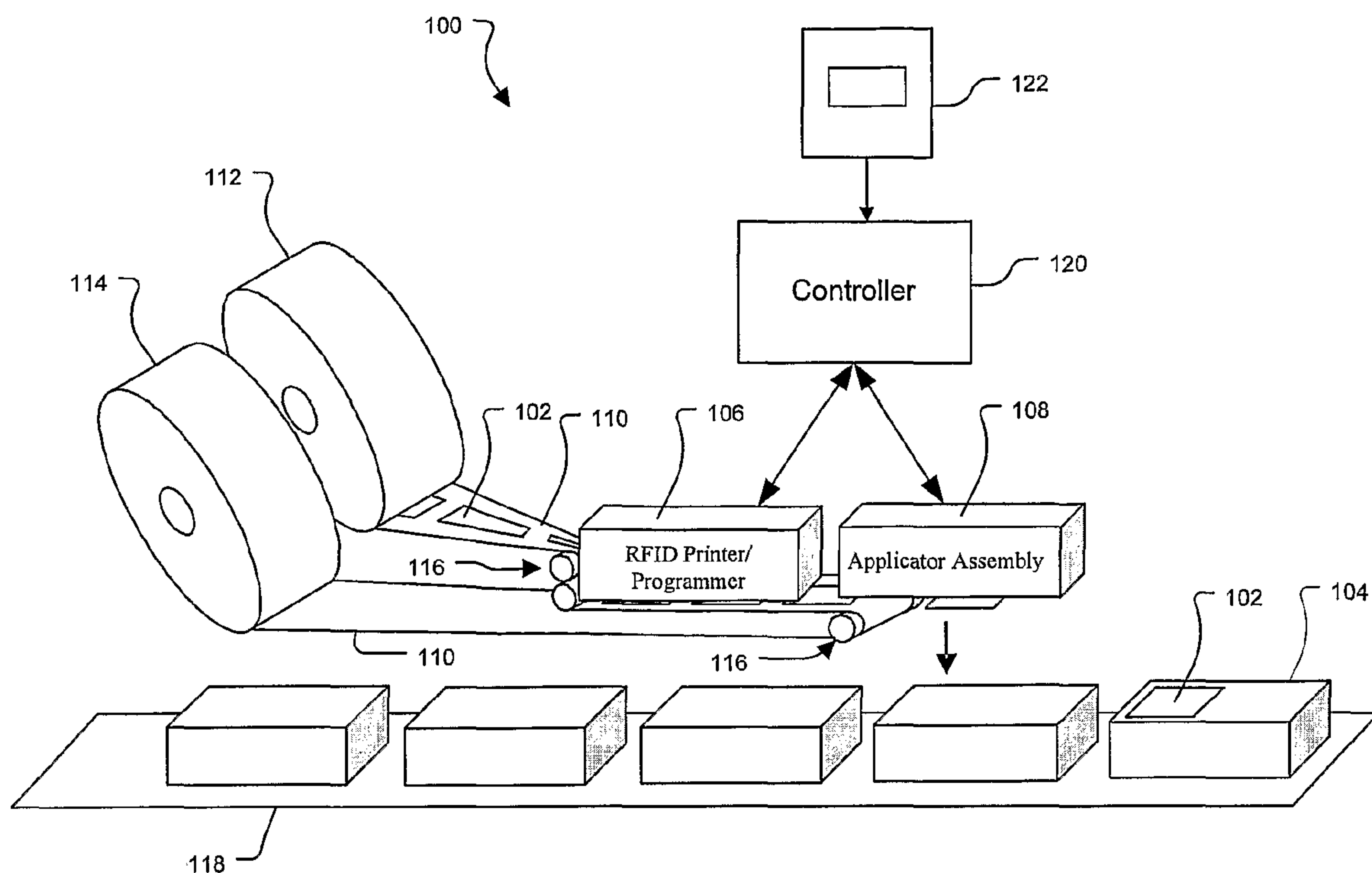




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(54) Titre : **SYSTEME COMPRENANT UN PROGRAMMATEUR RFID INTEGRE**
(54) Title: **SYSTEM INCLUDING INTEGRATED RFID PROGRAMMER**



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

An RFID applicator system including an integrated RFID programmer for programming RFID labels prior to affixing the labels to items. The system may also include an integrated printer for printing on the RFID labels prior to affixing the labels to items. A remote device for controlling the programmer is also provided.



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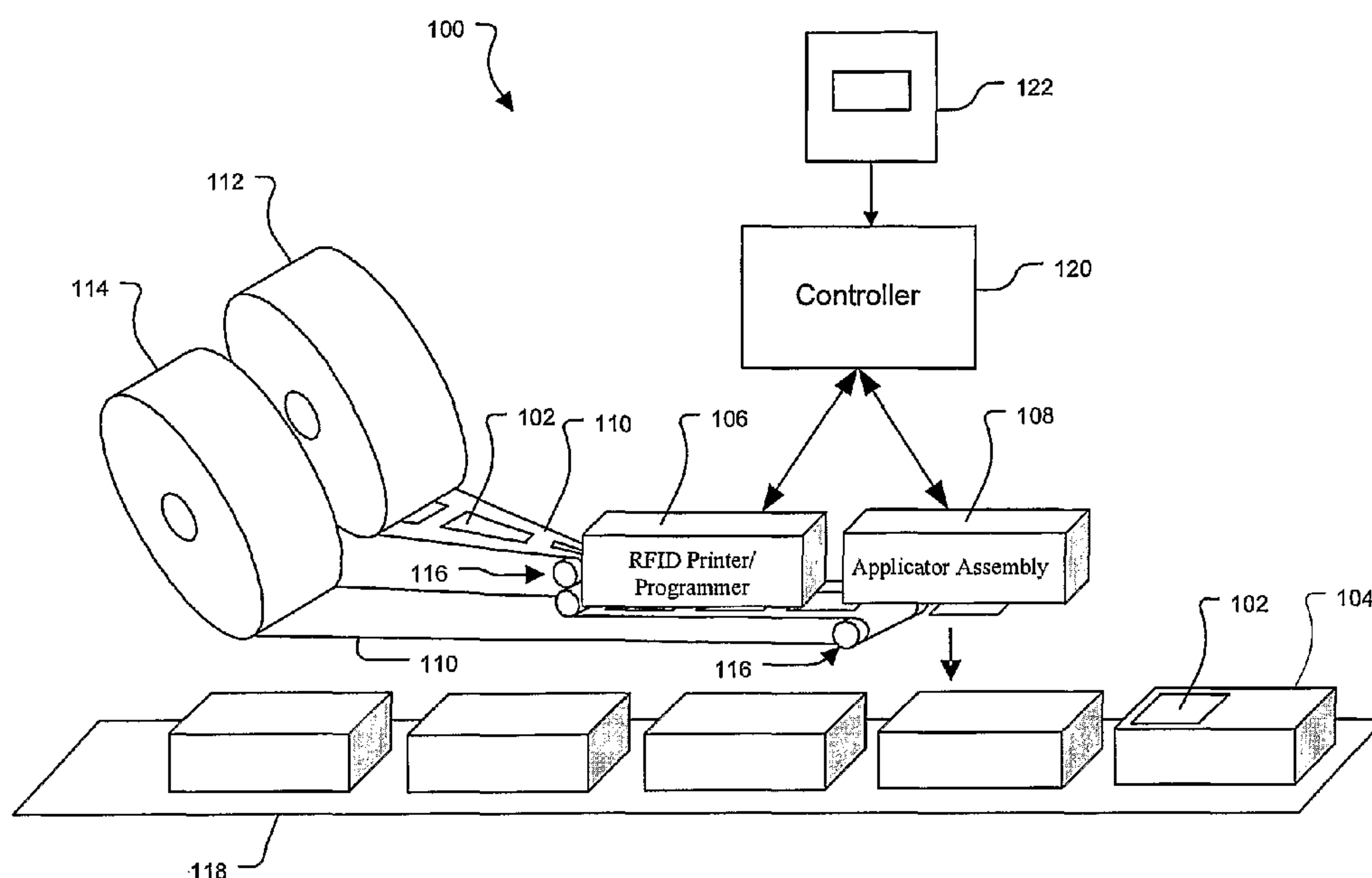
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(54) Title: SYSTEM INCLUDING INTEGRATED RFID PROGRAMMER



(57) Abstract: An RFID applicator system including an integrated RFID programmer for programming RFID labels prior to affixing the labels to items. The system may also include an integrated printer for printing on the RFID labels prior to affixing the labels to items. A remote device for controlling the programmer is also provided.

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SYSTEM INCLUDING INTEGRATED RFID PROGRAMMERTechnical Field

[0001] The invention relates to systems for programming an RFID label, and, more particularly, a system for integrating the programming of an RFID label into a variety of applications, such as with printers, high-speed label applicators, handheld applicators and dispensers.

Background Information

[0002] Radio frequency based identification (RFID) is widely used in the identification and tracking of products, equipment, and other articles. For example, RFID systems are commonly used in electronic article surveillance (EAS) and in logistical and inventory systems for monitoring goods and equipment and recording information on the target item. A RFID system typically includes a RFID reader and a RFID device such as a tag or label. The RFID reader may transmit a radio-frequency carrier signal to the RFID device. The RFID device may respond to the carrier signal with a data signal encoded with information stored on the RFID device. RFID devices may store information such as a unique identifier or Electronic Product Code (EPC) associated with an article or item.

[0003] Typically, RFID labels are programmed with associated information, e.g. an EPC, prior to application or use. For example, a work station or hand-held unit may be used to program the label. Programming systems have also been combined with table-top printers to provide a programmed label including printed information on a surface thereof for manual application. One example of such a combined table-top programmer/printer is the R402 RFID Label Printer/Encoder, available from Zebra Technologies International, LLC of Vernon Hills, IL. These programmer/printer stations have been used to pre-program and print labels before the labels are fed into the applicator system for application to an item. This is a costly two-step process, requiring two separate pieces of equipment.

[0004] Automated label applicators have been used to apply spools of pre-programmed RFID labels to items or articles. In one known configuration, a supply spool is provided including printed labels removably affixed to a web of liner material. The labels and liner are fed from the spool through a series of feed rollers to an applicator. In synchronization with this operation, the item to which the label is to be affixed is fed along a conveyor to an application area beneath the applicator. The applicator may include, for example, a vacuum

(air-based) system or a mechanical applicator. As the labels are fed to the applicator, the liner is removed from the label and the applicator applies the RFID label to the item traveling along the conveyor. The used liner is subsequently taken up by a rewind spool.

[0005] It is known to incorporate a separate printer into such a system, typically located proximate the applicator, for printing the label prior to application. In such systems, the label is programmed at a separate programming station after it is printed and applied to the item. Unfortunately, however, known systems have not integrated RFID programming into the application process, resulting in a time intensive and expensive approach to applying programmed labels to associated items.

[0006] Accordingly, there is a need for a system for applying RFID labels to various devices, such as by affixing the label mechanically onto equipment or integrating into the equipment, wherein the system includes an integrated RFID label programmer.

Summary of the Invention

[0007] The invention relates to a system for integrating the programming of an RFID label into a variety of applications, such as with printers, high-speed label applicators, handheld applicators and dispensers. Embodiments of the invention may include a system for affixing an RFID label to an item having a programming unit for receiving one or more RFID labels from a label supply, the programming unit configured to program information on the label; and an applicator for receiving the programmed label from the programming unit and applying the label to an item.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0008] The subject matter regarded as the embodiments is particularly pointed out and distinctly claimed in the concluding portion of the specification. The embodiments, however, both as to organization and method of operation, together with objects, features, and advantages thereof, may best be understood by reference to the following detailed description when read with the accompanying drawings in which: FIG. 1 is a diagrammatic view of one exemplary embodiment of an RFID applicator consistent with the invention.

[0009] FIG. 2 is a side cross-sectional view of one exemplary embodiment of a RFID label that can be used in an RFID applicator consistent with the invention.

[0010] FIG. 3 is a block diagram of an exemplary integrated printer/programming unit consistent with the invention.

[0011] FIG. 4 is a diagrammatic view of another exemplary RFID applicator consistent with the invention.

Detailed Description

5 [0012] For simplicity and ease of explanation, the invention will be described herein in connection with various exemplary embodiments thereof. Those skilled in the art will recognize, however, that the features and advantages of the invention may be implemented in a variety of configurations. It is to be understood, therefore, that the embodiments described herein are presented by way of illustration, not of limitation.

10 [0013] FIG. 1 illustrates one exemplary embodiment of a radio frequency identification (RFID) label applicator system 100 consistent with the invention including integrated label printing, programming, and application. The applicator system 100 may include an integrated programming/printing 106 unit configured to program and, optionally, print on RFID labels 102 and an applicator 108 configured apply the programmed RFID labels 102 to
15 articles or items 104. The articles or items 104 may be products, merchandise, or any other items or articles that may be monitored using RFID techniques.

[0014] In the illustrated exemplary embodiment, blank RFID labels 102, i.e. labels that have not been completely programmed, may be removably secured to a backing material or web 110 and wound around a supply roll 112. The web 110 may be drawn or advanced from the
20 supply roll 112 to the integrated printer/programming unit 106. The integrated printer/programming unit may be configured to program the labels with associated information and, in one embodiment, to print on the labels while the labels are supported on the web 110.

[0015] In synchronization with this operation, items 104 to which the labels 102 are to be
25 affixed may be fed along a conveyor 118 to an application area beneath the applicator 108. After the integrated printing/programming unit 106 programs and prints the labels 102, the system 100 may pass the labels to the applicator 108, which may include any known applicator configuration for removing the label from the web (e.g. by peeling over a peeler bar) and affixing it to an associated item 104 traveling along the conveyor 118 (e.g. using an
30 air or vacuum actuated tamp assembly). After the RFID labels 102 are removed from the web for application to an item (or rejected as being defective), scrap web 110 may be rewound onto a rewind roll 114. The rewind roll may be driven to assist in rewinding the scrap web 110 on the roll.

[0016] The RFID label applicator system 100 may include an applicator controller 120 to control operation of the system 100. The applicator controller 120 may be a programmable logic controller (PLC), such as the type available from Allen-Bradley, Omron or Mitsubishi, or a general purpose computer, such as a PC, programmed to control one or more operations of the applicator 100. The controller 120 may be coupled to the supply 112, rewind 114 and/or feed rollers 116 (e.g., to the motors, sensors, etc. thereof) to control the feeding of the web 110 through the system 100 and/or to control the positioning of the RFID labels 102 relative to the RFID printer/programming unit 106. The controller 120 may also be coupled to the applicator assembly 108 to control application of programmed, printed and removed RFID labels to the items 104. A user interface / control panel 122 may be coupled to the controller 120 to enable a user to monitor the application process and/or to provide commands and/or operating parameters to the controller 120.

[0017] The controller 120 and/or user interface 122 may also be coupled to the integrated printer/programming unit 106 to control the RFID printing and programming operations.

RFID label printing operations may be controlled, for example, by controlling the printer to print associated indicia, e.g. product and/or source identifiers, on the labels upon receiving an indication that the RFID labels 102 are properly positioned relative to the integrated printer/programming unit 106. RFID programming operations may be controlled, for example, by allocating Electronic Product Codes (EPC's) and/or other data to be sent to the RFID labels 102 upon receiving an indication that the RFID labels 102 are properly positioned relative to the integrated printer/programming unit 106. The controller 120 may also monitor detection of defective labels to control a label reject assembly. The controller 120 may further collect printing and/or programming data and statistics and provide such data to the user.

[0018] One embodiment of a RFID label 102 is shown in greater detail in FIG. 2. The RFID label 102 may include an integrated circuit (IC) chip 202 coupled to an antenna 204. The IC chip 202 and antenna 204 may be sandwiched between one or more layers or substrates, such as an adhesive substrate 206 and a printable layer 208. The adhesive substrate 206 may include a scrim coated on each side with an adhesive, such as an acrylic based adhesive. The printable layer 208 may be made of a thermal transfer paper or other material suitable for printing. One or more additional layers or substrates may also be incorporated into the RFID label 102, as is known to those skilled in the art. The web 110 may be made of a paper with a release agent such as wax or silicone to allow the RFID label 102 to peel away from the web

110. The RFID label 102 may have a peel adhesion strength (e.g., about 15 N/inch) that allows the RFID label 102 to be removably adhered to the web 110 and later adhered to the items 104. Although RFID labels may have various sizes, one example of the RFID label 102 may be about 3 in. by 3 in. and supported on a web 110 having a width of about 4 in.

5 [0019] One example of a RFID label 102 is the "Combo EAS/RFID Label or Tag" disclosed in U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial No. 60/628,303, which is fully incorporated herein by reference. Other examples include the RFID labels commercially available under the name Sensormatic® from Tyco Fire and Security. Those skilled in the art will recognize that the RFID label 102 may include any RFID device capable of being adhered or otherwise
10 secured to articles or items.

[0020] Turning now to FIG. 3, there is shown in block diagram form one exemplary embodiment of an RFID printing/programming unit 106 useful in a system consistent with the invention. As shown, one embodiment of the integrated printing programming unit 106 may include a processor 300, a machine-readable medium 302 for storing one or more
15 programs to operate the processor, a printer 304 controlled by the processor, and a RFID reader/programmer 306 controlled by the processor. Again, the printing/programming unit 106 may be integrated into the applicator system 100 for programming and, optionally, printing labels 102 with associated information as, for example, they pass by the printing/programming unit 106 on a web 110 drawn from a supply roll 112. The printing and
20 programming operations may be performed in any order. Also, in an embodiment wherein printing on the labels is not necessary or desired, the printer 304 may omitted from the unit 106, or disabled. In one embodiment, the processor 300 may control printing and programming functions under the control of the system controller 120 through a control input 308 received from the system controller 120. Those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize,
25 however, that although the processor 300 and the machine-readable medium 302 are shown as being integrated into the printing/programming unit 106, the processor and/or the machine-readable medium 302 may be incorporated into the system controller 120 or another separate local or remote component.

[0021] The printer 302 may include any known printer configuration, e.g. an inkjet or laser-
30 type printing head and ink supply, and may be configured for printing on the RFID labels under the control of the processor 300. The RFID reader/programmer 306 may include any RFID reader/programmer known to those of ordinary skill in the art for reading and/or programming RFID devices, such as the type known as the Sensormatic® SensorID™ Agile

2 Reader available from Tyco Fire and Security. The RFID programming system 106 may also be capable of detecting defective RFID labels, for example, by attempting to read a RFID label after applying programming signals. In one embodiment, the RFID reader/programmer 106 may generally include a transceiver 310 (transmitter and receiver) for
5 transmitting information to and reading information received from the label 102 under instruction from the processor, and an antenna 312 connected to the transceiver 310 for propagating a signal to and from the label 102.

[0022] Another exemplary embodiment 100a of a system consistent with the invention is illustrated in FIG. 4. As shown in FIG. 4, an applicator system consistent with the invention
10 may include a remote, e.g. handheld, unit 400 in wireless communication with the printing/programming unit 106 and/or system controller 120. Those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that the remote unit 400 may be configured for wireless communication with one or more of the applicator system 100a components in a variety of ways, e.g. through communication of electromagnetic signals between antennas 406, 408, by an infra red link
15 such as an IrDA0 link, etc.

[0023] The remote unit may include a user interface/control panel 402, a processor, and a machine-readable medium including instructions adapted to be executed by the processor to allow a user to monitor the automated printing/programming and application process and to reconfigure programming of the labels 102 remotely, i.e. without the need to access the
20 printing/programming unit 106 or the system controller 120 directly. In addition, or alternatively, the remote unit may include an integrated printer/programming unit 106a for allowing remote printing, reading and/or programming of RFID labels. The printer/programming unit 106a may be configured as shown in FIG. 3, with the printer optionally omitted to reduce the size of the device, and may be provided on a single circuit
25 board for driving a reading/programming antenna, e.g. antenna 312. The remote unit may also include a power source, e.g. a battery and/or may be configured to dock with a base station, as disclosed, for example in U.S. Patent Application Ser. No. 10/412,739, the teachings of which are incorporated herein by reference.

[0024] It will be appreciated that the functionality described for the embodiments of the
30 invention may be implemented in the integrated printer/programmer 106, 106a, the system controller 120, or other system component using hardware, software, or a combination of hardware and software, and well-known signal processing techniques. If implemented in software, a processor and machine-readable medium is required. The processor can be any

type of micro-processor or logic circuitry capable of providing the speed and functionality required by the embodiments of the invention. For example, the processor could be a processor circuit from the Pentium® family of processors made by Intel Corporation, or the family of processors made by Motorola. Machine-readable media include any media capable of storing instructions adapted to be executed by a processor. Some examples of such media include, but are not limited to, read-only memory (ROM), random-access memory (RAM), programmable ROM (PROM), erasable programmable ROM (EPROM), electronically erasable programmable ROM (EEPROM), dynamic RAM (DRAM), magnetic disk (e.g. floppy disk and hard drive), optical disk (e.g. CD-ROM), and any other unit that can store digital information. In one embodiment, the instructions are stored on the medium in a compressed and/or encrypted format.

[0025] As used herein, the phrase “adapted to be executed by a processor” is meant to encompass instructions stored in a compressed and/or encrypted format, as well as instructions that have to be compiled or installed by an installer before being executed by the processor. Further, the processor and machine-readable medium may be part of a larger system that may contain various combinations of machine-readable storage units through various I/O controllers, which are accessible by the processor and which are capable of storing a combination of computer program instructions and data.

[0026] According to one aspect of the invention, there is provided a system for affixing an RFID label to an item including: a programming unit for receiving one or more RFID labels from a label supply, the programming unit being configured to program information on the label; and an applicator for receiving the programmed label from the programming unit and applying the label to an item.

[0027] According to another aspect of the invention, there is provided a system for affixing an RFID label to an item including: a label supply including a plurality of RFID labels removably affixed to a web of material; a programming unit configured to receive one or more of the labels from the label supply and program information on the label while the label is affixed to the web; a printer configured to receive the one or more of the labels from the label supply and to print on the label while the label is affixed to the web; and an applicator configured to remove the label from the web and apply the label to an item.

[0028] According to another aspect of the invention, there is provided a method of affixing an RFID label to an item including: receiving one or more RFID labels from a label supply including a plurality of the RFID labels removably affixed to a web of material; programming

information on the label while the label is affixed to the web; removing the label from the web; and applying the label to an item.

[0029] While the principles of the invention have been described herein, it is to be understood by those skilled in the art that this description is made only by way of example and not as a
5 limitation as to the scope of the invention. Other embodiments are contemplated within the scope of the invention in addition to the exemplary embodiments shown and described herein. Modifications and substitutions by one of ordinary skill in the art are considered to be within the scope of the invention, which is not to be limited except by the following claims.

Claims

What is claimed is:

1. A system for affixing an RFID label to an item comprising:
a programming unit for receiving one or more RFID labels from a label supply, said
5 programming unit configured to program information on said label; and
an applicator for receiving said programmed label from said programming unit and
applying said label to an item.
2. A system according to claim 1, wherein said label supply comprises a plurality of
labels removably affixed to a web of material wound on a supply roll, and wherein said
10 system is configured to advance said labels from said label supply past said programming
unit and then to said applicator.
3. A system according to claim 1, wherein said programming unit is an integral unit
comprising a printer for receiving one or more labels from said label supply and printing on
said label.
- 15 4. A system according to claim 1 wherein said programming unit is in an integral unit
comprising, a processor, a machine-readable medium coupled to said processor and storing
instructions adapted to be executed by said processor, a transmitter coupled to said processor,
a receiver coupled to said processor, and an antenna coupled to said transmitter and said
receiver for transmitting and receiving signals to and from said label.
- 20 5. A system according to claim 4, wherein said programming unit comprises a printer for
receiving one or more labels from said label supply and printing on said label.
6. A system according to claim 1, said system further comprising a remote unit for
remotely controlling said programming unit using wireless communication.
7. A system according to claim 6, wherein said remote unit comprises an RFID
25 programmer for programming information on RFID labels.
8. A system for affixing an RFID label to an item comprising:
a label supply comprising a plurality of RFID labels removably affixed to a web of
material;
a programming unit configured to receive one or more of said labels from said label
30 supply and program information on said label while said label is affixed to said web;
a printer configured to receive said one or more of said labels from said label supply
and to print on said label while said label is affixed to said web; and

an applicator configured to remove said label from said web and apply said label to an item.

9. A system according to claim 8, wherein said web of material is wound on a supply roll.

5 10. A system according to claim 8, wherein said system is configured to advance said labels from said label supply past said programming unit and said printer and to said applicator.

11. A system according to claim 8, wherein said programming unit and said printer are combined into an integral printer/programming unit.

10 12. A system according to claim 8, wherein said programming unit is in an integral unit comprising, a processor, a machine-readable medium coupled to said processor and storing instructions adapted to be executed by said processor, a transmitter coupled to said processor, a receiver coupled to said processor, and an antenna coupled to said transmitter and said receiver for transmitting and receiving signals to and from said label.

15 13. A system according to claim 8, further comprising a remote unit for remotely controlling said programming unit using wireless communication.

14. A system according to claim 13, wherein said remote unit comprises an RFID programmer for programming information on RFID labels.

15. A method of affixing an RFID label to an item comprising:
20 receiving one or more RFID labels from a label supply comprising a plurality of said RFID labels removably affixed to a web of material;
programming information on said label while said label is affixed to said web;
removing said label from said web; and
applying said label to an item.

25 16. A method according to claim 15, said method further comprising printing on said label while said label is affixed to said web.

17. A method according to claim 15, wherein said programming and said printing are performed by an integrated unit.

30 18. A method according to claim 15, wherein said programming is performed by an integrated unit comprising, a processor, a machine-readable medium coupled to said processor and storing instructions adapted to be executed by said processor, a transmitter coupled to said processor, a receiver coupled to said processor, and an antenna coupled to

said transmitter and said receiver for transmitting and receiving signals to and from said label.

19. A method according to claim 15, said method further comprising controlling said programming unit using a remote unit wirelessly coupled to said programming unit.

5 20. A method according to claim 15, wherein said remote unit comprises an RFID programmer for programming information on RFID labels.

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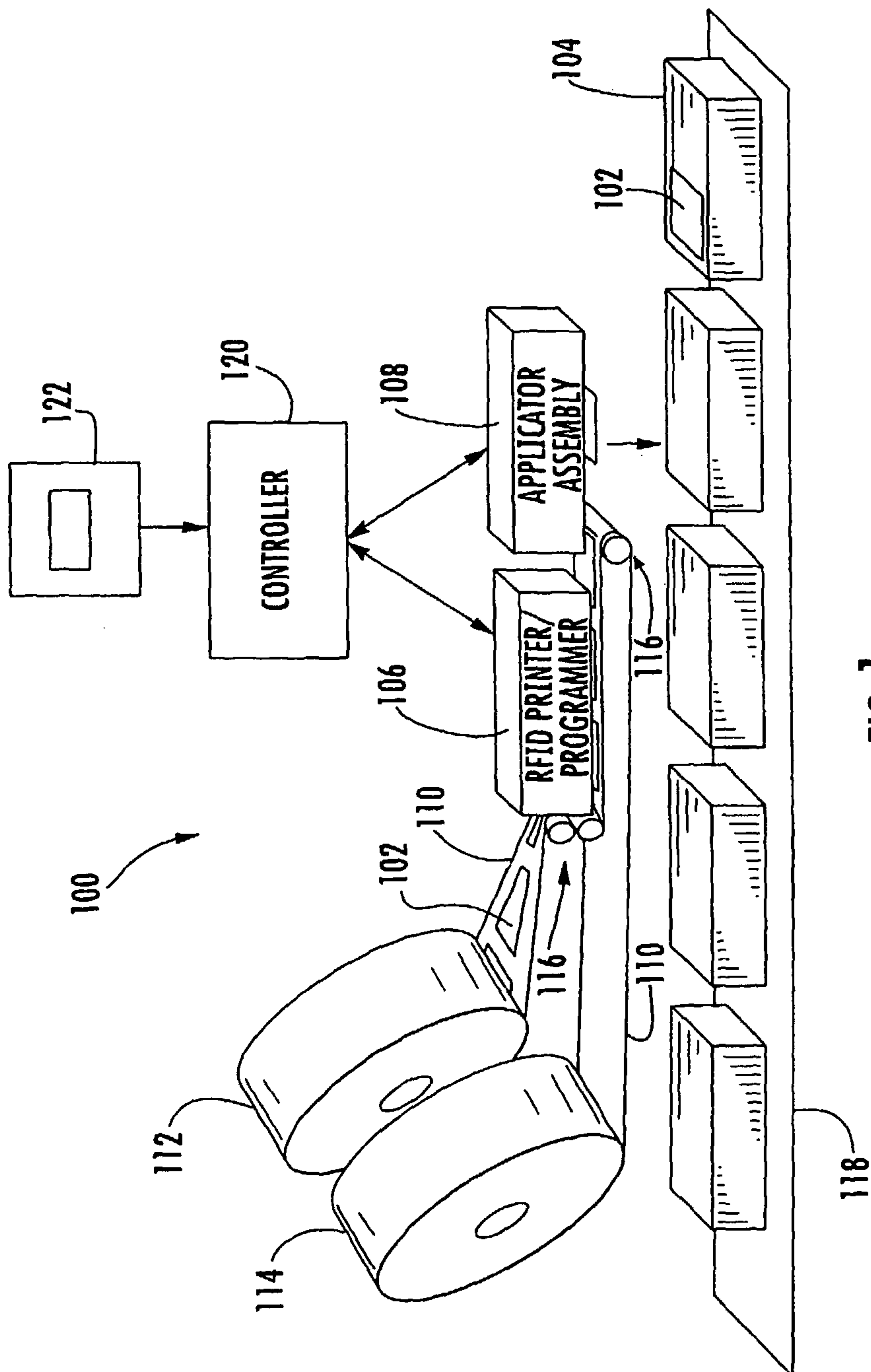


FIG. 1

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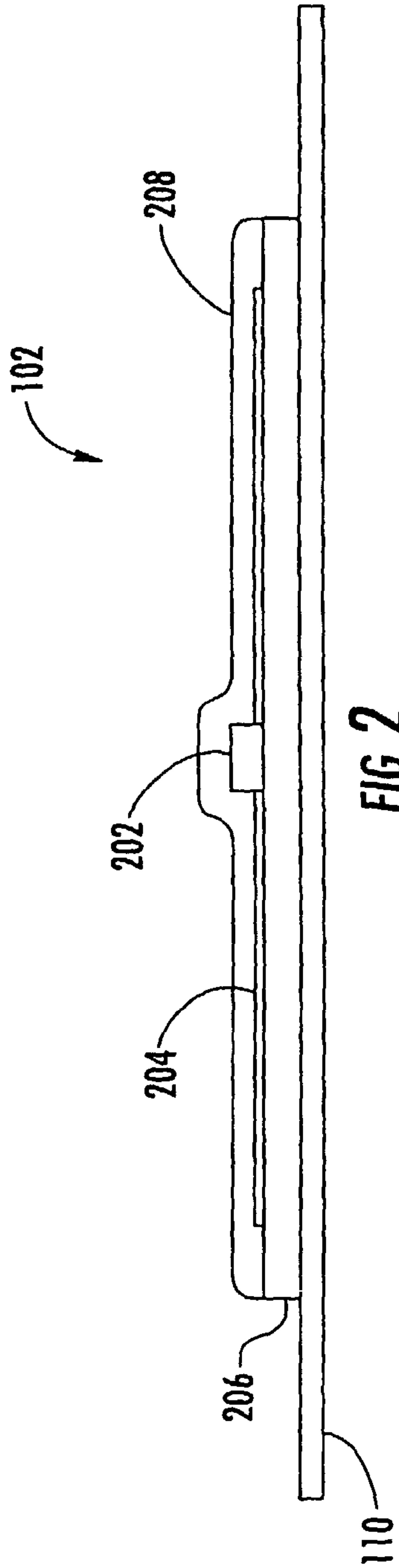


FIG. 2

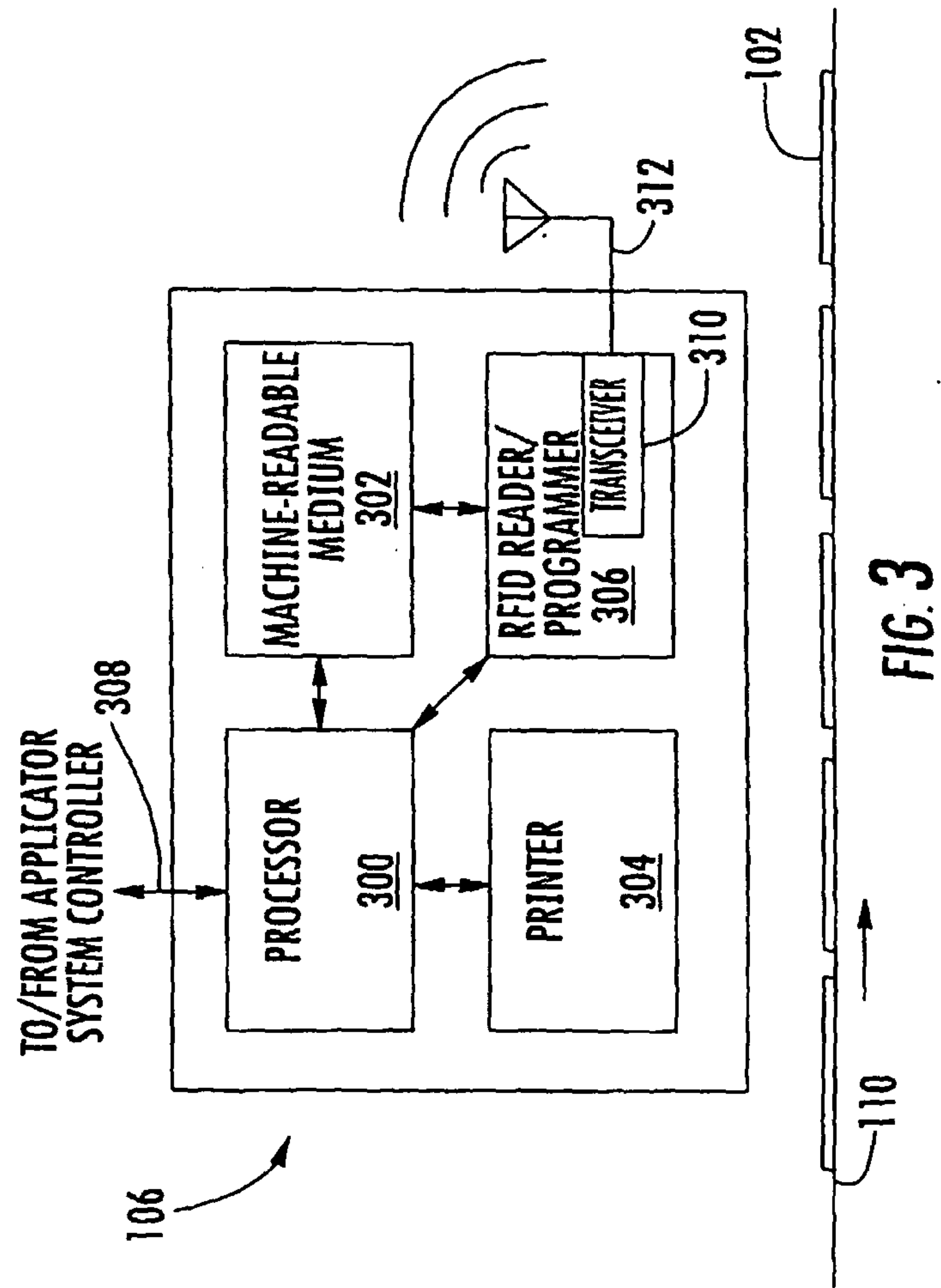


FIG. 3

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