a positioning system to determine the location of a user, a memory to store hierarchically-organized information about one or more objects, and a processor to render an audio signal based on the hierarchically-organized information. The audio signal is rendered into an audio space corresponding to the user, so as to allow user perception of the location of at least one of the objects relative to the location of the user. The objects may be landmarks in the vicinity of the user.

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NAVIGATIONAL SOUNDSCAPING

BACKGROUND

Cross-Reference to Related Applications

[0001] The present application claims the benefit of U.S. Non-Provisional Patent Application No. 13/327,544, filed December 15, 2011, the disclosure of which is incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

Field

[0002] The present disclosure relates generally to navigational systems, and more specifically, to navigational systems incorporating audio cues.

Background

[0003] In human-computer interfaces, a frequent issue is information overflow or overload. People have a limited capacity to sense information being presented to them, and with computers and other informational devices, the amount of data that can be simultaneously presented may overwhelm a typical user. More importantly, being presented with too much information can sometimes compromise safety, in certain circumstances.

[0004] When it comes to perception of our surroundings, seeing (vision) and hearing (auditory) are the two most important senses. Individuals often rely on vision for accurate and specific information, and on auditory senses for less precise information. Hearing frequently supplements vision to benefit a situation.

[0005] An example of a contemporary situation where a person uses both audio and visually senses is driving while using global positioning system (GPS) navigation. For a typical driver in this situation, the eyes are generally busy watching the road. With an onboard GPS navigation system turned on, the driver can become distracted if information from the navigational system is visual: maps, directions, routes, neighboring objects, and the like. To reduce this potential distraction, some automotive navigational systems provide audible turn-by-turn instructions, delivered to the driver by audio commands.

[0006] Other than maps and directions, additional auxiliary data are also available on some navigational systems, such as locations of particular landmarks, such as banks, schools, gas stations, hospitals, boat ramps, airports, restaurants, schools, points of

interest and the like. However, in some navigational systems, these additional data can present information overload to users.

SUMMARY

[0007] Described herein are techniques that can reduce information overload by presenting spatial audio cues and intuitive hierarchical audio content to indicate geographic information in navigational systems. Such techniques can deliver more information to a user, while offloading at least some of the visual burden of using a navigational system. One possible application is automobile navigational systems.

[0008] Through the use of spatial sound, i.e., sound that is perceived as emanating from different, specific locations, the disclosed techniques can use intuitive audio content to symbolize objects (e.g., landmarks) on a map, and then auditorily present them so that they are perceived around a user, for example, inside a car. Many audio cues can coexist in three-dimensional (3D) auditory space without being perceived as overcrowded. The human ear has a natural capacity to perceive many audio events simultaneously. In addition, the audio content that represents each object can be hierarchical-organized and intuitive. Hierarchical auditory content provides another level of distinction for each type of object.

[0009] According to an aspect, an apparatus includes a positioning system, a memory and a processor. The positioning system determines the location of a user, and the memory stores hierarchically-organized information about one or more geographic objects, for example, landmarks. The processor is configured to produce an audio signal based on the hierarchically-organized information. The audio signal can be output as sound in audio space about the user so as to allow user perception of the location of at least one of the geographic objects relative to the location of the user.

[0010] According to another aspect, a method of presenting audio information to a user includes determining a user location using a positioning system, retrieving hierarchically-organized information about a landmark based on the user location, and producing an auditory sound based on the hierarchically-organized information through one or more transducers. The auditory sound is produced so as to allow user perception of the location of the landmark relative to the user location.

[0011] According to another aspect, an apparatus includes means for determining a user location using a positioning system, means for retrieving hierarchically-organized information about a landmark based on the user location, and means for producing an

auditory sound based on the hierarchically-organized information. The auditory sound is produced so as to allow user perception of the location of the landmark relative to the user location.

[0012] According to a further aspect, a computer-readable medium embodying a set of instructions executable by one or more processors is provided. The instructions include programming code for determining a user location using a positioning system, programming code for retrieving hierarchically-organized information about a landmark based on the user location, and programming code for producing an auditory sound based on the hierarchically-organized information. The auditory sound is produced so as to allow user perception of the location of the landmark relative to the user location.

[0013] Other aspects, features, and advantages will be or will become apparent to one with skill in the art upon examination of the following figures and detailed description. It is intended that all such additional features, aspects, and advantages be included within this description and be protected by the accompanying claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0014] It is to be understood that the drawings are solely for purpose of illustration. Furthermore, the components in the figures are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon illustrating the principles of the techniques and devices described herein. In the figures, like reference numerals designate corresponding parts throughout the different views.

[0015] FIG. 1 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary system for producing 3D auditory navigational cues.

[0016] FIG. 2 is a diagram conceptually illustrating hierarchical organization of landmark audio icons.

[0017] FIG. 3 is diagram illustrating an exemplary automotive audio surround sound system usable with the navigational system of FIG. 1.

[0018] FIG. 4 is diagram illustrating an exemplary near-phone sound system usable with the navigational system of FIG. 1.

[0019] FIG. 5 is diagram illustrating exemplary headphones usable with the navigational system of FIG. 1.

[0020] FIG. 6 is a flowchart showing an example method of producing 3D auditory navigational cues.

[0021] FIG. 7 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary system architecture for producing 3D auditory navigational cues.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0022] The following detailed description, which references to and incorporates the drawings, describes and illustrates one or more specific embodiments. These embodiments, offered not to limit but only to exemplify and teach, are shown and described in sufficient detail to enable those skilled in the art to practice what is claimed. Thus, for the sake of brevity, the description may omit certain information known to those of skill in the art.

[0023] The word "exemplary" is used throughout this disclosure to mean "serving as an example, instance, or illustration." Anything described herein as "exemplary" is not necessarily to be construed as preferred or advantageous over other approaches or features. Unless expressly limited by its context, the term "signal" is used herein to indicate any of its ordinary meanings, including a state of a memory location (or set of memory locations) as expressed on a wire, bus, or other transmission medium.

[0024] FIG. 1 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary system 10 for producing 3D auditory navigational cues. The system 10 includes a positioning system 12, such as a global positioning system (GPS), a processor 16, a user interface (UI) 14, a memory 18, an audio mixer 20, an audio post-processing circuit 22, and one or more transducers 24, such as audio speakers.

[0025] The processor 16 includes a landmark extraction block 26, an audio content synthesis/association block 28, an audio content modification block 30, and a spatialization block 32. The processor 16 can be a microprocessor, such as an ARM7, or digital signal processor (DSP) executing software, one or more application specific integrated circuits (ASICs), field programmable gate arrays (FPGAs), complex programmable logic devices (CPLDs), discrete logic, or any suitable combination thereof.

[0026] The memory 18 stores landmark information 34 and an audio source library 36. The audio source library includes hierarchically-organized audio content 38. The memory 18 may be a separate device from the processor 16, or may be integrated with the processor 16 on the same chip.

[0027] From the GPS 12, the user location and speed can be obtained by the landmark extraction block 26. Using the user coordinates, the landmark extraction block 26 accesses relevant landmark information from the memory 18. The relevant

landmarks are usually within the vicinity of the user, that is, they can be determined as being located within a predefined distance from the user's present location. Based on the user's location GPS coordinates, the landmark extraction block 26 determines a range of coordinates about the user's coordinates and then searches the landmark information 34, retrieving information for landmarks within the range, which represents the vicinity of the user. For each identified landmark in the user vicinity, the system 10 can process and generate an audio icon, as follows.

[0028] The content synthesis/association block 28 synthesizes or associates short excerpts of audio (also called audio icons) with each landmark, according to intuitive rules and local cultural background. The audio icons can be non-speech audio. Thus, whenever the user hears the audio icon sound, he/she can picture the type of landmark in his/her mind. For example, banks can be associated with the sound of coins dropping, gas stations with a roaring engine, seaports with ship bells, restaurants with fork-and-knife sounds, and so forth.

[0029] The audio content for each audio icon can be selected from the hierarchically-organized audio content library 38 or synthesized by the audio content association/synthesis block of the processor 16. The synthesis function can be performed by any suitable device configured to generate real-time audio using the processor 16. This can include circuitry and/or software executable by the processor 16 for performing MIDI synthesis, or any other electronic design to render audio with oscillators, noise generators, wavetables, filters, envelop followers, and/or the like. The synthesis function can be configured so that the synthetic audio content generated by the block 28 is hierarchically-organized in a manner similar to that of the hierarchically-organized audio content 38 stored in the audio source library 36.

[0030] In some configurations of the system 10, the audio content can be entirely synthesized by the block 28, and the audio source library 36 and audio content association function can be omitted from the system 10. In other configurations of the system 10, the audio content synthesis function is omitted from the block 28, and the audio content association function and audio source library 36 are solely used to generate the audio content of the audio icons.

[0031] The content association method employed by the block 28 may vary depending upon the application of the system 10. The method can use predetermined landmark-to-sound mappings stored in a lookup table. The mappings point to audio icons stored in the audio source library as hierarchically-organized audio content 38;

thus, when a landmark is detected by the landmark extraction block 26, the content association/synthesis block 28 can use the landmark coordinates or identifier to retrieve a corresponding stored audio icon from the audio source library 36 for playback. The mappings can be factory designated or user-configurable through the UI 14, and/or they can also be associated with a learning algorithm, so they adapt during use for better performance based on user habit. Irrespective of what specific association method is used, the method should serve the end result that once a landmark is identified and needs to be presented to the user, the corresponding sound (audio icon) intuitively represents the landmark to the listener. Intuitive auditory icons can provide information while not being intrusive. For example, the auditory space surrounding one or more listeners may be a 3D soundscape of natural sounds that can be configured to be pleasant and enjoyable to the listeners.

[0032] Not only are high-level characteristics (e.g., type) of landmarks associated with particular sounds, but the scale and other details of landmarks may be hierarchically represented within different sub-categories of sounds. For example, a stand-alone bank automatic teller machine (ATM) can be depicted by the sound of a single or few dropping coins, while a major bank branch can be represented by with a larger number of coins pouring down; a Chinese restaurant can be represented with fork-and-knife sound followed by a pentatonic tune, and a Persian restaurant can be represented with fork-and-knife sound followed by a measure of belly dance music. These latter examples of audio icons are concatenated audio designs, meaning multiple audio sounds are concatenated together to make a single audio icon. The audio icon designs can vary, and may be customizable by the user through the UI 14.

[0033] The audio content modification block 30 modifies the audio icon content before the content is transformed into a spatial audio signal. Through the UI 14, the user can assign importance levels, or define and associate custom actions according to time of day, weather condition or the like. The user can also set special sound effects for user-selected landmarks by using the UI 14.

[0034] The UI 14 can include a visual display, such as a liquid crystal display (LCD), and user input means, such as one or more buttons, dials, and/or touch screen inputs. Software executable by the processor 16 can be used to control and implement the display and user input means. The display can present a setup menu, where each category of landmark is listed, with one or more accompanying drop-down menus to select audio content files, synthesis methods or patches to associate with the landmarks.

The UI 14 can also be configured to permit selection and configuration of individual landmarks. The selections for each landmark can include a default setting.

[0035] User-selected audio processing such as filtering, modulation, level control, reverb and the like can be selected through the UI 14 and used to modify and add effects to the 3D sound produced by the system 10 for particular landmarks selected by the user through the UI 14. For example, sound effects like chorus/phaser or modulation techniques like amplitude modulation can cause a particular sound to stand out from a mixture of sounds. These methods can be applied on important landmarks when needed; level control algorithms such as the dynamic range control (DRC) modules can help giving existing sound extra boost in loudness, which helps important landmarks to sound even louder given limited headroom in the whole sound mix.

[0036] The spatialization block 32 renders each sound source (the audio content corresponding to the virtualized landmark in the audio space) into 3D audio space, according to the direction and distance relative to the user. Landmarks that are farther away may sound more distance, and their direction of perception in the audio space matches their location relative to the user.

[0037] 3D audio rendering techniques are known in state-of-art software architectures and APIs (application programming interfaces). Methods for spatializing sounds include vector based amplitude panning (VBAP), Ambisonics, and binaural rendering techniques, such as head-related transfer function (HRTF) filtering, virtual 3D audio and the like. Standards like OpenSL, OpenAL, DirectX, all have dedicated sections elaborating on 3D audio APIs, and some with rendering methods. Depending on the presentation devices, various core algorithms can be used to render the 3D effects, such as binaural filters on headphones, and panning methods on speakers. Low-pass, high-pass filters and environmental reverberation effects are often integral parts of the 3D audio software.

[0038] After processing each sound source by the spatialization block 32, the mixer 20 mixes the audio signals from the spatialization block 32 together and delivers the mixed audio signals to the audio post-processing circuit 22. The audio post-processing circuit can perform functions such as amplification, impedance matching and the like. The audio signal is output from the audio post-processing circuit 22 to the audio transducers 24, where it is converted into sound energy. The transducers 24 can be any suitable devices for producing sound in response to electronic audio signals, such as speakers.

[0039] FIG. 2 is a diagram conceptually illustrating an example hierarchical structure 100 of landmark audio icons. This example structure 100, or ones like it, may be employed for the hierarchically-organized audio content 38 of FIG. 1.

[0040] Referring to the data structure 100, at the top level (level-1) 102, the category or type of landmark is defined. In the example shown, several different types of landmarks are illustrated, for example, a bank category 104, a gas station category 106, and a restaurant category 108. Other categories are possible. At the next level down, sub-categories or sub-types (level-2) HOa-c are defined for at least some of the level-1 categories. These sub-categories further refine the types of landmarks. As shown in the example, the bank category 104 is broken down into three level-2 sub-categories of different types of banking locations: automatic teller machine (ATM) 112, office 114, and major, full-service branch office 116. The restaurant category 108 is further broken down into level-2 sub-types of French restaurants 118, Italian restaurants 120 and Chinese restaurants 122.

[0041] As described above in connection with FIG. 1, the audio content association takes multi-levels and may use different methods. By way of example, as shown in FIG. 2, two different categories for two-level indexing are illustrated. For bank sounds, it is further detailed by intuitively associating the quantity of money sound with the size of the bank office. For the restaurants, the cuisine style can be indicated by concatenating a general restaurant sound with more detailed cultural sounds associated with the nationality of the cuisine.

[0042] As also shown in FIG. 2, the level-2 sub-categories can be even further broken down in level-3 sub-categories 124.

[0043] Although the example hierarchy of landmark icons is shown as having only three levels, any suitable number of levels, categories and sub-categories can be defined and used within the systems and methods described herein.

[0044] FIG. 3 is a diagram illustrating an exemplary automotive audio surround sound system 200 usable with the navigational system 10 of FIG. 1. The surround sound system 200 includes a plurality of audio speakers 203, 206, 208 located within a vehicle 202, such as a passenger car. The speakers 203-208 may include one or more bass (woofer) speakers 208, one or more mid-range speakers 203, and one or more tweeters 206. The speakers 203-208 essentially act as the audio transducers 24 shown in FIG. 1. In high-end automobiles, a surround speaker system with a circle of speakers can be used for spatial auditory display. Methods for spatializing sounds include vector

based amplitude panning (VBAP), Ambisonics, and the like. For example, VBAP assigns different speaker gains according to their relative distance and location, so sound can be virtually represented in between the physical space of the speakers; in Ambisonics, sound are encoded according to their spatial spherical harmonics, and rendered back with prior knowledge of the loudspeaker placements. These methods are well-known spatial sound algorithms.

[0045] FIG. 4 is diagram illustrating an exemplary near-phone sound system 248 usable with the navigational system 10 of FIG. 1. The near-phone sound system 248 includes a structure, such as a chair 250, having one or more speakers 252 mounted thereon in close proximity to where the user's ears will be when in use. The near-phone speakers 252 essentially act as the audio transducers 24 shown in FIG. 1 when used with the navigational system 10. In the example shown in FIG. 4, the two adjacent speakers 252 are mounted over the chair headrest to deliver spatial audio to a user seated in the chair 250. Three dimensional audio techniques such as crosstalk cancellation and various filtering methods can be used with the near-phone system 248 to improve the audio quality. Methods for spatializing sounds in the system 248 may include VBAP, Ambisonics, and the like.

[0046] FIG. 5 is a diagram illustrating an exemplary headset 300 usable with the navigational system 10 of FIG. 1. The headset 300 can be any suitable type of headphone. For example, the headset 300 can be an open cover headphone: wearing a regular headphone can possibly block out important sounds. Open-cover headphones can let the user 300 hear audio while still hear the sounds in the surrounding area. Binaural rendering techniques (HRTF filtering, virtual 3D audio and the like) can be utilized to render spatial sound over the headphone 300. Alternatively, the headset 300 can be a bone conduction headphone, as shown in FIG. 5. A bone conduction headphone does not block the ear. Instead, sound is delivered to the user 300 through jawbone conduction. Whatever its form, the headset 300 essentially acts as the audio transducers 24 shown in FIG. 1.

[0047] FIG. 6 is a flowchart 400 showing an example method of producing 3D auditory navigational cues. In step 402, the user's location is determined by the positioning system, for example, a GPS. In step 404, information about surrounding landmarks is extracted from a landmark database. In the database, each landmark can be associated with GPS coordinates. Using the user's location GPS coordinates, a range

of coordinates about the user's coordinates can be searched in the database, retrieving information for landmarks within the range, which represents the vicinity of the user.

[0048] In step 406, audio content is associated with or synthesized for one or more of the landmarks based on the extracted landmark information. After the positioning system extracts each landmark, a hierarchical-indexing method can associate each landmark with certain categories of sound (e.g., audio icons) from a source library. Alternatively/additionally, the audio icon can be synthesized by a processor, as discussed above in connection with FIG. 1. As mentioned above with reference to FIG. 1, the association or indexing may be accomplished with a lookup table of the landmark-to-sound mappings.

[0049] As part of the association process, audio content for one or more audio icons is retrieved from the hierarchically-indexed audio source library (step 408). If the audio icon is instead entirely synthesized by the processor, step 408 is bypassed.

[0050] In step 410, a check is made to determine whether the landmark has been designated by the user for association with a user-configured audio icon. If the landmark is not user designated for special treatment, the navigation system produces an audio signal using the audio content retrieved from the source library (step 414) and/or synthesized by the processor. However, if the landmark has been designated, user-defined audio content is substituted for or otherwise replaces the synthesized icon or retrieved audio content from the hierarchically-indexed portion of the content library (step 412). The user-defined audio content is then processed to produce the audio signal (step 414).

[0051] In step 416, any optional user modifications to the audio signal, such as added sound effects, filtering, reverberation and the like are performed on the audio signal. Apart from the audio icons mapped to the landmarks by the association block, users can also specify certain landmarks to trigger special alert tones instead of the hierarchically-indexed sounds from the source library. For example, when driving in a vehicle that is nearly out of fuel, a user or automobile itself can set the system to designate gas stations as a special landmark. Instead of outputting a gas station audio icon, the system will instead emit a high level alert buzz once the vehicle is within the vicinity of a gas station.

[0052] The audio signal is then spatialized into 3D space (step 418). As previously described herein, software is commercially available for spatializing sound and methods for spatializing sounds may include vector based amplitude panning (VBAP),

Ambisonics, binaural rendering techniques, such as head-related transfer function (HRTF) filtering, virtual 3D audio and the like.

[0053] In step 420, the spatialized 3D audio signal is transduced into 3D sound so that it may be heard by the user. Any of the audio transducers described herein may be used.

[0054] FIG. 7 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary system architecture 500 for producing 3D auditory navigational cues. The system architecture 500 can be used to implement the system 10 shown in FIG. 1 and/or the method depicted in FIG. 6. The system 500 includes a processor 502, such as a microprocessor (uP), a GPS module 504, a user interface 506, a memory 508, a digital-to-analog (D/A) conversion module 510, an analog audio post-processing circuit 512, one or more audio transducers 514, and a visual navigational display 530. The components 502-512, 530 of the system 500 can communicate with one another over a bus 503.

[0055] The memory 508 stores programming code and data used by the processor 502. The memory 508 can be any suitable memory device for storing data and programming code (programming instructions), including but not limited to RAM, ROM, EEPROM, optical storage, magnetic storage, or any other medium that can be used to store program code and/or data structures and that can be accessed by the processor 502. The programming code may include at least the following software executable by the processor 502: landmark extraction software 516, audio content association/synthesis software 518, audio mixing software 520, audio content modification software 524, spatialization software 522 and visual navigational display software 532. The memory 508 can also store the landmark information 34 and the audio source library 36, including the hierarchically-organized audio content.

[0056] The landmark extraction software 516 includes instructions executable by the processor 502 to cause the system 500 to perform the functions of the landmark extraction block 26 described herein in connection with FIG. 1. The audio content association/synthesis software 518 includes instructions executable by the processor 502 to cause the system 500 to perform the functions of the audio content association/synthesis block 28 described herein in connection with FIG. 1. The audio mixing software 520 includes instructions executable by the processor 502 to cause the system 500 to perform the functions of the mixer 20 described herein in connection with FIG. 1. The audio content modification software 524 includes instructions executable by the processor 502 to cause the system 500 to perform the functions of the audio

content modification block 30 described herein in connection with FIG. 1. The spatialization software 522 includes instructions executable by the processor 502 to cause the system 500 to perform the functions of the spatialization block 30 described herein in connection with FIG. 1.

[0057] The visual navigational display software 532 includes instructions executable by the processor 502 to control the visual navigational display 530 included in the system 500. The visual navigational display 530 includes a screen, such as an LCD, for visually displaying maps and navigational information to the user, as is conventionally done in commercially-available navigational systems. The software 532 may include code for presenting the maps and visual icons on the display based on user location coordinate information output from the GPS module 504.

[0058] The processor 502 can execute software and use data stored in the memory 508 to cause the system 500 to perform the functions and methods of any of the systems described herein in connection with FIGS. 1-6. The processor 502 can be a microprocessor, such as an ARM7, a digital signal processor (DSP), one or more application specific integrated circuits (ASICs), field programmable gate arrays (FPGAs), complex programmable logic devices (CPLDs), discrete logic, or any suitable combination thereof.

[0059] The D/A conversion module 510 can be any suitable D/A converter for converting a digital audio output signal into an analog audio output signals. In the system 500, the digital audio output signal is generally output from the processor 502 when executing the audio mixing software 520. The D/A converter 610 may be a multi-channel D/A converter so that it may simultaneously convert multiple audio output channels, e.g., stereo output, reproduced by the system 500.

[0060] The analog post-processing circuit 512 may include any suitable circuitry, such as one or more amplifiers, filters, level shifters, echo cancellers, or the like, for analog processing the output audio signals from the D/A conversion module 510 so that they may be appropriately output by the loud speakers 514.

[0061] The user interface 506 may include the features of UI 14 described in connection with FIG. 1.

[0062] The functionality of the systems, modules, devices and their respective components, as well as the method steps and modules described herein may be implemented in hardware, software/firmware executable by hardware, or any suitable combination thereof. The software/firmware may be a program having sets of

instructions (e.g., programming code segments) executable by one or more digital circuits, such as microprocessors, DSPs, embedded controllers, or intellectual property (IP) cores. If implemented in software/firmware, the functions may be stored on or transmitted over as instructions or code on one or more computer-readable media. The computer-readable media may include both computer storage media and communication media, including any medium that facilitates transfer of a computer program from one place to another. A storage medium may be any available medium that can be accessed by a computer. By way of example, and not limitation, such computer-readable medium can comprise RAM, ROM, EEPROM, CD-ROM or other optical disk storage, magnetic disk storage or other magnetic storage devices, or any other medium that can be used to carry or store desired program code in the form of instructions or data structures and that can be accessed by a computer. Disk and disc, as used herein, includes compact disc (CD), laser disc, optical disc, digital versatile disc (DVD), floppy disk and blu-ray disc where disks usually reproduce data magnetically, while discs reproduce data optically with lasers. Combinations of the above should also be included within the scope of computer-readable medium.

[0063] Certain examples of navigational soundscape techniques have been disclosed. These techniques are examples, and the possible integrations are not limited to what is described herein. Moreover, various modifications to these examples are possible, and the principles presented herein may be applied to other systems and methods as well. For example, the principles disclosed herein may be applied to other devices, such as personal computers, stereo systems, entertainment counsels, video games and the like. In addition, the various components and/or method steps/blocks may be implemented in arrangements other than those specifically disclosed without departing from the scope of the claims.

[0064] Thus, other embodiments and modifications will readily occur to those of ordinary skill in the art in view of these teachings. Therefore, the following claims are intended to cover all such embodiments and modifications when viewed in conjunction with the above specification and accompanying drawings.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An apparatus, comprising:
 - a positioning system configured to determine the location of a user;
 - a memory configured to store hierarchically-organized information about one or more landmarks; and
 - a processor configured to render an audio signal based on the hierarchically-organized information into a predetermined audio space corresponding to the user so as to allow user perception of the location of at least one of the landmarks relative to the location of the user.
2. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the hierarchically-organized information includes an audio icon for each landmark.
3. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the hierarchically-organized information includes a plurality of categories, each category defining a different type of landmark, and associates an audio icon with each category that distinguishes the category from other categories.
4. The apparatus of claim 3, wherein the hierarchically-organized information further includes a plurality of sub-categories defined for at least one of the categories, each sub-category defining a different sub-type of landmark, and the hierarchically-organized information associates an audio icon with each sub-category that distinguishes the sub-category from the other sub-categories.
5. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the memory stores an audio source library of audio icons.
6. The apparatus of claim 5, further comprising a lookup table configured to map the landmarks to the audio icons.

7. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising:
one or more transducers configured to produce an auditory sound in response to the audio signal, the auditory sound being perceivable in the audio space so as to allow user perception of the location of the landmark relative to the user location.
8. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the processor renders the audio signal so as to allow user perception of the distance and direction of at least one of the landmarks relative to the location of the user.
9. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the processor renders the audio signal so that the auditory sounds corresponding to more distant landmarks are perceived by the user as sounding more distant than auditory sounds corresponding to landmarks that are closer to the user.
10. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising a user interface configured to permit the user to modify the audio signal.
11. The apparatus of claim 10, wherein the user interface is configured to permit the user to configure the processor to modify the audio signal based on environmental conditions.
12. The apparatus of claim 10, wherein the user interface allows the user to modify the audio signal by adding sound effects.
13. The apparatus of claim 10, wherein the user interface allows the user to configure the hierarchically-organized information for a user-selected landmark.
14. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the processor is configured to synthesize audio content of the audio signal.

15. A method of presenting audio information to a user, comprising:
 - determining a user location using a positioning system;
 - retrieving from a memory hierarchically-organized information about a landmark based on the user location; and
 - producing an auditory sound based on the hierarchically-organized information through one or more transducers, the auditory sound being produced so as to allow user perception of the location of the landmark relative to the user location.
16. The method of claim 15, wherein the hierarchically-organized information includes an audio icon for each landmark.
17. The method of claim 15, wherein the hierarchically-organized information includes a plurality of categories, each category defining a different type of landmark, and associates an audio icon with each category that distinguishes the category from other categories.
18. The method of claim 17, wherein the hierarchically-organized information further includes a plurality of sub-categories defined for at least one of the categories, each sub-category defining a different sub-type of landmark, and the hierarchically-organized information associates an audio icon with each sub-category that distinguishes the sub-category from the other sub-categories.
19. The method of claim 15, further comprising providing an audio source library of audio icons.
20. The method of claim 19, further comprising mapping a plurality of landmarks to the audio icons with a lookup table.
21. The method of claim 20, further comprising rendering the auditory sound so as to allow user perception of the distance and direction of at least one of the landmarks relative to the location of the user.

22. The method of claim 21, further comprising rendering the auditory sound so that an audio icon corresponding to a more distant landmark is perceived by the user as sounding more distant than an auditory sound corresponding to a landmark that is closer to the user.
23. The method of claim 15, further comprising receiving user input for modifying the auditory sound.
24. The method of claim 23, wherein the user input modifies the auditory sound based on environmental conditions.
25. The method of claim 23, wherein the user input modifies the auditory sound by adding sound effects.
26. The method of claim 23, further comprising receiving user input for configuring the hierarchically-organized information for a user-selected landmark.
27. The method of claim 15, further comprising:
synthesizing the hierarchically-organized information based on the user location, instead of retrieving the information from the memory.
28. An apparatus, comprising:
means for determining a user location using a positioning system;
means for retrieving hierarchically-organized information about a landmark based on the user location; and
means for producing an auditory sound based on the hierarchically-organized information, the auditory sound being produced so as to allow user perception of the location of the landmark relative to the user location.
29. The apparatus of claim 28, wherein the hierarchically-organized information includes an audio icon for each of a plurality of landmarks.

30. The apparatus of claim 28, wherein the hierarchically-organized information includes a plurality of categories, each category defining a different type of landmark, and associates an audio icon with each category that distinguishes the category from other categories.

31. The apparatus of claim 30, wherein the hierarchically-organized information further includes a plurality of sub-categories defined for at least one of the categories, each sub-category defining a different sub-type of landmark, and the hierarchically-organized information associates an audio icon with each sub-category that distinguishes the sub-category from the other sub-categories.

32. The apparatus of claim 29, wherein the memory stores an audio source library of audio icons.

33. The apparatus of claim 32, further comprising a lookup table configured to map the landmarks to the audio icons.

34. The apparatus of claim 29, further comprising means for rendering the audio signal so as to allow user perception of the distance and direction of at least one of the landmarks relative to the location of the user.

35. The apparatus of claim 28, further comprising means for rendering the audio signal so that auditory sounds corresponding to more distant landmarks are perceived by the user as sounding more distant than auditory sounds corresponding to landmarks that are closer to the user.

36. The apparatus of claim 28, further comprising means for permitting the user to modify the auditory sound.

37. The apparatus of claim 36, further comprising means for permitting the user to modify the auditory sound based on environmental conditions.

38. The apparatus of claim 36, further comprising means for permitting the user to modify the auditory sound by adding sound effects.

39. The apparatus of claim 36, further comprising means for permitting the user to configure the hierarchically-organized information for a user-selected landmark.

40. The apparatus of claim 28, further comprising:

means for synthesizing the hierarchically-organized information based on the user location.

41. A computer-readable medium embodying a set of instructions executable by one or more processors, comprising:

programming code for determining a user location using a positioning system;

programming code for retrieving hierarchically-organized information about a landmark based on the user location; and

programming code for producing an auditory sound based on the hierarchically-organized information, the auditory sound being produced so as to allow user perception of the location of the landmark relative to the user location.

42. The computer-readable medium of claim 41, wherein the hierarchically-organized information includes an audio icon for each of a plurality of landmarks.

43. The computer-readable medium of claim 41, wherein the hierarchically-organized information includes a plurality of categories, each category defining a different type of landmark, and associates an audio icon with each category that distinguishes the category from other categories.

44. The computer-readable medium of claim 43, wherein the hierarchically-organized information further includes a plurality of sub-categories defined for at least one of the categories, each sub-category defining a different sub-type of landmark, and the hierarchically-organized information associates an audio icon with each sub-category that distinguishes the sub-category from the other sub-categories.

45. The computer-readable medium of claim 41, further comprising:

programming code for synthesizing the hierarchically-organized information based on the user location.

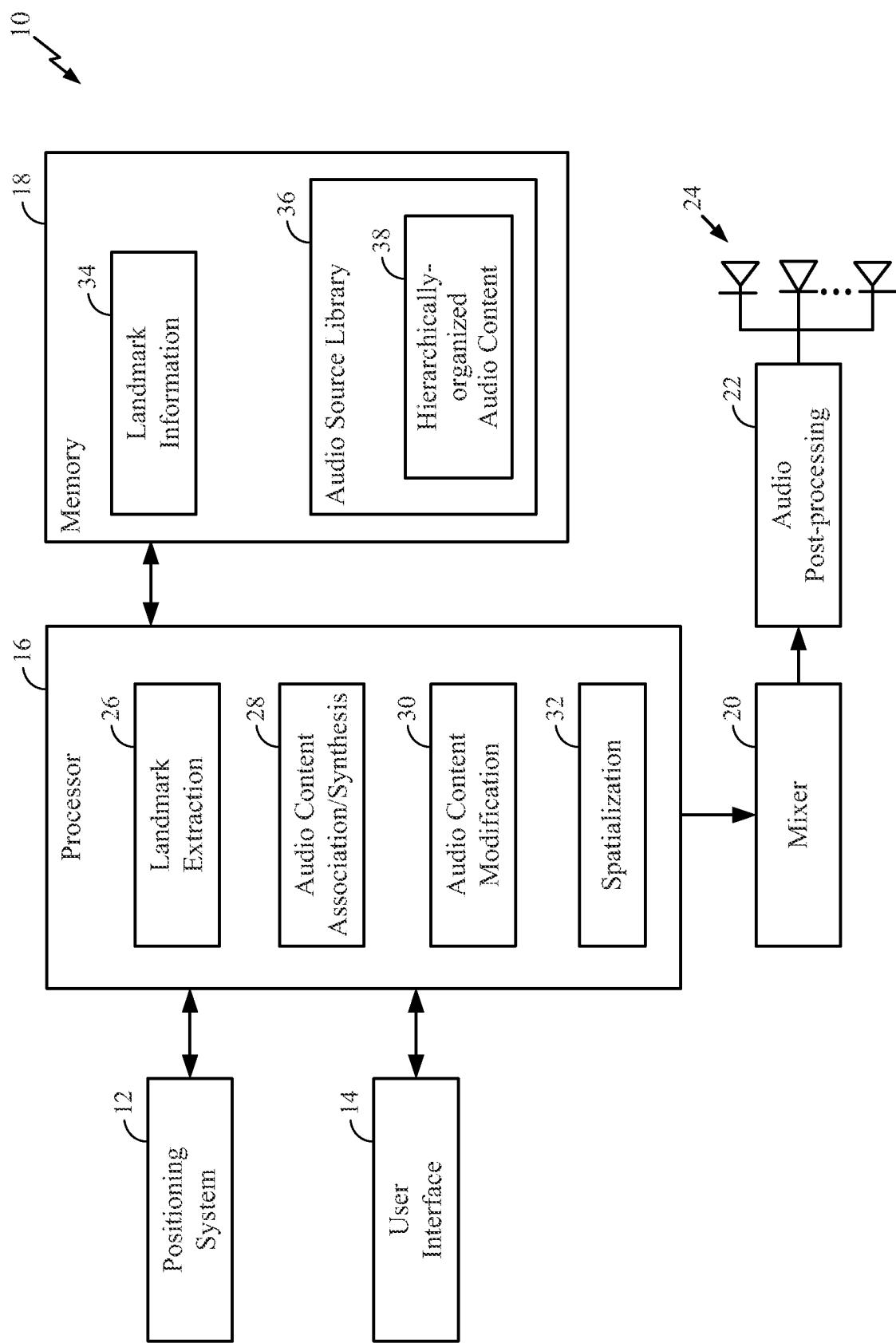


FIG. 1

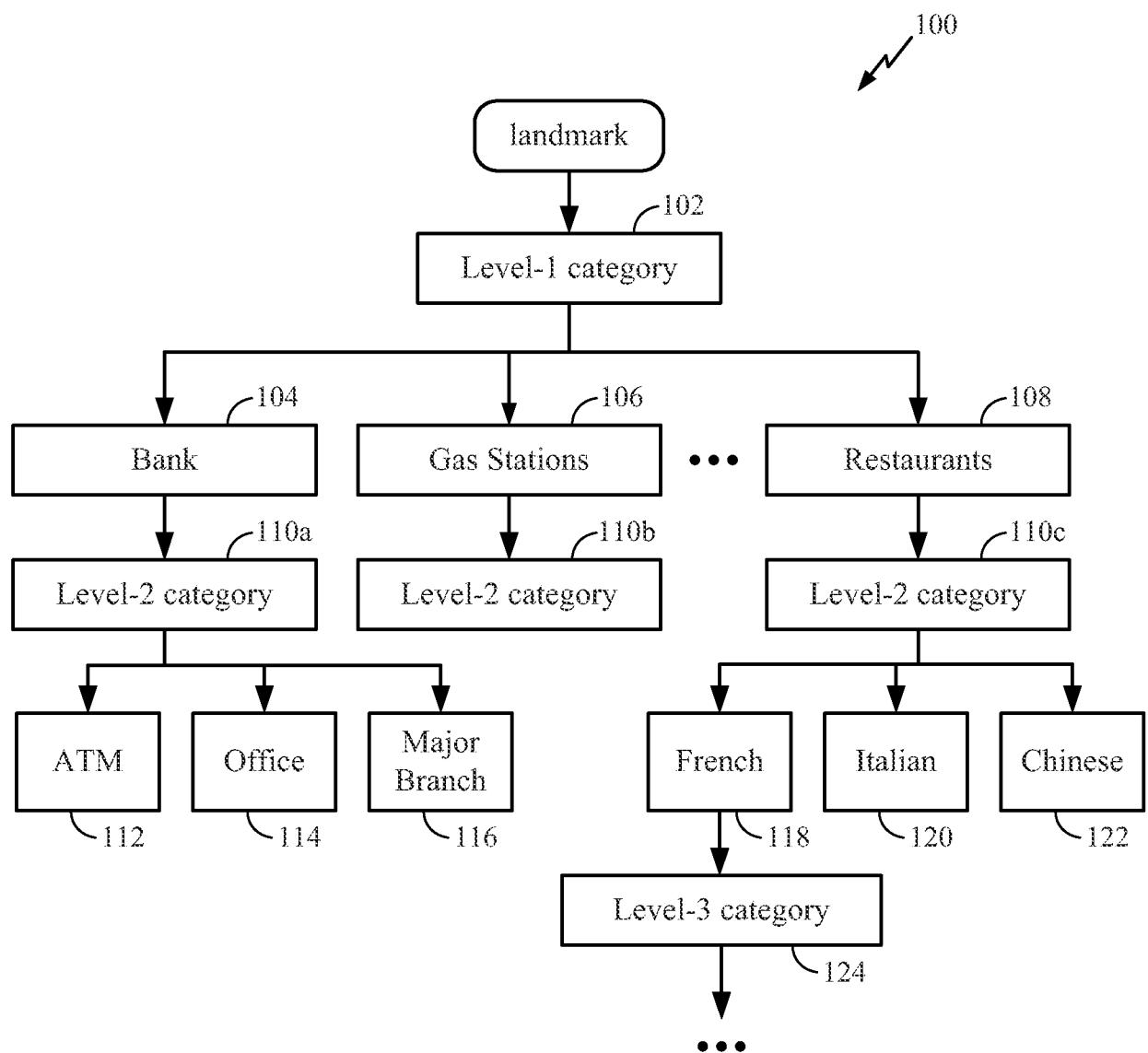
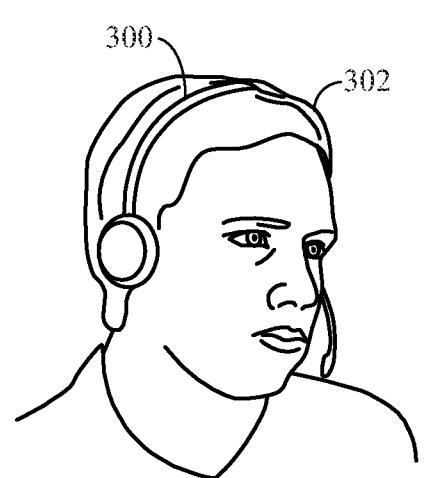
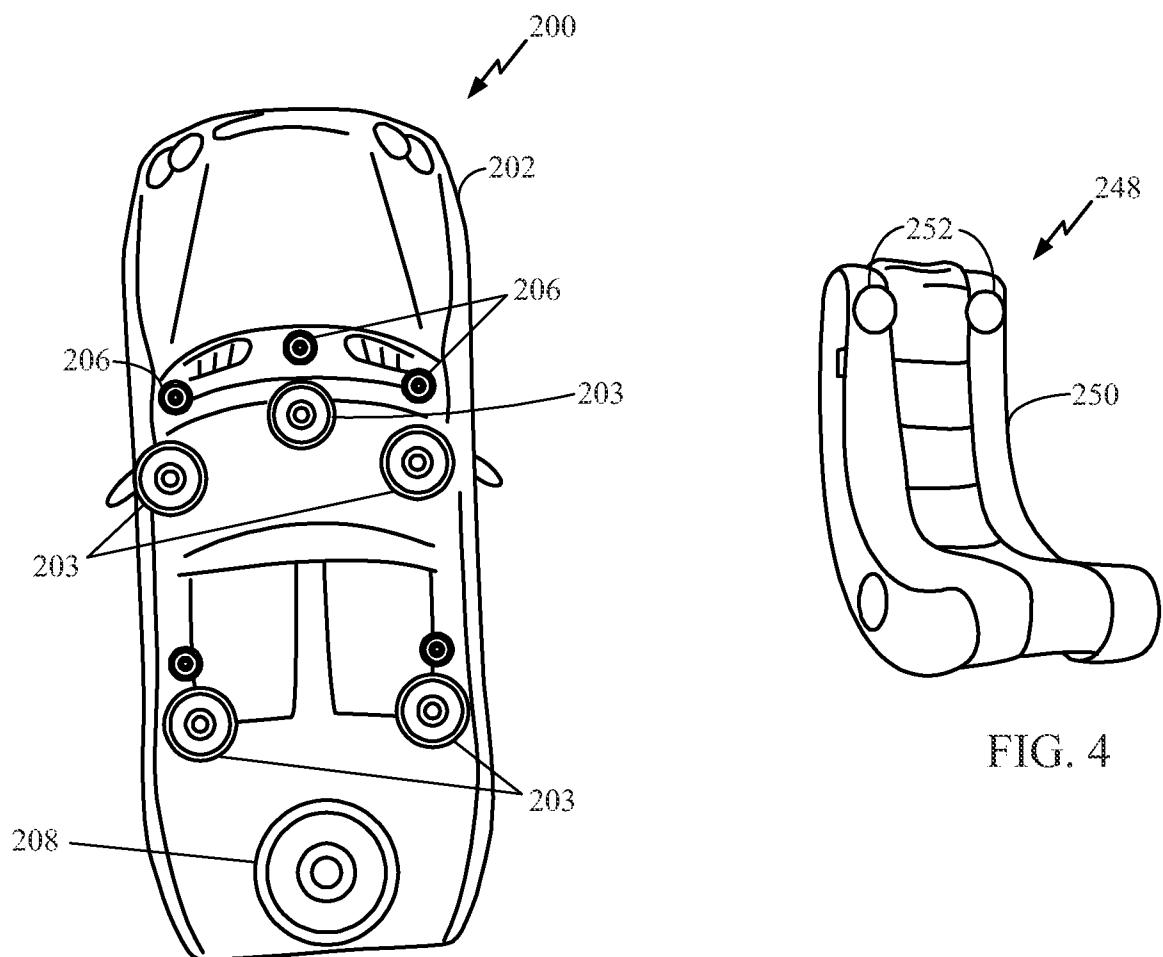


FIG. 2

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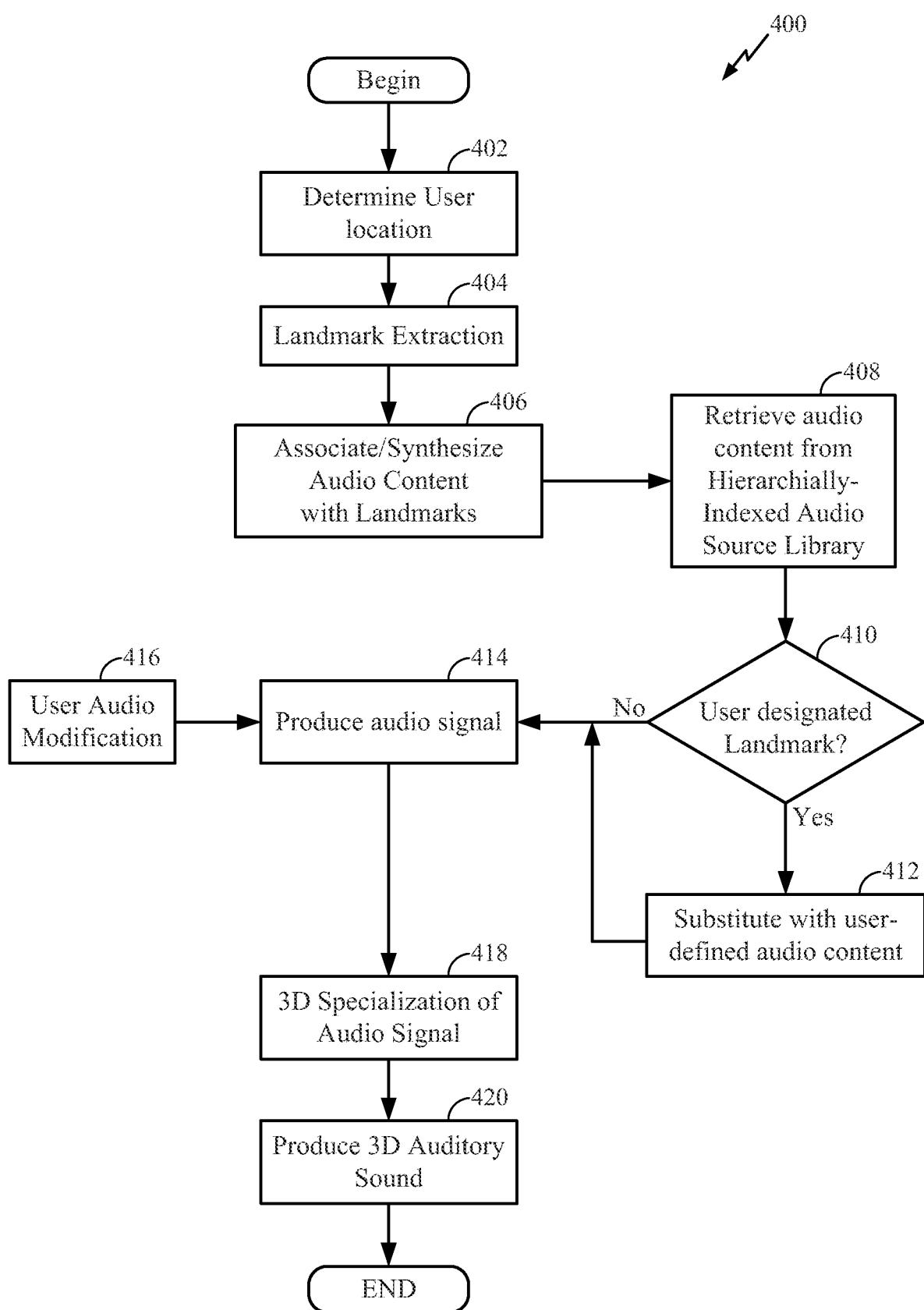


FIG. 6

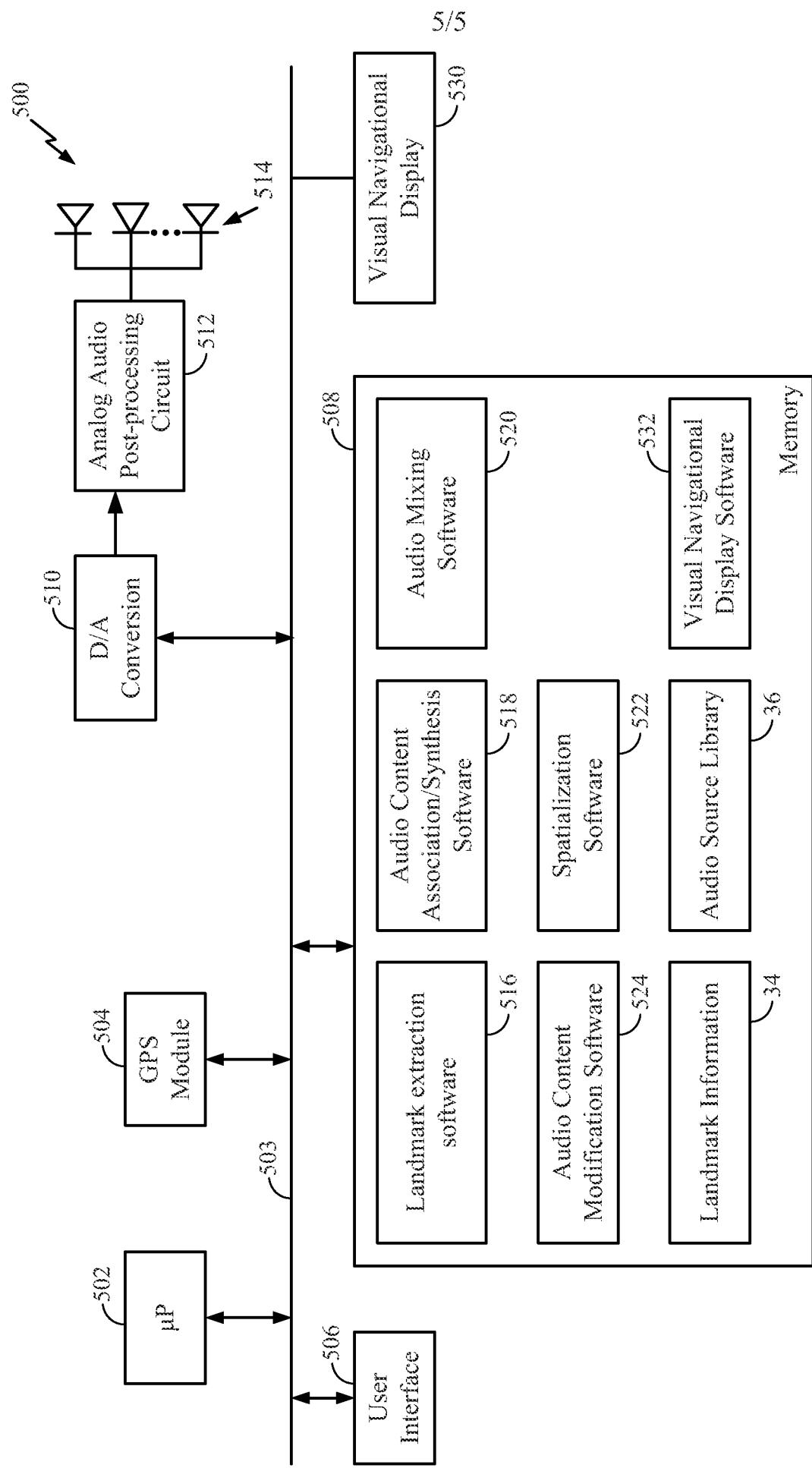


FIG. 7

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/US2012/067858

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
INV. G01C21/36

ADD.

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
G01C

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

EPO-Internal , WPI Data

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	JP 2003 156352 A (ALPINE ELECTRONICS INC) 30 May 2003 (2003-05-30)	1-3 ,5-9 , 14-17 , 19-22 , 27-30, 32-35 , 40-43 ,45 4 , 10-13 , 18, 23-26, 31, 36-39 ,44
Y	abstract paragraphs [0011] , [0017] , [0020] - [0036]	
Y	----- Wo 2008/109326 A1 (B0SE CORP [US] ; OLC0TT ANDREW [US] ; DEBETTENCOURT LISA [US] ; HOTARY JA) 12 September 2008 (2008-09-12) page 6, line 19 - line 29 ----- -/-	4 , 18,31 , 44



Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.



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Date of the actual completion of the international search

Date of mailing of the international search report

28 January 2013

06/02/2013

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/US2012/067858

C(Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	EP 1 033 557 A2 (SONY CORP [JP]) 6 September 2000 (2000-09-06) paragraphs [0013] , [0031] - [0033] ; figures 3,4 -----	10-13, 23-26, 36-39

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

International application No
PCT/US2012/067858

Patent document cited in search report	Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
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WO 2008109326	A1 12-09-2008	NONE	
EP 1033557	A2 06-09-2000	EP 1033557 A2 06-09-2000 JP 2000258170 A 22-09-2000 US 6446001 B1 03-09-2002	