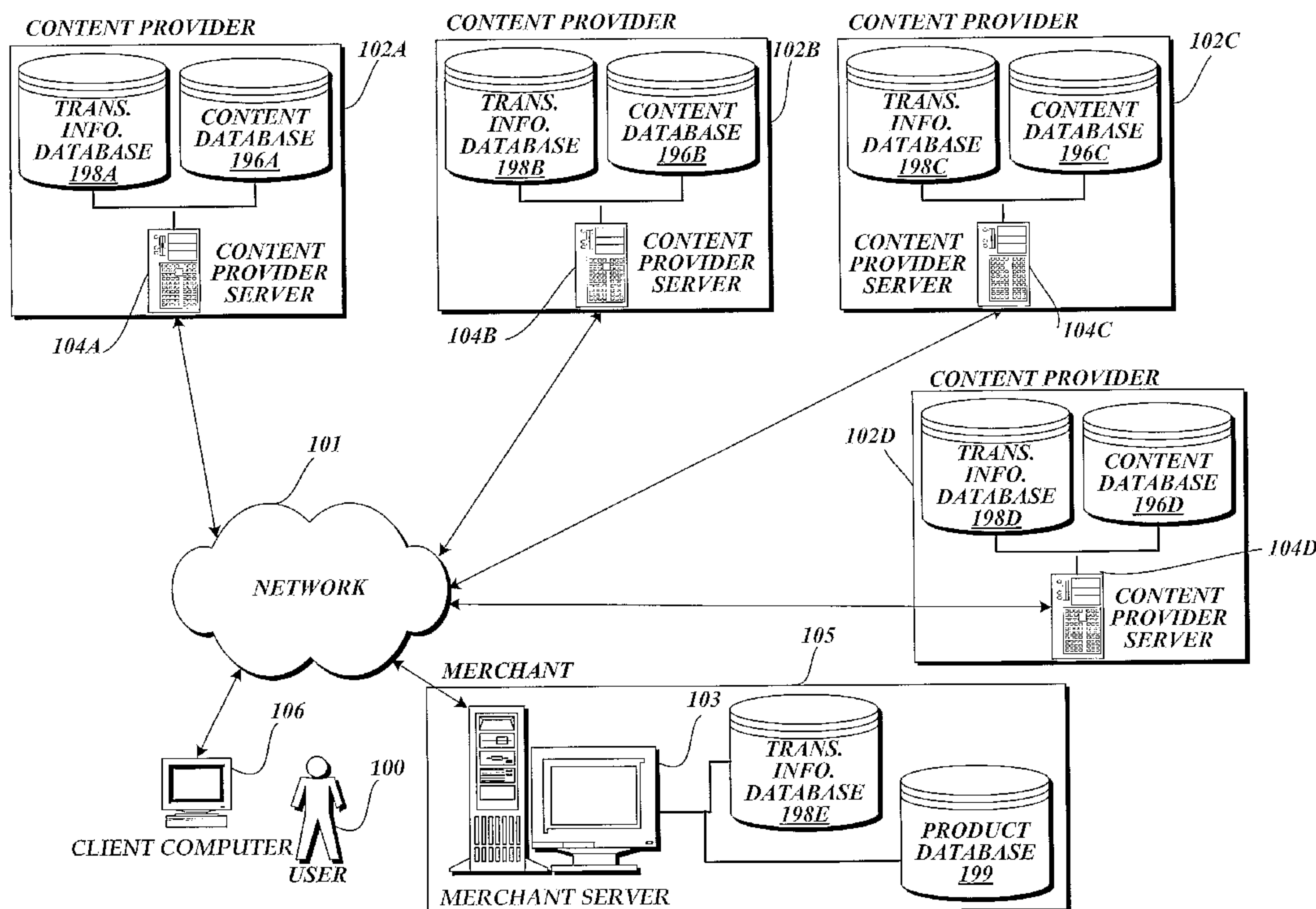




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A system and method for managing access rights of media files communicated over a network. In a preferred embodiment, the present invention allows a user to obtain rights to access media files of selected content, which may include a song, album, movie, etc. Once the user obtains rights to access media files of the selected content, information that identifies the user and information that describes the selected content is communicated to a plurality of content providers. By receiving information that identifies the user and information that describes the selected content, each content provider can verify independently that the user is authorized to access one or more files that contain the selected content. The user may then directly contact any one of many service providers to access media files that contain the selected content.

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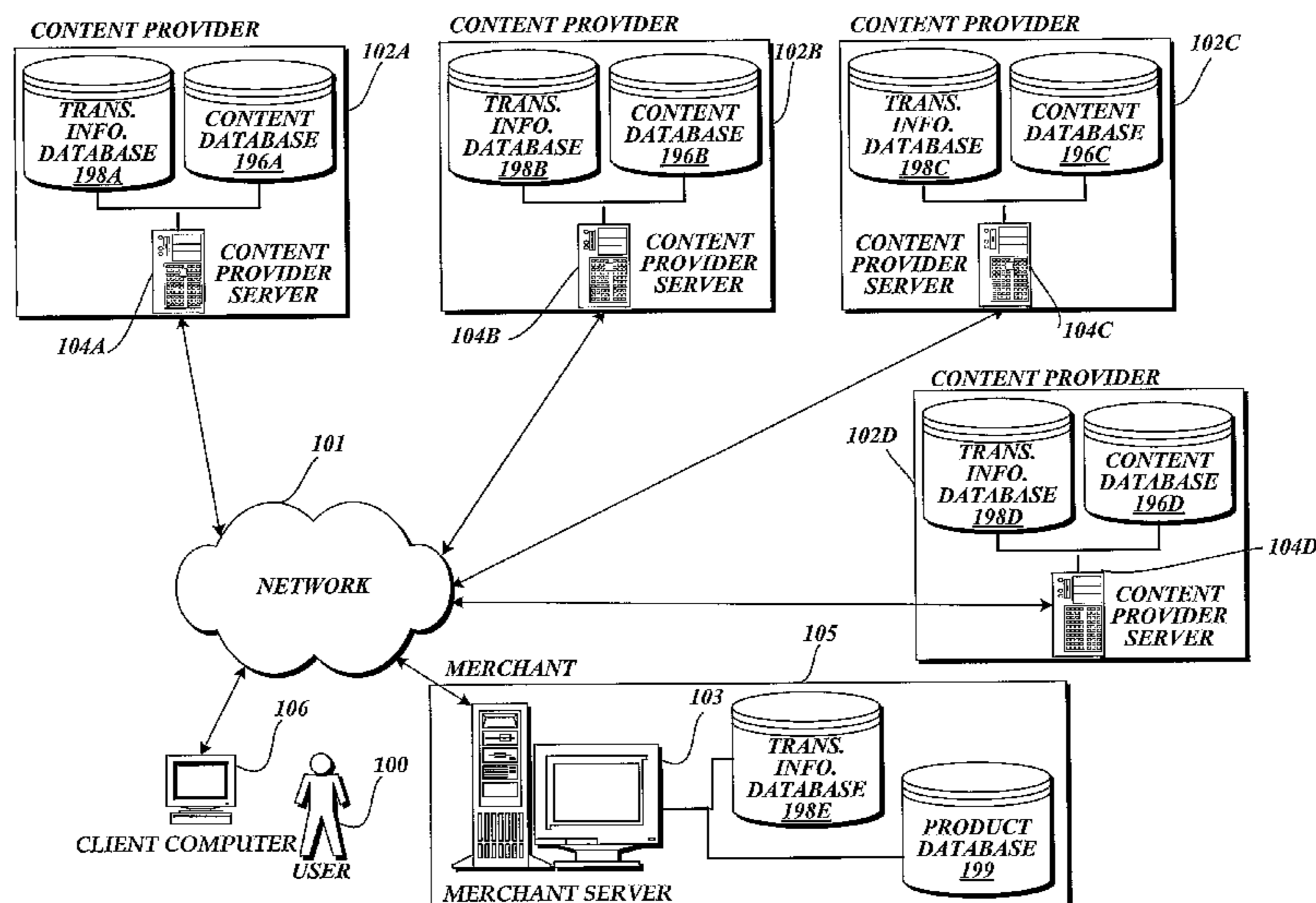
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(54) Title: METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR MANAGING ACCESS TO MEDIA FILES



(57) **Abstract:** A system and method for managing access rights of media files communicated over a network. In a preferred embodiment, the present invention allows a user to obtain rights to access media files of selected content, which may include a song, album, movie, etc. Once the user obtains rights to access media files of the selected content, information that identifies the user and information that describes the selected content is communicated to a plurality of content providers. By receiving information that identifies the user and information that describes the selected content, each content provider can verify independently that the user is authorized to access one or more files. that contain the selected content. The user may then directly contact any one of many service providers to access media files that contain the selected content.

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For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR MANAGING ACCESS TO MEDIA FILES

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed to a method and system for managing access to
5 media files, and more particularly relates to the management of access rights to media
files communicated over the Internet.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The widespread use of the Internet has greatly enhanced the way users acquire
and use electronic media. There are now many different types of media players that
10 allow users to locate, obtain, and play media files that contain music, movies, computer
programs, pictures, games and other content. For instance, a user may search for a
particular song at the Apple Music Store, which is found at <http://www.applemusic.com>,
and purchase rights that allow the user to download a media file containing the song.
Once the user obtains the media file, the user may play the song on a compatible media
15 player application, such as the iTunes® player by Apple of Cupertino, CA. Other media
player applications that allow users to purchase and play media files include the
RealOne™ player by RealNetworks, Inc., of Seattle, WA; and the Windows Media
Player™ by Microsoft Corp. of Redmond, WA.

While existing systems have enhanced the way users acquire and use media,
20 existing systems present some limitations. One limitation is caused by the fact that
specific media player applications are limited to certain types of file formats. For
instance, if a user obtains a media file in a Windows® media format, e.g., a .WMA file,
for use in the Windows Media Player™, the obtained media file may be incompatible
with other media players, such as the RealOne™ player or the iTunes® player. Although
25 it is possible for a user to convert an original media file having a Windows® media
format into a format that is compatible with another player, such a remedy is not always
desirable because the conversion process causes some degradation in the quality of the
recording.

The above-described limitation caused by incompatible file formats is more
30 apparent when existing media players are required to manage rights to a
copyright-protected work contained in a media file. For instance, if a user purchases a
copyright-protected audio file from the Apple Music Store, the user receives the audio
file in a particular format, such as Apple's new AAC format. Copyright protection of the

content contained in the audio file is preserved since the proprietary AAC format cannot be played by other media players. In addition, the compatible media player application, the iTunes® player, limits the number of copies that can be produced from the original media file. Thus, if the user would like to play the purchased song on another media
5 player application, such as the Windows Media Player™, the user would have to purchase rights to the same song from another provider having an audio file format that is compatible with the Windows Media Player™. Although it may be possible for the user to convert the AAC file to another format suitable for another media player, the quality of the converted audio file would be subject to some degradation. In addition, conversion of
10 an AAC file to another file format may violate one or more copyrights that apply to the purchased file. As a result of the above-described limitations, consumers of copyright-protected media files may not have the ability to utilize more than one media player application for certain media files. In addition, users may be forced to purchase multiple copies of a song if they wish to utilize more than one media player application.

15 Accordingly, the prior art is lacking an effective method and system for efficient distribution and management of media files. In addition, the prior art is lacking an effective method and system for managing access rights to copyrighted works contained in media files.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

20 A system and method is provided for managing access rights to media files communicated over a network. In accordance with one embodiment, the system and method manage user access rights to works, also referred to herein as "content," that are contained in media files and typically subject to copyright. Instead of providing access to
25 a single media file, having a particular format, the present invention allows purchasers of copyrighted content to receive a number of different files, having different file formats, without requiring the purchaser to pay multiple times for the copies of the copyrighted content. By providing controlled access to content stored in multiple file formats, the present invention allows users to readily receive media files that may be played on a
30 number of desired media player applications. Many other benefits, such as an improved consumer pricing arrangement, may also result from such management of access rights of copyrighted content.

In one embodiment, the present invention allows a user to purchase rights to access media files of selected content, which may include a song, album, movie, etc.

Once the user purchases rights to access media files of the selected content, information that identifies the user and information that describes the selected content is communicated to one or more content providers. The information may be in the form of a token that signifies the user's right to access the selected content. By receiving this information, each content provider can verify that the user is authorized to access a number of files that contain the selected content. The user may then directly contact any one of many service providers to access media files that contain the selected content. A user's right to access the media files with the selected content may be communicated to the content providers at the time of the user's purchase or at a later time, e.g., when a user contacts a particular content provider and requests access to the media files. In other embodiments, a content provider may allow a user to access media files as a result of an authorization signal sent in response to an authorization request. Access to a media file may include, but is not limited to, downloading an actual media file containing the selected content, accessing a non-recordable data stream containing the work, accessing a recordable data stream containing the work, etc.

As a result, the user's access to the selected content is not limited to the proprietary file format merely because one content provider is limited to such a proprietary file format. Embodiments of the present invention allow users to obtain the selected content in more than one file format by accessing media files provided by different content providers. Among many other benefits, access to different content providers allows users to readily access a number of different formats of media files containing the selected content, without requiring users to pay multiple times for copies of the same content. Thus, users do not incur an increased cost simply because they desire to play the selected content on a number of different media players.

25

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing aspects and many of the attendant advantages of this invention will become more readily appreciated as the same become better understood by reference to the following detailed description, when taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein:

30

FIGURE 1 is a pictorial diagram of a number of computers connected to a network, including a client computer and a number of servers for allowing a number of users to communicate via client-server software applications;

FIGURE 2 is a schematic block diagram of an exemplary embodiment of one server depicted in FIGURE 1;

FIGURE 3A is a flow diagram illustrating an exemplary embodiment of a rights management routine formed in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 3B is a sequence diagram showing the path of data communicated in the rights management routine shown in FIGURE 3A;

FIGURE 4 is a pictorial diagram illustrating an exemplary Web page formed in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention; and

FIGURE 5 is a sequence diagram showing the path of data communicated in a rights management routine formed in accordance with a separate alternative embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The following description provides an enabling description of a system, method and computer-readable medium for managing access to media files communicated over a network, such as the Internet. The following description first provides an overview of a computing environment in which the present invention may be implemented. Following that, a description of a rights management routine is described and shown in accompanying flow diagrams. The illustrative examples described herein are not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise forms disclosed. Similarly, any process steps described herein may be interchangeable with other steps, or several combinations of steps, in order to achieve the same result.

FIGURE 1 provides an exemplary overview of a computing environment in which the invention may be implemented. The environment includes at least one client computer 106, a merchant server 103 and a plurality of content provider servers 104A, 104B, 104C and 104D, interconnected by a communications network 101. The client computer 106 may be associated with a user 100, such as a consumer seeking to purchase rights to access one or more media files containing copyright-protected content. The merchant server 103 may be associated with a merchant 105, such as an on-line retailer offering to sell access rights to media content, i.e., copyright-protected works including music, movies, etc. The content provider servers 104A, 104B, 104C and 104D may be associated with respective content providers 102A, 102B, 102C and 102D, each of which may be a company that distributes media files containing copyright-protected works.

Each content provider may store media files containing copyright-protected works in content databases 196A, 196B, 196C and 196D, and distribute those media files in specific formats. For instance, if the first content provider server provider 102A is Microsoft, the media files stored in its respective content database 196A may include
5 media files in Microsoft's WMA format. Similarly, if the second content provider 102B is RealNetworks, the media files stored in its respective content database 196B may include media files in RealNetworks' RA or RM format.

As described in more detail below, the user 100 may use the client computer 106 to purchase rights to access and/or obtain selected content and other products listed in a
10 product database 199 maintained by the merchant 105. Purchase transaction information is stored in a transaction information database 198E of the merchant server 103. The transaction information, or a portion or representation thereof, is also communicated to one or more of the content providers 102A, 102B, 102C and 102D and stored in a number of respective transaction information databases 198A, 198B, 198C and 198D. The user
15 may then contact the respective content provider(s) 102A, 102B, 102C and 102D to obtain access to the media files containing the selected content. Using the information stored in the transaction information databases 198A, 198B, 198C and 198D, each content provider can determine if the user 100 has rights to access particular media files stored in the content databases 196A, 196B, 196C and 196D.

20 The client computer and the servers, depicted in FIGURE 1, are configured to electronically communicate via the network 101. The network 101 may be a LAN or a larger network, such as a wide area network (WAN) or the Internet. The computing environment shown in FIGURE 1 may be configured to communicate media files, Web
page documents, commands, and data between the client computer and the servers. As
25 will be appreciated by those skilled in the art and others, the computer systems shown in FIGURE 1 provide a simplified example of one suitable environment for implementing the present invention. The present invention is not limited to this particular form of implementation.

When software formed in accordance with this invention is implemented in
30 computer systems of the type illustrated in FIGURE 1, the invention provides a way for users to purchase, download and play media files. For instance, a user can purchase rights to access media files of selected content, which may include a song, album, movie, etc. Once the user purchases rights to access media files containing the selected content,

information that identifies the user and the selected content is communicated to a plurality of content providers. By using the information that identifies the user and the selected content, each content provider can readily determine if the user is authorized to access the media files that contain the selected content. The user may directly contact
5 any one of the service providers to access the media files that contain the selected content.

As a result of the above-described process, the user's access to the selected content is not limited to a single file format, even if an individual content provider distributes the selected content in a proprietary file format. If the user desires an alternative file format
10 for use with another media player application, the user simply contacts another service provider to access a media file in the desired format. Among many other benefits, access to different content providers allows users to readily access a number of different formats of media files containing the selected content, without requiring the user to pay multiple times for multiple copies of the same work. Thus, the user does not incur an increased
15 cost simply because he or she desires to play, view, or execute the selected content on a number of different media players.

FIGURE 2 depicts an exemplary computer architecture of a server, such as the merchant server 103, suitable for use in the environment shown in FIGURE 1. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that the server 103 may include many more (or fewer)
20 components than those shown in FIGURE 2. It is not necessary, however, that all of these generally conventional components be shown in order to disclose an enabling embodiment of the present invention. As shown in FIGURE 2, the server 103 is connected to the network 101 (FIGURE 1) via a network interface 160. Those of
ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that the network interface 160 includes the
25 necessary hardware and software to allow the server 103 to communicate with other computing devices connected to the network by the use of one or more suitable communication protocols, such as TCP/IP protocol.

The server 103 also includes a processing unit 162, a video display adapter 164, and memory 166, all communicatively connected together and to the network
30 interface 160 by a bus 168. The memory 166 generally comprises RAM, ROM, and/or permanent memory, such as a hard disk drive, tape drive, optical drive, floppy disk drive, or combination thereof. The memory 166 stores an operating system 172 for controlling the operation of the server 103. As is known to those of ordinary skill in the art, the

operating system may be formed by a general-purpose server operating system such as a Microsoft® server operating system, UNIX or LINUX™. A binary input/output system ("BIOS") 188 for controlling the low-level operation of server 103 is also stored in the memory 166.

5 The memory 166 additionally stores the program code and data for providing network services that allow users to request, receive, and view information and data files stored at the server 103. Accordingly, the memory 166 may store a Web server application 178, which may be provided by any one of a number of commercially available software packages. The Web server application 178 comprises computer
10 executable instructions that, when executed by the processing unit 162, generate configurable markup documents, such as the sample Web page shown in FIGURE 4, which is described in more detail below. The Web server application 178 may be configured to communicate with a commercially available database application 176 and a control application 174 to facilitate various functions of the present invention, as
15 described below.

 The server 103 may further include an input/output interface 190 connected to the bus 168 for communicating with external devices, such as a mouse, keyboard, scanner, or other input devices not shown in FIGURE 2. Likewise, the server 103 may include additional mass storage facilities, such as CD-ROM/DVD-ROM drive 192 and large
20 capacity mass memory 194, such as a hard disk drive, tape drive, optical disk drive, or combination thereof, also connected to the bus 168. The server 103 may utilize the mass memory 194 to store several databases. In one embodiment, the mass memory 194 of the server 103 contains a transaction information database 198E, which stores information
25 that identifies different users. The transaction information database 198E also stores information that identifies content, such as a specific songs, albums, movies, etc., purchased by each user. As described in more detail below, information stored in the transaction information database 198E of the server 103 is communicated for storage in other transaction information databases 198A, 198B, 198C and 198D.

 The content provider servers 104A, 104B, 104C and 104D shown in FIGURE 1
30 may take the form of any suitable computer architecture, such as the computer architecture illustrated in FIGURE 2, if appropriate. The content provider servers 104A, 104B, 104C and 104D may each include a network interface for communicating with other computing devices via the network 101. The network interface may be configured

for use with any wired or wireless network connection, and may be used with any suitable communication protocol, such as the TCP/IP protocol. In general, each of the content provider servers 104A, 104B, 104C and 104D includes a processing unit, a display, and a memory unit. The memory unit stores the program code necessary for operating a Web site and for providing access to media files stored in a memory device. In the particular embodiment described thus far, the memory unit of each content provider server 104A, 104B, 104C and 104D may include the content databases 196A, 196B, 196C and 196D for storing the media files, and the transaction information databases 198A, 198B, 198C and 198D for storing transaction and user information received from the server 103.

10 The client computer 106 shown in FIGURE 1 may take the form of any one of a number of different computer products. For example, the client computer 106 may include aspects of the computer architecture illustrated in FIGURE 2, if appropriate. The client computer 106 may include a network interface for providing communication with the network 101. The network interface may be configured for use with any wired or wireless network connection, and may be used with any suitable communication protocol, such as the TCP/IP protocol. In general, the client computer 106 includes a processing unit, a display, and a memory unit. The memory unit of the client computer 106 stores the program code necessary for operating the client computer 106. The memory unit of the client computer 106 may also store an application for browsing Web pages, such as
15
20 Microsoft's Internet Explorer[®] Web browser.

The above-described computer systems store software programs that, when executed, implement aspects of the present invention. For illustrative purposes, the following describes an embodiment of the present invention that allows a user to access media files containing purchased content. In this example, the user purchases rights from a merchant. In turn, the merchant communicates information to one or more content providers enabling them to independently authorize access of at least one media file containing the selected content to the user. The user then accesses media files containing the selected content from one or more content providers. Although the illustrative example described herein depicts a Web-based implementation, those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that the scope of the invention may include other implementations regardless of the configuration, size, or form of the computing system.

Referring now to the flow diagram of FIGURE 3A, the sequence diagram of FIGURE 3B, and the pictorial diagram of FIGURE 4, one exemplary embodiment of a

media rights management routine 300 will now be described. The media rights management routine 300 begins at block 301 where the routine communicates a transaction Web page that enables a user to purchase rights to access media content. Generally described, the transaction Web page facilitates the communication of media information from a server 103 to a client 106, which allows the user to identify media content to be purchased. The transaction Web page also allows the user to select desired content and transact a purchase of the selected content with a merchant. It should be understood that a purchase transaction in the context of the present invention is not limited to transactions involving monetary transfer, but may involve any form of interaction in which access rights to selected media content are granted to a user.

For illustrative purposes, a sample transaction Web page 400 for use in the process of block 301 is shown in FIGURE 4. The sample transaction Web page 400 comprises a first text field 440, which provides an overview of the content that is offered for sale. In this example, the first text field 440 generally describes the media content as "Music by Blur." The sample transaction Web page 400 also comprises a second text field 443, which provides a detailed description of the media content. In this example, the second text field 443 includes a list of songs. The list of songs describes each song's track name, artist, album, and genre. Although this illustration shows one example where specific types of information are used to describe the content offered for sale, other types of information suitable for describing the content falls within the scope of the present invention. One of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that the information describing the media content may come from a database associated with the merchant, such as the product database 199 shown in FIGURE 1.

The sample transaction Web page 400 also comprises control features that allow users to select and purchase rights to access selected content. In this example, the control features include a set of selection buttons 442 that allows users to select desired content, and a control button 441 that allows users to complete a purchase transaction. User actuation of the control button 441 causes transaction information, which may include one or more items such as a purchase order describing the user and the selected content, to be communicated from the client 106 to the server 103. In one embodiment, the transaction information is arranged as a Uniform Resource Locator (URL) that the client 106 generates and transmits to the server 103. In other embodiments, the transaction information may be arranged and transmitted differently. As will be

appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art, a control application 174 of the merchant server 103 in FIGURE 2 may operate in conjunction with existing electronic commerce software applications to implement the control features that complete the purchase transaction between the user and the merchant.

5 The transaction Web page 400 may also include other features. For instance, the transaction Web page may be configured with program code that allows users to conduct a keyword search for desired content. The transaction Web page may also be configured with other electronic commerce-related features such as a login feature and a shopping cart feature. In one embodiment, a standard local login feature may be used (e.g., in
10 which a user enters a user name and password that is checked against a local database of authorized users). Alternatively, a login feature of the transaction Web page may utilize one or more commercially available universal login services, such as Microsoft's .Net Passport service.

 Returning to FIGURES 3A and 3B, the rights management routine 300 continues
15 at block 303 where the client 106 communicates the transaction information to the server 103. In one embodiment, the transaction information identifies the selected content purchased by the user. For example, if the selected content includes a song, the transaction information may include general media information, such as the song's title, artist, album, genre, etc. Specifically referring to the example shown in FIGURE 4, the
20 selected content is the first song on the list, which is entitled "Tender." Thus, in this example, the transaction information may include: TRACK NAME = Tender; ARTIST = Blur; ALBUM = 13; GENRE = ROCK/POP. Alternatively, or in addition to the general media information, the transaction information may include a unique identifier associated
 with the selected content, such as a Universal Product Code (UPC) or the like.

25 In addition to information that identifies the selected content, the transaction information may also identify the user. In such an embodiment, a proprietary or public user identification code, such as one produced by Microsoft's .Net Passport[®] service, may be used. As will be appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art, the process of block
30 303 may be implemented by any known communication method, such as those employing URL's to communicate transaction information from a client to a server. Although this description illustrates one specific example of a Web-based implementation of a purchase transaction, those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that

implementations of the present invention may include other suitable systems configured to transact a purchase and sale between a user and a merchant.

Continuing at block 305, the rights management routine 300 stores the transaction information in a database associated with the merchant, such as the transaction information database 198E of FIGURE 1. In one embodiment, the transaction information may be stored in a plurality of database records, where each database record identifies the user and the selected content purchased by the user. As will be appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art, existing database programs may be used for implementing the process of block 305.

As shown in block 307, the rights management routine 300 communicates transaction information to a number of content provider servers. More specifically, transaction information is communicated from the merchant server 103 to one or more of the content provider servers 104A, 104B, 104C and 104D. The transaction information communicated in block 307 includes a sufficient amount of information to allow each content provider server 104A, 104B, 104C and 104D to determine if the user has obtained valid rights to access the selected content (e.g., by purchasing the selected content), that may be contained in media files stored in a local database of each content provider, such as the content databases 196A, 196B, 196C and 196D. In one embodiment, the merchant server 103 may communicate transaction information that identifies the user and the selected content purchased by the user. The transaction information may be in the form of a token that uniquely identifies the user in the system but includes measures to protect the privacy of the user. The process of block 307 may utilize any suitable method for communicating data between two computers, which may involve secured or encrypted data communications. The transaction information may be communicated to content providers at the time the user obtained valid rights to access the selected content (e.g., at the time of purchase), or at a later time (e.g., when the user contacts a particular content provider and requests access to the selected content).

In an example where a user has previously established one or more accounts with content providers 102A, 102B, 102C, and 102D, the user may log into the merchant server 103 and instruct the server 103 to associate those content providers with the user's purchase of content from the merchant 105. In one possible embodiment, the user may associate content providers in the server 103 by providing the merchant 105 the user's account name and password for each of the desired content providers. This information

is communicated to the server 103 in a secure data communications link. In another embodiment, the user may simply provide an account name (or other account identification) for the desired content provider(s), which the server 103 may reference when communicating transaction information to the content providers. In yet another
5 embodiment, user identification and authentication provided by a globally-recognized login service (such as Microsoft's .Net Passport service) may be used. The user may further log into the server 103, as desired, to add or delete a content provider from their account with the merchant 105.

When the merchant 105 notifies the content providers listed in the user's account
10 of the user's right to access media files containing particular content, the merchant server 103 sends a message (preferably via a secure data communications link) that contains the user's account name and password, or some agreed representation thereof, to the particular content provider, along with information identifying the content that the user is authorized to access. Using standard data communications protocols, each of the
15 content providers receiving this message from the merchant 105 can recognize indicia in the transmission indicating the merchant server 103 as the source of the message. This indicia provides additional security confirming the authenticity of the merchant's message. As described below, each of the content providers receives the transaction information (or other authorization signal) from the merchant 105 and honors it by
20 permitting the user to access the content in the content provider's server.

Alternatively, the merchant 105 may provide an application programming interface (API) that the content providers 102A, 102B, 102C, and 102D may use to enable their customers to log into the merchant server 103 from the content provider's
Web site or client media player. Preferably, the login provided by the API would be a
25 secure, Web-based service provided by the merchant server 103 so that communication of the user's identification and password with the merchant server 103 is hidden from the content providers. Once a user is logged into the merchant server 103, and information provided regarding the particular content provider 102A, 102B, 102C, or 102D, the merchant server 103 returns a token to the content provider which the merchant 105 and
30 the content provider agree to represent the particular user. From then on, if the user purchases selected content from the merchant 105, the merchant server 103 communicates the user's unique token, along with an indication of the purchased content.

The transaction information may be communicated to each content provider server in response to an event or on a regular timed basis. For instance, the transaction information collected by the merchant server 103 may be periodically transmitted to each content provider server in response to the receipt of a control signal generated by a database synchronization program, timing program, etc. In an alternative embodiment, instead of communicating transaction information, the merchant 105 may communicate an authorization signal to one or more content provider servers allowing access to media files in the content provider's servers. Details of such an alternative embodiment are described below in regard to FIGURE 5.

After the processing of block 307, the rights management routine 300 continues at block 309 where each content provider server 104A, 104B, 104C and 104D stores the received transaction information. In the process of block 309, the received transaction information may be stored in a number of local databases associated with each content provider, such as the transaction information databases 198A, 198B, 198C and 198D shown in FIGURE 1. As a result of the process of block 309, the transaction information databases 198A, 198B, 198C and 198D of each respective content provider 102A, 102B, 102C and 102D, may have all, or less than all, of the media and user information stored in the transaction information database 198E of the merchant. Storage of the transaction information enables each content provider server to independently determine if individual users of the system have access rights to its stored content. After the processing of blocks 301-309, the user may directly contact the content providers to access media files containing the user's selected content.

Next, as shown in block 311, the user communicates a request to access a media file containing the selected content. In the process of block 311, the access request is sent from the client 106 to a server of an individual content provider, such as a server 104A, 104B, 104C, or 104D. A user may communicate an access request by using a commercially available software application, such as a Web browser application or a media player application. The user may send the access request to a particular content provider that provides media files in a desired media format. For example, as shown in the sample of sequence diagram of FIGURE 3B, if a user desires to play his or her purchased media content on an iTunes® media player, the user may send the access request to the third content provider server 104C to access a media file having a compatible media format, such as Apple's AAC format. Those of ordinary skill in the art

will appreciate that a media player, such as the iTunes® media player, may be configured with program instructions that allow a user to log into a content provider and communicate an access request for selected content. Media players may also be configured to work with a universal login service, such as Microsoft's .Net Passport service, to communicate an access request to a content provider. In one embodiment, the access request may contain information that identifies the user and the content requested by the user. Since the third content provider 104C has received transaction information from the merchant server 103, the third content provider 104C can readily determine if the user has obtained valid rights to access one or more media files containing the content described in the access request.

In response to receiving the access request, the routine continues at block 313 where the content provider server authorizes the access request. In the present example, the content provider server 104C determines if the access request contains information that corresponds with relevant transaction information stored in the transaction information database 198C. If the relevant transaction information indicates that the user identified in the access request has obtained rights to access the content identified in the access request, the access request is authorized.

Once the access request has been authorized, the rights management routine 300 continues to block 315 where the content provider server (in this example, the third content provider server 104C) provides access to a media file containing the selected content. In accordance with the present invention, access to a media file may include, but is not limited to, downloading an actual media file containing the selected content, accessing a non-recordable data stream containing the work, accessing a recordable data stream containing the work, etc. The format of the media file should be a file format that is compatible with the media player desired by the user. In this part of the process, the media file may be delivered by one of a number of known methods for downloading or streaming a media file. In addition, the media file may be communicated by the use of any known file transfer protocol. Additional disclosure of methods for communicating media and product information between client and server computers is included in U.S. Patent Application No. 09/815,450, which is entitled "DELIVERY OF GOODS FROM INTERNET VENDORS TO ANONYMOUS CUSTOMERS," filed on March 22, 2001, and published on September 26, 2002 (2002/0138354), the disclosure of which is hereby incorporated by reference.

Also shown in the subsequent process blocks 317-321 of FIGURES 3A and 3B, additional media files stored at other content providers can be accessed by the user. Thus, even after the user has accessed a first media file containing the selected content, the user may send an additional access request to another content provider to access other
5 media files containing the selected content. This type of request may be invoked if the user desires a media file having a different format. For example, with reference to the example shown in FIGURE 3B, the user may contact the first content provider 104A if the user desires media files that are compatible with a Microsoft media player; the second content provider 104B if the user desires media files that are compatible with a Real
10 media player; or the fourth content provider 104D if the user desires media files in more generic formats.

As shown in process block 317 of FIGURES 3A and 3B, a subsequent access request may be communicated from the client 106 to one or more content provider servers 104A, 104B or 104D. Similar to the first access request (block 311)
15 communicated to provider server 103A, the subsequent access request 317 may be invoked by a commercially available software application, such as a Web browser application or a media player application. As shown in process blocks 319 and 321, the content provider servers respond to the receipt of the subsequent access request by authorizing the request and providing access to one or more media files containing the
20 requested content. Process blocks 319 and 321 may be executed in a manner similar to the above-described processes of blocks 313 and 315. Upon the completion of the process of block 321, the rights management routine 300 terminates.

FIGURE 5 describes a separate alternative embodiment of a rights management routine. As described above, a merchant server can manage access to media files in other
25 ways. FIGURE 5 illustrates one alternative embodiment of a rights management routine 300' where an authorization signal for allowing access to media files is communicated to an individual content provider server.

In this alternative embodiment, the process of transacting a purchase of access rights to selected content may be carried out in a manner as described above. Thus, the
30 communication of media information (301) and transaction information (303) are carried out in a manner similar to the above-described processes of blocks 301 and 303 shown in FIGURES 3A and 3B. After the purchase transaction is complete, the user associated with the client computer 106 may issue an access request to any one of the content

providers. In the example shown in FIGURE 5, the client computer 106 communicates an access request (350) to the third content provider server 104C. An access request (350) may include information that identifies the user and the selected content.

5 In response to receiving the access request, the third content provider server 104C communicates an authorization request (352) to the merchant server 103. In this embodiment, the authorization request (352) sends sufficient information so that the merchant server 103 can determine if the user is authorized to access the content identified in the access request (350). For instance, the authorization request (352) may include information that identifies the user and the selected content.

10 In response to receiving the authorization request (352), as shown in block 353, the merchant server 103 determines if the user is authorized to access the content identified in the access request (350). As described above, the merchant server 103 may analyze the received transaction information (303) to determine if the user has obtained rights to receive access to the selected content. If the merchant server 103 determines
15 that the user may access the selected content, the merchant server 103 sends an authorization signal notifying the requesting content provider that the user may access one or more media files containing the content. The authorization signal may include any information that allows any one of the content provider servers to determine that the requesting user has access to the selected content. For instance, the authorization signal
20 may include information that identifies the user and the selected content. Alternatively, the authorization signal may include information such as a reference to the access request (350) sent by the content provider, etc. As shown in communication line 354, the merchant server 103 communicates an authorization signal to the third content provider
server 104C.

25 In yet another alternative, an authorization request may be received directly from a client computer associated with the user which is executing a media player application. An authorization signal is then communicated to a content provider in the user's account known to provide media files having a data format compatible with the user's media player application.

30 In yet another embodiment, the authorization request (352) may only contain sufficient information to uniquely identify the user. When the merchant server 103 receives an authorization request (352) from a content provider, it returns an authorization signal (354) that identifies all of the new content that the user has been

authorized to receive since the last authorization request made by the content provider. In this embodiment, it is not necessary that the merchant server 103 know the specific content the user is requesting from the content provider. Rather, the merchant server 103 simply keeps a record of authorization requests it receives from content providers with respect to the user and ensures that the content provider is updated in regard to the content that the user is authorized to access. In some respects, this embodiment may be envisioned as a type of "pull" system in which the content provider initiates a data transfer from the merchant when the user contacts the content provider seeking access to selected content. The merchant server 103 responds with a list of content that has been newly authorized since the last update provided to the content provider.

In response to receiving the authorization signal (354), the content provider server provides access to a media file containing the requested content. The merchant server 103 provides a central control for user access credentials for each content provider server. The user may send an access request to each content provider server to receive a number of different media files containing the requested content and the content provider servers communicate with the merchant server 103 to ensure that user is authorized to receive the requested content.

Other optional implementations of the invention become apparent from the foregoing described embodiments. For example, purchases of selected content from individual content providers 102A, 102B, 102C, and 102D may provide a basis for transmission of a broadcast message to the other content providers of the user's right to access media files containing the selected content from the other content providers. In one particular implementation, a content provider completing a sales transaction for selected content with the user may communicate information regarding the user (e.g., in the form of an account name/password or a previously established token, as described earlier) to the merchant 105, along with an indication of the purchased content, which the merchant 105 may then use to send a message to the other content providers communicating the user's right to access the purchased content.

As illustrated by the above-described embodiments, the present invention allows purchasers of copyright-protected content to receive different files having different file formats of the purchased content without requiring the purchaser to pay multiple times for the separate copies of the content. By providing controlled access to content stored in multiple file formats, the present invention allows users to readily purchase and receive

media files that may be played on different desired media player applications. Many other benefits, such as an improved consumer pricing arrangement, may also result from such management of access rights of copyrighted content.

For example, a preferred embodiment of the invention enables users to purchase
5 selected content in a transaction and allow the users to access media files containing the selected content from multiple content providers without having to pay multiple times to access the media files. Pricing arrangements for the selected content should be established such that the merchant, the content providers, and the owner of the copyrighted content are fairly treated. Many compensation models may be devised for
10 use with the invention. The following examples are provided for illustrative purposes, and do not limit the invention.

In one compensation model, the merchant and the copyright owner divide the payment provided by the user, and the content providers agree to deliver the selected content upon user request without further charge to the user with the hope of acquiring
15 new customers. In another compensation model, the merchant, the copyright owner, and the content providers each receive a portion of the payment made by the user for the selected content. In yet another compensation model, the user may designate the content providers from whom the user desires to obtain the selected content. There is no charge to the user for delivery of content from a first content provider, but the user may be
20 charged incremental fees for designating additional content providers. In this model, the merchant and the copyright owner may divide the base purchase charge paid by the user, with the content providers dividing the additional incremental fees charged to the user for
access to two or more content providers.

In still another compensation model, the merchant may receive payment from a
25 user for selected content, of which a portion is shared by the merchant and the copyright owner, and the remaining portion is maintained in an "escrow" account that is paid to the content providers that actually deliver the selected content to the user. The particular formulas used to determine the portions received by the merchant, the copyright owner, and the content providers may vary according to the particular implementation of the
30 invention and the agreements established between the parties.

While several embodiments of the invention have been illustrated and described above, it will be appreciated that various changes can be made therein without departing

from the scope of the invention. The scope of the invention should be determined from the following claims and equivalents thereto.

The embodiments of the invention in which an exclusive property or privilege is claimed are defined as follows:

1. In a computing environment having a merchant server, a client computer and a plurality of content provider servers, a method for managing user access to media files containing selected content, wherein the method comprises:

transacting a user purchase of access rights to selected content, wherein the purchase of access rights is transacted between a merchant associated with the merchant server and a user associated with the client computer; and

communicating transaction information associated with the purchase of access rights from the merchant server to one or more of the content provider servers, wherein the transaction information contains information that allows each receiving content provider server to authorize access of at least one media file containing the selected content to the user.

2. The method of Claim 1, wherein the method further comprises, at one or more content provider servers, receiving a request for user access to a media file containing the selected content;

processing the request with the transaction information to determine if the user is authorized to receive access to the media file containing the selected content; and

if it is determined that the user is authorized to receive access to the media file containing the selected content, allowing the user to access the media file containing the selected content.

3. The method of Claim 2, wherein the request is generated by a media player application executing on the client computer, and wherein the request is communicated from the client computer to a content provider server storing a media file having a data format that is compatible with the media player application.

4. The method of Claim 2, wherein allowing the user to access the media file includes downloading the media file containing the selected content from the content provider server to at least one client computer associated with the user.

5. The method of Claim 2, wherein allowing the user to access the media file includes streaming the media file containing the selected content from the content provider server to a media player application executing on the client computer.

6. The method of Claim 1, wherein the method further comprises, storing the transaction information in a database; receiving an authorization request from a content provider, wherein the authorization request contains data that identifies the selected content and the user; and in response to receiving the authorization request: retrieving the transaction information from the database; determining if the user is authorized to access the selected content; and communicating an authorization signal to the content provider, wherein the authorization signal contains information that allows the content provider to authorize access of at least one media file containing the selected content to the user.

7. The method of Claim 1, wherein the method further comprises receiving from a content provider an authorization request that contains data identifying the user, and in response to receiving the authorization request, communicating to the content provider an authorization signal that contains information allowing the content provider to authorize user access of at least one media file containing the selected content.

8. The method of Claim 1, further comprising receiving compensation from the user for the purchase transaction and dividing the compensation between the merchant and an owner of copyright in the selected content.

9. The method of Claim 1, further comprising receiving compensation from the user for the purchase transaction and dividing the compensation between the merchant, an owner of copyright in the selected content, and one or more content providers in the plurality of content of providers.

10. The method of Claim 1, further comprising: receiving a base compensation from the user for the purchase transaction and dividing the base compensation between the merchant and an owner of copyright in the selected content; and

receiving incremental compensation from the user for designating content providers and dividing the incremental compensation among the designated content providers.

11. The method of Claim 1, further comprising receiving compensation from the user for the purchase transaction, wherein a portion of the compensation is divided between the merchant and an owner of copyright in the selected content, and the remainder of the compensation is maintained in an account and divided among the content providers that provide the user access to the at least one media file containing the selected content.

12. A computer-readable medium having computer-executable components for managing access to media files containing selected content, the computer-executable components comprising:

a data component configured to store transaction information that identifies individual users and selected content purchased by individual users; and

a server component operable to:

transact a user purchase of access rights to selected content, wherein the purchase of access rights is transacted between a merchant associated with a server executing the server component and a user associated with a client computer; and

communicate transaction information associated with the purchase of access rights from the server to one or more content provider servers, wherein the transaction information contains information that allows each content provider server to authorize access of at least one media file containing the selected content to the user.

13. The computer-readable medium of Claim 12, wherein the server component is further operable to:

store the transaction information in the data component;

receive an authorization request from a content provider of the plurality of content providers; and

in response to receiving the authorization request:

retrieve the transaction information from the database;

determine if the user is authorized to access the selected content; and

communicate an authorization signal to the content provider, wherein the authorization signal contains information that allows the content provider to independently authorize access of at least one media file containing the selected content to the user.

14. The computer-readable medium of Claim 12, wherein the server component is further operable to:

receive an authorization request from a content provider that contains data identifying the user; and

in response to receiving the authorization request, communicating an authorization signal to the content provider, wherein the authorization signal contains information allowing the content provider to authorize user access of at least one media file containing the selected content.

15. A system for managing user access to media files containing selected content, comprising:

a transaction information database; and

a merchant server in communication with the transaction information database, wherein the merchant server is configured to:

transact a user purchase of access rights to selected content;

store transaction information associated with the user purchase of access rights in the transaction information database; and

communicate an authorization signal to one or more content provider servers, wherein the authorization signal contains information that allows each content provider server to authorize user access of at least one media file containing the selected content.

16. The system of Claim 15, wherein the merchant server is further configured to:

receive an authorization request for user access to a media file containing the selected content on a content provider server;

process the request with the transaction information in the transaction information database to determine whether the user is authorized to access the media file containing the selected content; and

communicate the authorization signal to the content provider server in response to determining that the user is authorized to access the media file.

17. The system of Claim 16, wherein the authorization request is received from the content provider server.

18. The system of Claim 16, wherein the authorization request is received from a media player application executing on a client computer associated with the user.

19. The system of Claim 18, wherein the authorization signal is communicated to a content provider storing the selected content in a media file format that is compatible with the media player application.

20. A method for managing user access to media files containing selected content, comprising:

transacting a user purchase of access rights to selected content;

receiving an authorization request that identifies the user; and

in response to receiving the authorization request, communicating an authorization signal to a content provider, wherein the authorization signal contains information that allows the content provider to authorize user access of at least one media file containing the selected content.

21. The method of Claim 20, wherein the authorization request further identifies the selected content.

22. The method of Claim 21, further comprising determining if the user is authorized to access the selected content based on the user purchase transaction.

23. The method of Claim 20, wherein the authorization request is received from the content provider.

24. The method of Claim 20, wherein the authorization request is received from a media player application executing on a client computer associated with the user.

25. The method of Claim 24, wherein the authorization signal is communicated to a content provider storing the selected content in a media file format that is compatible with the media player application.

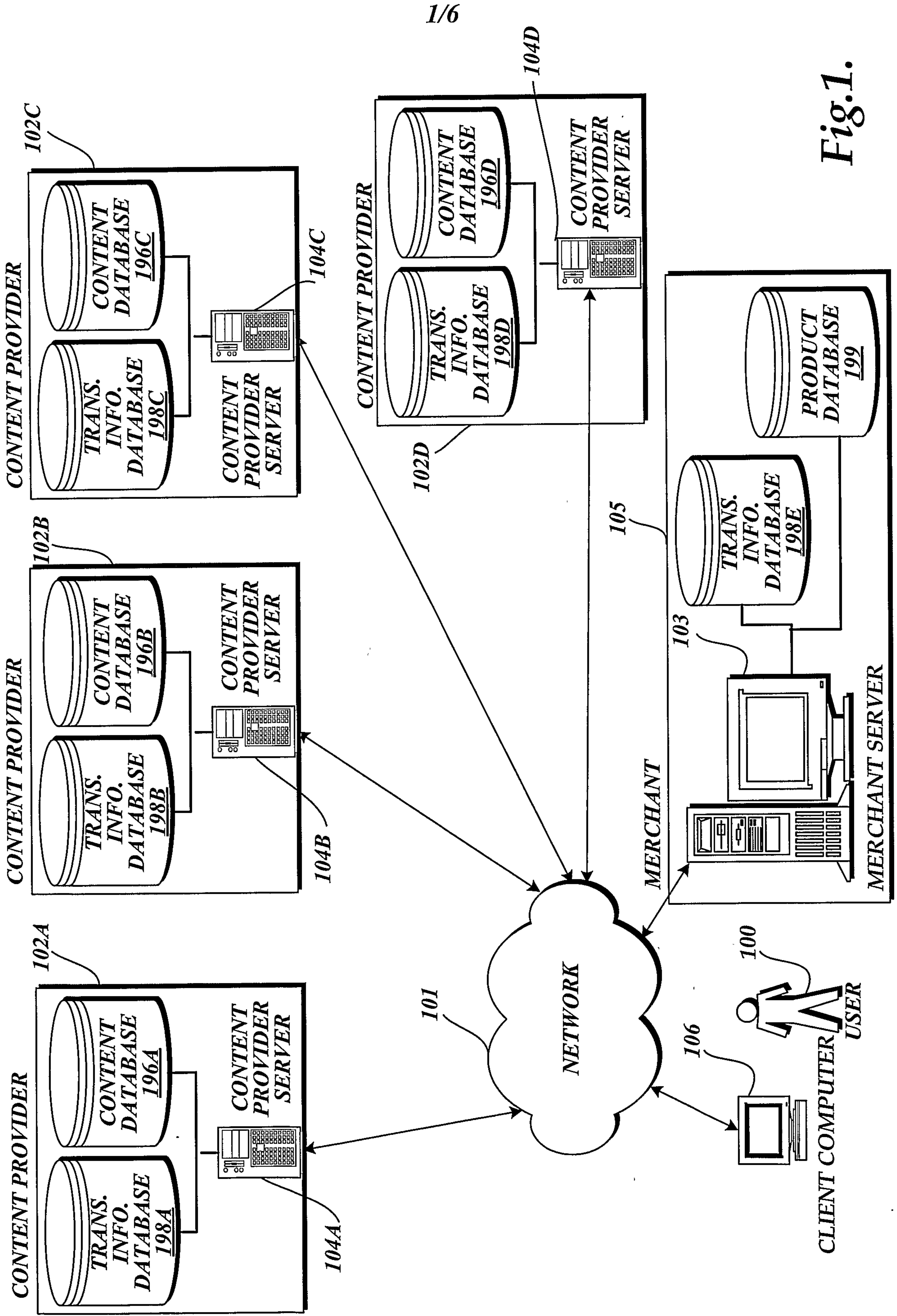


Fig. 1.

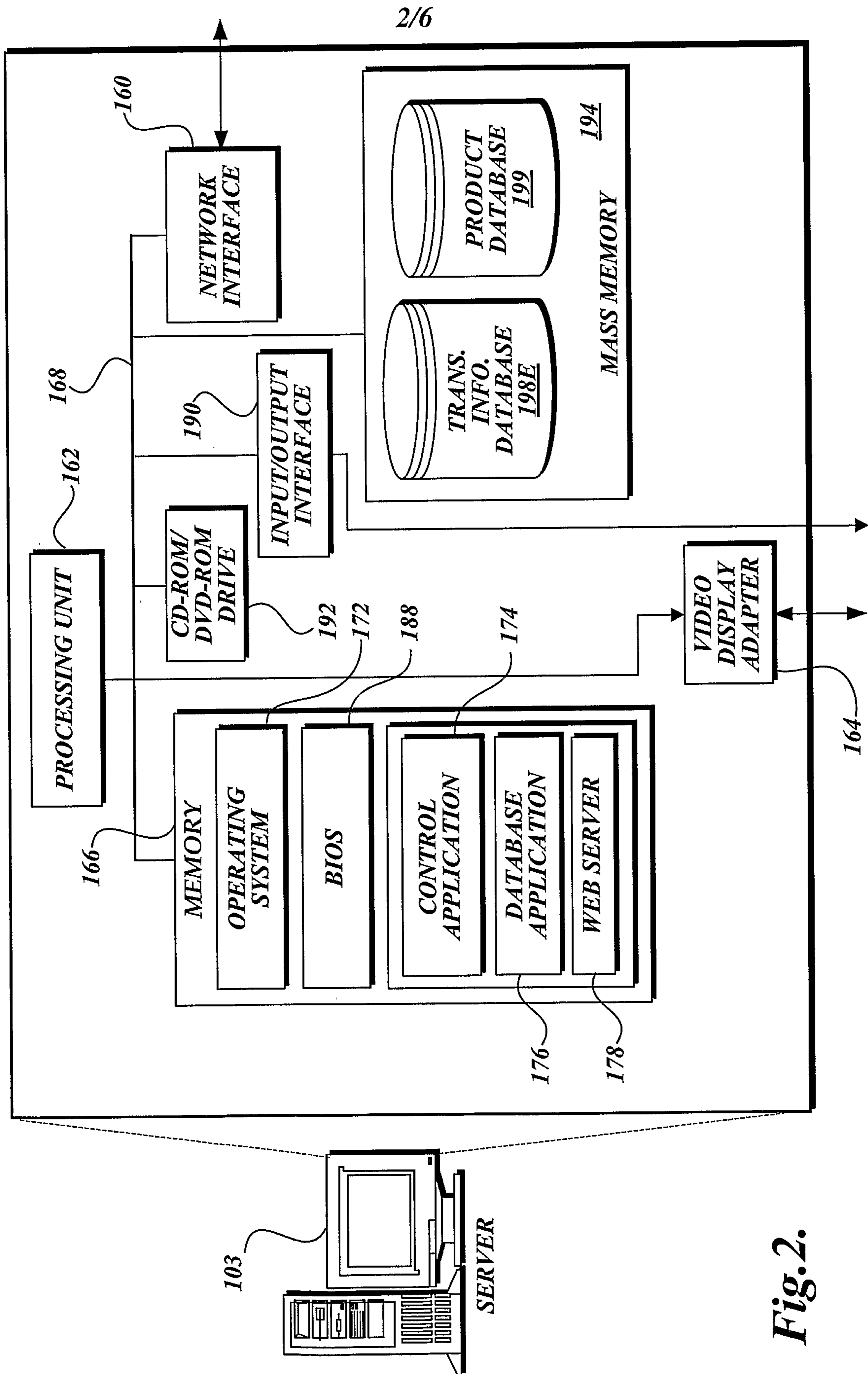


Fig. 2.

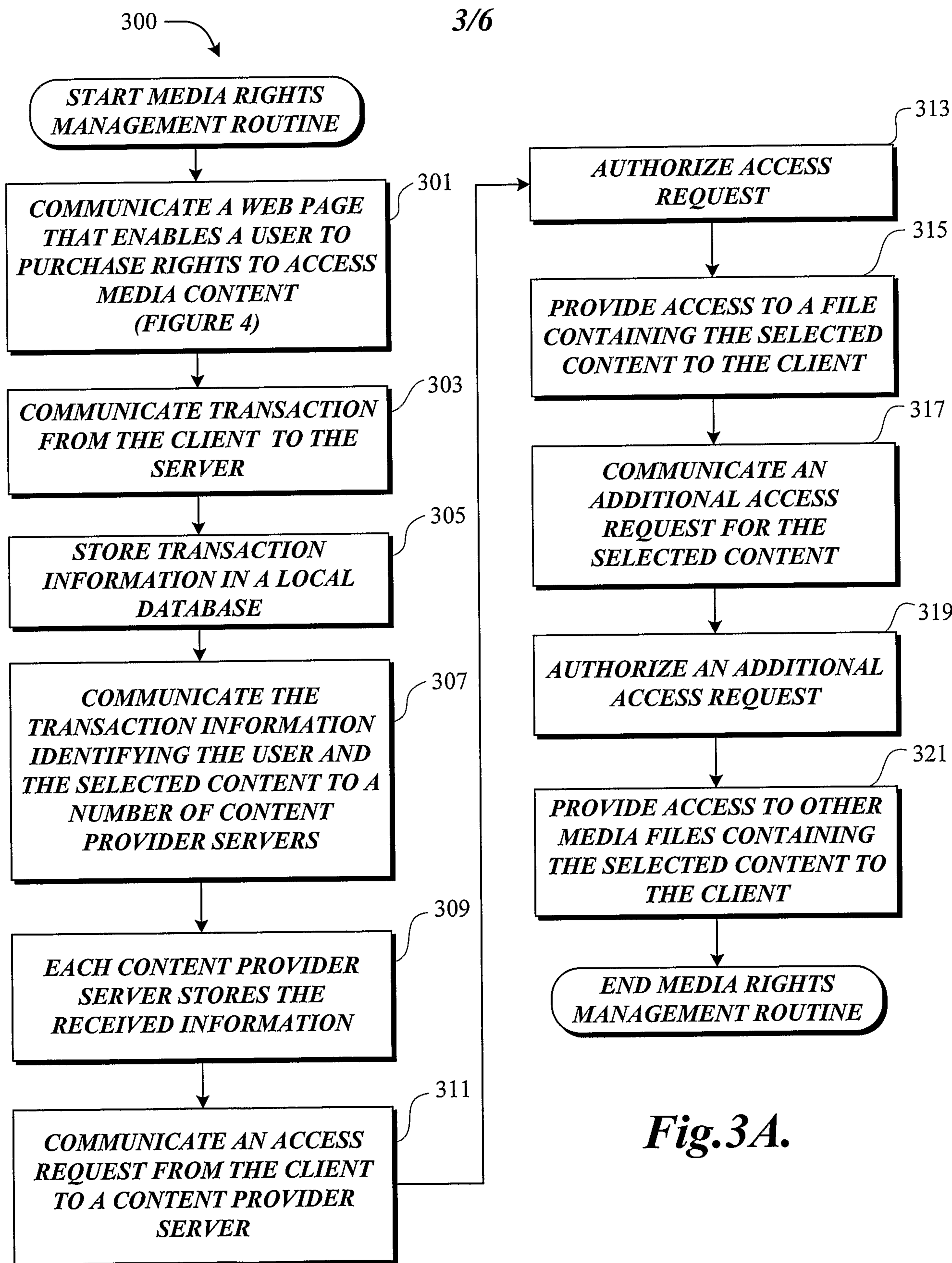


Fig.3A.

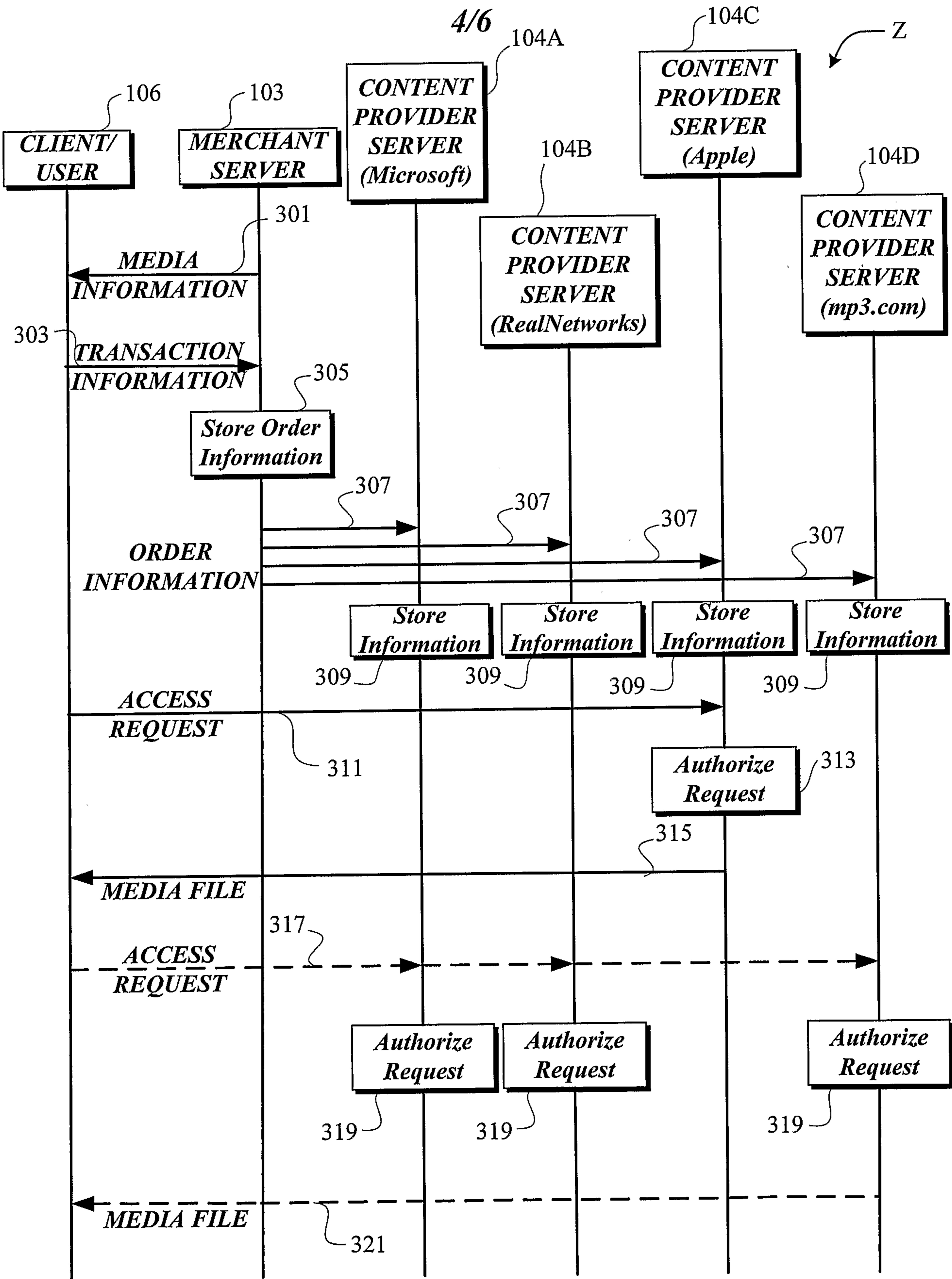


Fig.3B.

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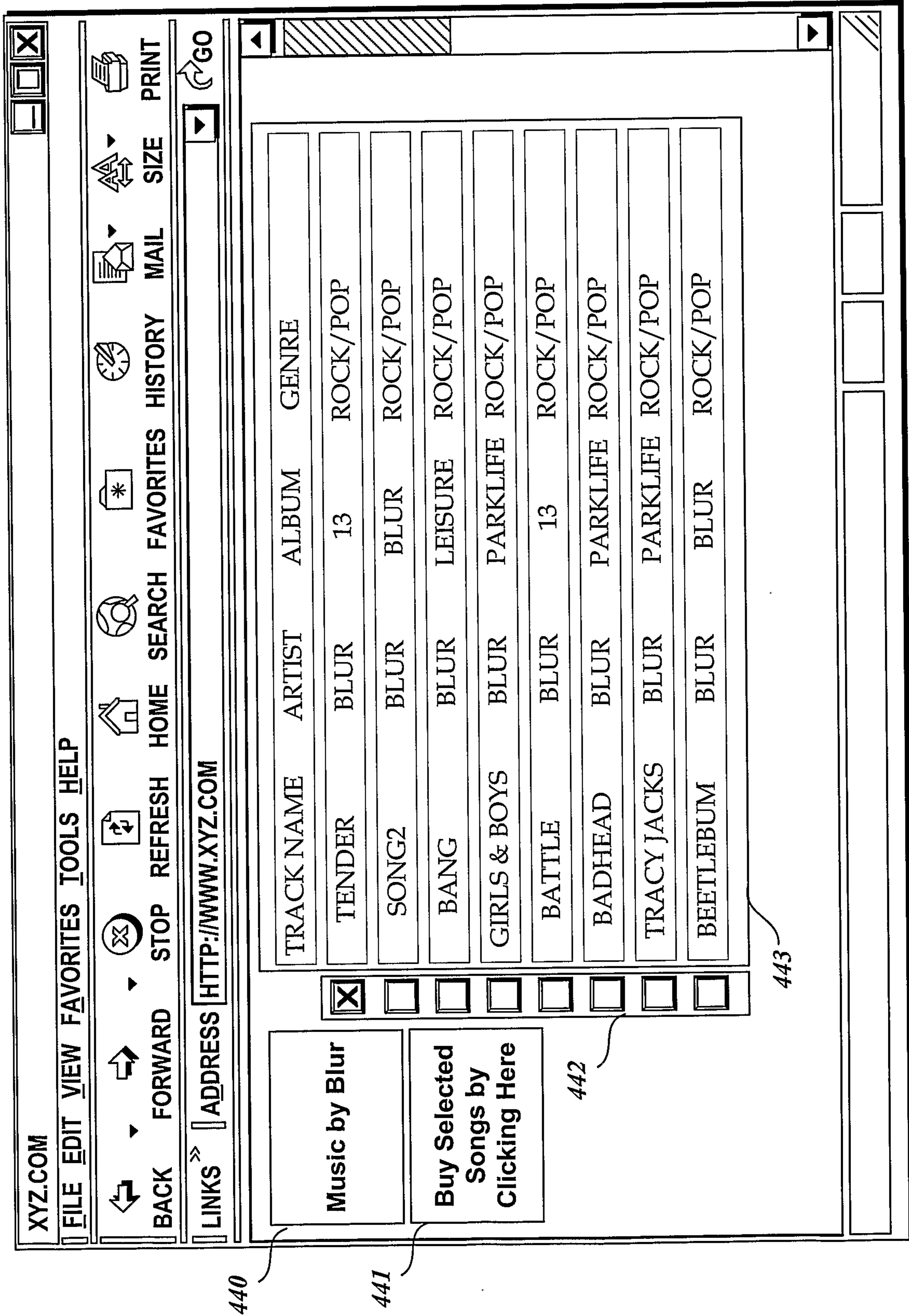


Fig. 4.

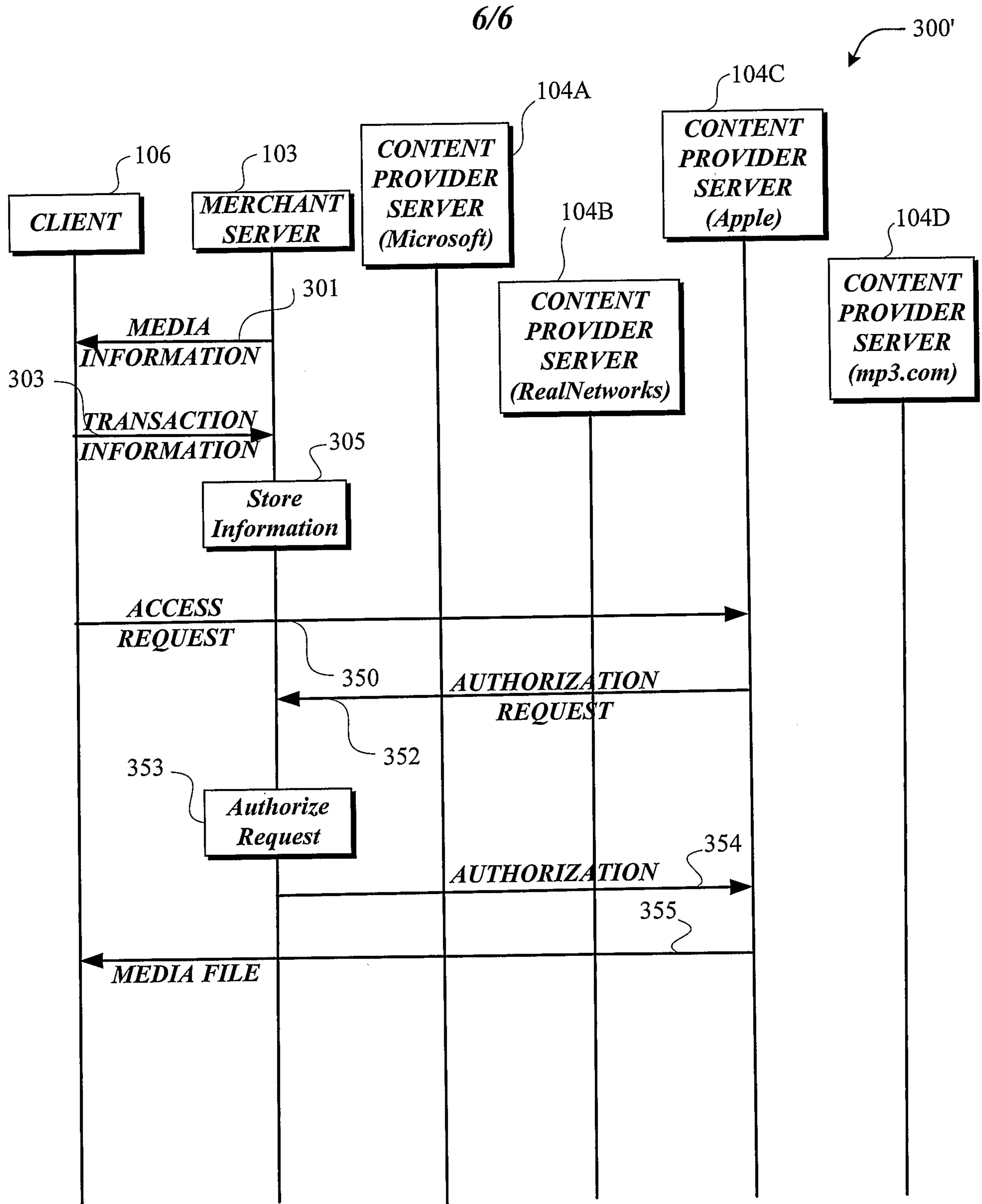


Fig. 5.

