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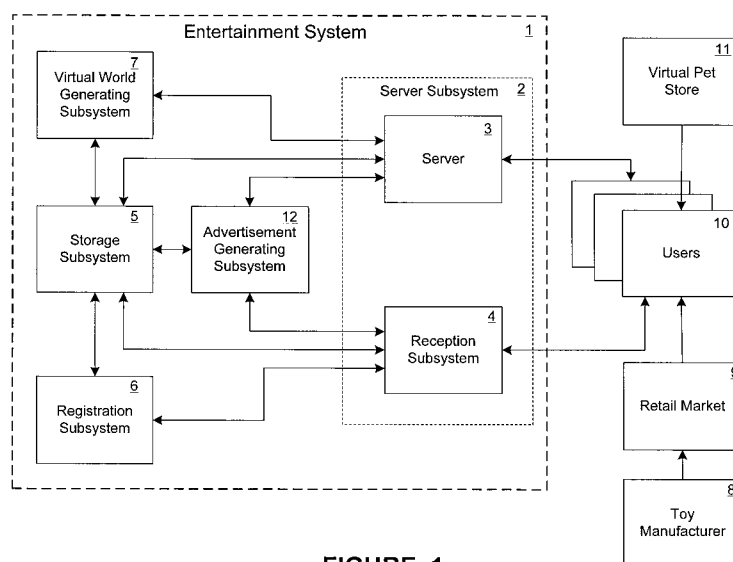


FIGURE 1

(57) Abstract: A method of delivering interactive content using an entertainment system. The method includes a step of providing access to interactive content to a user at a first level of access over a computer network including first access privileges. The method also includes a step of providing access to the content to the user at a second level of access in response to the user satisfying a first predetermined condition. The second level of access provides second access privileges that are excluded from the first level of access. The method also includes a step of providing access to the content to the user at a third level of access in response to the user satisfying both the first predetermined condition and a second predetermined condition. The third level of access provides the second access privileges and third access privileges. The third access privileges are excluded from said second level of access.

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[0001] BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

[0002] This application relates generally to a system and method for multi-tiered website access.

5 [0003] More specifically, this application relates to an entertainment system including a website, wherein the system provides various levels of access depending upon certain conditions.

Description of the Related Art

10 [0004] The Internet has given rise to numerous interactive entertainment websites in which users can participate in various activities, including games and chat rooms, for free. In some cases, advertisements are displayed to the users in order to generate revenue for the owners of the websites. However, the
15 revenue generated by these sites is limited, since there is no requirement that the user actually purchases the products or services contained in the advertisements. In order to generate additional revenue, some entertainment websites limit access to users who have purchased a product, service or a subscription to
20 the site.

[0005] Other entertainment websites have incorporated incentive-based systems in which purchasers of products or services are provided access to additional web content. In these websites, access to web contents, such as games, is provided to
25 all users for free. However, certain content, such as additional games or enhanced game play, is limited to users who enter a secret code that unlocks the content. The secret code can be provided to the user upon purchasing a product or service. For example, United States Patent No. 6,267,672 to Vance, incorporated
30 herein by reference, describes a remotely accessible game, such as an internet game, to encourage consumers to purchase a product. Consumers who purchase a product receive access information, such

as a website URL and a code, which the consumer may then use to access and participate in the remotely accessible game.

[0006] More recently, entertainment websites have been developed in which the web-site content is directly tied to a product that is purchased by a user. For example, as disclosed in 5 United States Patent Application Publication No. 2005/0192864 to Ganz, incorporated herein by reference, a user purchases a toy that includes a secret code provided in the toy packaging. Access to a certain interactive content on the website provided by the 10 manufacturer of the toy is restricted to users who purchase a toy. When the user carries out a registration process on the manufacturer's website, which involves entering the secret code, a virtual world is presented to the user. The virtual world includes a virtual toy corresponding to the toy purchased by the 15 user. The user can participate in various interactive activities involving the virtual toy. The user may then purchase additional toys and enter the secret codes provided with those toys to add additional virtual toys to the virtual world. These virtual toys can interact with each other, thereby enhancing the user's 20 entertainment experiences. Further, after a predetermined period of time has lapsed since the secret code was registered, access to the website can be temporarily suspended until an additional purchase is made and a new code is registered. Thus, for both of these reasons, users are encouraged to continue to purchase 25 additional toys in order to obtain additional secret codes.

[0007] SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] Provided is method of delivering interactive content using an entertainment system. The method comprises steps of providing access to interactive content to a user at a first 30 level of access over a computer network, said first level of access providing first access privileges; providing access to said interactive content to said user at a second level of access over said computer network in response to said user satisfying a first predetermined condition, said second level of access providing

second access privileges that are excluded from said first level of access; and providing access to said interactive content to said user at a third level of access over said computer network in response to both said user satisfying said first predetermined
5 condition and said user satisfying a second predetermined condition, said third level of access providing said second access privileges and third access privileges, the third access privileges being excluded from said second level of access.

[0009] Also provided, according to another aspect of
10 the invention, is a method of selling products and/or services using an interactive entertainment system. The method comprises steps of providing access to interactive content to a user at a first level of access over a computer network, said first level of access providing first access privileges; selling a product and/or
15 service to said user; after said selling, providing access to said interactive content to said user at a second level of access over said computer network, said second level of access providing second access privileges that are excluded from said first level of access; receiving consent from said user to display
20 advertisements to said user along with said interactive content; and after said selling and said receiving, providing access to said interactive content to said user at a third level of access over said computer network, said third level of access providing said second access privileges and third access privileges that are
25 excluded from said second level of access.

[0010] BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] Figure 1 shows a schematic block diagram of an example embodiment of an entertainment system and its interactions with some external entities.

30 [0012] DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EXAMPLE EMBODIMENTS

[0013] Provided is an entertainment system including an online "virtual world" where the user of a toy or other product,

such as a figurine or trading card, can register the product using a unique registration code provided with the product at purchase, register or adopt the product online, and play with a virtual representation of the product (a "virtual product") in the virtual world. The code may be provided in any way, including printed on a tag attached to the product, electronically stored in a memory attached to the product, or the like. In some embodiments, the "virtual world" can be implemented using an interactive website via a user computer connected to the Internet. In this manner, a user can play with the virtual toy in a computer generated fantasy world (i.e., the virtual world). As described in more detail throughout the specification and in United States Patent Application Publication No. 2005/0192864 to Ganz, the user entering the code provided with a toy causes a virtual toy to be created that corresponds to the toy.

[0014] The term “product” could include any type of product including a toy, a trading card, a figurine, or any other consumer good that can be purchased or otherwise obtained. The term “toy” could be any type of toy (for example, those used by a child), including, for example, plush toys (including but not limited to stuffed animals, fantasy figures, dinosaurs, vehicles, dolls, etc.), along with other types of toys (including, but not limited to, vehicles such as cars and trucks; action figures such as army figures, monsters, sports figures, fantasy figures, dinosaurs; and dolls, etc.). The term “character” could include any type of character, such as a real or imaginary person, a real or imaginary pet animal, a robot or other real or imaginary animate object.

[0015] Graphics, animation, sound, and even recorded images might be utilized to generate the virtual world and virtual product. Even live images might be utilized, if desired. In addition, other sources of material can also be utilized. In essence, the virtual world creates an interactive playland for the product owner to encourage imagination using the product, and at the same time, provide an incentive to purchase additional products or encourage additional individuals to also purchase products in order to participate in the entertainment system.

[0016] Throughout this disclosure, the term “virtual” is used, for example, to describe the user viewable/hearable material presented to the user on the user computer from data and/or computer programs and commands generated and/or provided by the entertainment system, to the user computer running one or more computer applications (e.g., a web browser with the appropriate plug-ins, applets, and/or other support programs, etc.). The entertainment system provides the data and/or programs, via a communication network connected to the entertainment system and the user computer (e.g., the Internet).

[0017] The term “virtual” does not necessarily mean that the displayed item is not “real”, because the displayed item could, for example, be a video or picture of a real item, for example. Furthermore, the “virtual world” is presented using “real” physical phenomena (e.g., light and sound), and is impacted by “real” user interactions (e.g., mouse and keyboard manipulations). Rather, the term “virtual” is used to describe the computer generated and/or provided presentation to the user, including both visual and audible effects, via the user computer. It is a “virtual world” in the sense that it is primarily a computer presented fantasy world with which the user can interact via manipulations of the user computer. In this manner, the “virtual”

items of the virtual world can be presented as interacting with each other and with the user. Furthermore, the user is provided access to games and trivia as well.

[0018] In an example embodiment, the user buys a product (such as a plush animal, a trading card or a figurine), registers the product in a website at an URL listed on the product or product packaging, or a tag on the product. The entertainment system serves or delivers interactive content, such as a website that provides the virtual world to the user using various web pages, provides a biography of the product, a virtual representation of the product (the virtual product) using graphics and/or sound (such as an animated image, for example) to participate in games and activities. The entertainment system also provides a virtual means for maintaining the "health and well-being" of the character through various maintenance activities, such as virtual feeding and playing, virtual shopping, and virtual medical checkups, for example.

[0019] More specifically, the entertainment system 1 of the example embodiment utilizes a server subsystem including a web server subsystem for generating both dynamic and static web pages as is known in the art, and for receiving data and/or commands from the user computer. One or more databases support the functioning of this server subsystem. The web server utilizes various scripting or other executable programs for providing dynamic content to the user's computer, which is attached to the web server via some computer network, such as the Internet, for example. The web server can also utilize various animated motion programs, such as a Flash program, java scripts, etc., to provide dynamic content to the user.

[0020] Figure 1 shows a top-level block diagram of the entertainment system 1, interacting with various users 10. The users 10 should have previously purchased and registered one or more products from a retail merchant 9, who obtained the products from a manufacturer 8, or via a distributor. Alternatively, the users 10 may purchase a virtual character or pet, which is an image of a character or pet, from a virtual store 11.

[0021] If the user has not yet purchased a product, he can still access the entertainment system 10 to obtain information about the entertainment system and/or the products, but will not, in the example embodiment, have access to much of the site until a product is purchased and registered.

[0022] The entertainment system 1 is comprised of a server subsystem 2 for interacting with the users 10 via a user computer being operated by the user. The server subsystem can utilize a server 3, for serving content, including web pages, data, commands, and/or programs, for example, to the user computer. In addition, the server subsystem can include a reception subsystem 4, for receiving information and commands from the users 10. Alternatively, the server 3 and reception subsystem 4 might be combined into a single computer application, such as a commercially available web server, for example, running on one or more computers. The current system will utilize commercially available applications to implement much of the server subsystem. These systems can run on any conventional computer and be stored on any tangible medium such as a hard drive.

[0023] The entertainment system 1 also comprises a storage subsystem 5, for storing system data, user IDs and passwords, product registration codes, personalized user information, etc. utilized by the various subsystems. The storage subsystem 5 of the current system will utilize a commercially available database application running on commercially available hardware, for example.

[0024] A registration subsystem 6 is used for registering the user and the user's product into the entertainment system, so that the user has access to restricted portions of the entertainment system. The registration subsystem 6 may utilize its own dedicated application and hardware, or could be combined with or share the server subsystem 2 applications and/or hardware. The registration subsystem examines the registration code against stored data relating to a plurality of registration codes each representing a product for sale.

[0025] A virtual world providing subsystem 7 generates and/or provides the virtual world data to be served by the server 3 to the users 10 for use in displaying a virtual world on the user's computers. Portions of this data may be generated on the fly in response to user interactions, and portions are likely to be obtained and/or derived from data stored in the storage subsystem 5. For example, in the example embodiment, items owned by the user (the items in the dock for example), the virtual room state (virtual furniture in the room for example), virtual cash, health, happiness, hunger parameters are all examples of "stored data." Data generated on the fly, including a position in the room and arcade game scores also get stored.

[0026] Again, the virtual world providing subsystem 7 may utilize unique applications and/or hardware, or may be combined with one or more of the registration subsystem 6 and/or the server subsystem 2 applications and hardware.

[0027] An advertisement generating subsystem 12 generates and/or provides advertisements to be displayed on the user's computers. The advertisement generating subsystem 12 also provides a "sponsor area" that allows users to accumulate loyalty points by clicking on and/or viewing advertisements.

[0028] More specific details relating to an entertainment system which can be utilized according to the example embodiment are set forth, for example, in United States Patent Application Publication No. 2005/0192864 to Ganz, the disclosure of which is incorporated by reference herein. The entertainment system disclosed therein may provide some general services and features open to the public, such as information about the products and where to purchase them, a description of the features of the website, and other similar information. Accordingly, many of the features of the entertainment system are restricted to registered users to encourage product purchase.

[0029] According to the present disclosure, the above entertainment system is modified to offer tiered access. Furthermore, in the example embodiment, the entertainment system can be utilized for marketing additional products and/or accessories and/or services related to the product to allow restricted access to additional online activities and features to those who purchase the products.

[0030] The website can offer tiered access depending on various conditions, including whether the user has entered a registration code, or has acquired access through some other means. Each tier can provide a different level of access with corresponding access privileges.

[0031] For example, a four-tiered system of access to the website could be provided as follows. Users could obtain a free membership that will include access to the site at a first level of access, in which first access privileges are granted.

[0032] The first level of access could include advertisements ("ads") displayed on various site pages, which users are required to view in order to have free access to the website. Further, as an example, at the first level of access, a user could be limited to registering or adopting one of two "generic" characters or pets, which do not have physical product counterparts. In order to adopt other pets

or register other characters, a user would have to purchase a corresponding product, as described above.

[0033] The first privileges provided with the first level of access could include most of the website's features, but with limited access to each. For example, a user could be limited to a predetermined number of available games to play, such as three or four. These games could be changed on a regular basis, such as weekly. User could be permitted to see other games, but not to play them. Further, at the first level of access, users may be limited to have a predetermined number of other users, such as five, in a "friends list" for chatting and playing multiple-player games with.

[0034] As described in more detail in United States Patent Application Publication No. 2005/0192864 to Ganz, users can be provided with virtual rooms in which their virtual pets can play, sleep, etc. Additional virtual rooms can be purchased so that users can construct a virtual house. At the first level of access, restrictions can be placed on the user's access of the website. These restrictions can include, for example, users being limited to obtaining predetermined number of virtual rooms, such as three, in their virtual world.

[0035] Further, at the first level of access, certain website content or areas can be restricted from use. For example, users at the first level of access may not have access to features such as community chat rooms, email or other messaging services, and sending and/or receiving virtual objects, such as food, furniture, clothing, etc., as gifts to other users.

[0036] As mentioned above, at the first level of access, ads will be displayed and the ads cannot be turned off or disabled. Further, a special "sponsor area" can be accessed that will allow the member to accumulate loyalty points by clicking on and/or viewing ads.

[0037] A second level of access could be obtained by a user either by satisfying a first predetermined condition, such as purchasing a plush toy or other product, paying directly for access, earning access by accumulating a predetermined number of loyalty points as described above, or otherwise obtaining a membership that includes the second level of access. Second access privileges, which are provided at the second level of access, may include complete access to the site along with the ability to turn off or disable the presentation of some or all ads as determined by the user. This may be desirable for parents who do not want their

children exposed to the ads. The second access privileges are excluded from the first level of access.

[0038] The second level of access can be provided for a limited period of time. The period of time can vary depending upon how the user obtained such access. For example, if the user purchases a product or otherwise pays for the access, they could be provided access for a certain period, such as one year. If the user uses loyalty points to upgrade their account to the second level of access, the length of access can vary depending on amount of loyalty points used.

[0039] A user may be promoted to a third level of access by satisfying a second predetermined condition, such as by consenting to display ads, (i.e. turning the ads back on after they have been turned off). The third level of access includes third access privileges, which may include added bonuses such as weekly virtual cash or other currency and other prizes, free items, discounts, first looks at new games and features, priority access to certain aspects of the website, and exclusive access to certain contests and events. The third access privileges are excluded from the first and second levels of access. At any time, the user can choose to disable the ads, demoting the user to the second level of access. Further, as an alternative to viewing ads, it is contemplated that the third level of access could be obtained by satisfying some other predetermined condition such as purchasing an additional product and/or service.

[0040] Since the user may disable the ads at any time, the third access privileges may depend upon how long the user leaves the ads turned on. For example, if a user leaves the ads turned for a first predetermined period of time, such as one week, the user may receive a bonus of virtual currency. If the user leaves the ads on for a second predetermined period of time, such as one month, the user may receive an exclusive virtual item as a prize.

[0041] As mentioned above, after the limited period of time has passed from when the user obtains the second level of access, such as one year, the user's account will expire. At this point, however, the user moves from the second or third level of access to a fourth level of access. The fourth level of access may be substantially the same as the second level of access and may include the second access privileges, except that the user will be unable to disable the ads and the sponsor area. The user would not receive the third access privileges, such as the bonuses and priority access, even though the ads will be turned on. Further,

additional limitations may be placed on the user, such as in the number of rooms the user may obtain. At the fourth level of access, certain third level privileges may be "grandfathered." For example, if a user already has more than the limited number of rooms in his or her house, or more than the limited number of other players in their friends list, they may be allowed to keep the rooms or other players, but they will not be able to add any more as long as they are in the fourth level of access. The user may restore the second level of access by again participating in one of the first activities, such as buying another product. Once the second level of access is restored, the user may choose to voluntarily view the ads, thereby promoting the user to the third level of access.

[0042] The four tiers described above are merely one example of a tiered system according to the present invention. Other tiered systems are possible according to the present invention, such as different numbers of levels, other access privileges, and other ways to promote and/or demote users. As an example alternative to the four tiers described above, the third level of access could be eliminated, thereby providing a three tier system.

[0043] By using a tiered system, advertising can be used to generate revenues for the site, whereas the user can take steps to avoid the advertisements by satisfying certain requirements, and/or users can earn bonuses by viewing ads. Advertising income can be based on the number of users that view the ads, and/or click through via the ads.

[0044] It should be evident that this disclosure is by way of example and that various changes may be made by adding, modifying or eliminating details without departing from the fair scope of the teaching contained in this disclosure. The invention is therefore not limited to particular details of this disclosure except to the extent that the following claims are necessarily so limited.

CLAIMS

1. A method comprising:
connecting to a user (10) over a network from a website server (3);
determining said user's level of access to said website server (3);
responsive to determining said user (10) having a first, lower level of access, serving
first website content to said user (10), said first website content including
displayed advertisements that cannot be disabled;
responsive to determining said user (10) having a second level of access, which
second level of access is obtained via said user (10) making a purchase, and
which second level of access provides additional capabilities to said user (10),
serving second content to said user (10);
first permitting a display to said user (10) with said second level of access in which
said user (10) does not receive advertisements in said second content;
second permitting a display to said user (10) with said second level of access in
which said user (10) displays advertisements in said second content; and
responsive to said second permitting, providing said user (10) at said second level of
access who has allowed said advertisements to be displayed with a third level
of access over said network from said website server (3), said third level of
access providing at least one privilege that is not available to a user with said
second level of access.
2. The method according to claim 1, wherein said purchase includes at least one of
a toy, a product, a figurine, a trading card, a service, an image representing a
character, a membership, and a subscription.
3. The method according to claim 1 or 2, wherein said at least one privilege includes
at least one of free currency, free items, prizes, priority access to contests and other
activities, discounts and access to content excluded from said first level of access
and said second level of access.
4. The method according to any of claims 1 to 3, further comprising a step of, after a
predetermined period of time has passed after said purchase, providing access to
said interactive content at a fourth level of access over said computer network, said

fourth level of access including serving said first website content to said user (10), said first website content including displayed advertisements that cannot be disabled.

5. The method according to claim 4 wherein at said fourth level of access, said user (10) is subject to restrictions in accessing said first website content.

6. The method according to claim 5, wherein said first website content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein said restrictions include said user (10) being limited to obtaining a predetermined number of rooms.

7. The method according to any of claims 1 to 6, wherein at least one of said first website content and said second website content includes allowing said user (10) to register one of a plurality of characters, wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to registering one or more predetermined characters of said plurality of characters, and wherein at said second level of access, additional characters of said plurality of characters may be registered by said user (10).

8. The method according to any of claims 1 to 7, wherein a code is provided with a product that was purchased, and wherein said code causes said one of said plurality of characters that is registered by said user (10) to correspond to said product.

9. The method according to claim 8, wherein the product includes at least one of the code printed on a tag and the code stored in a memory device.

10. The method according to claim 8, wherein said code causes said one of said plurality of characters that is registered by said user (10) to include an image resembling said product.

11. The method according to any of claims 1 to 10, wherein said first website content includes one or more games, and wherein at said second website content includes at least one additional game not included in said first website content.

12. The method according to any of claims 1 to 11, wherein at least one of said first website content and said second website content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to obtaining a predetermined number of rooms, and wherein at said second level of access, said user (10) may obtain more than said predetermined number of rooms.

13. A method of delivering interactive content using an entertainment system, comprising steps of:

providing access to interactive content to a user at a first level of access over a

computer network, said first level of access providing first access privileges;

providing access to said interactive content to said user (10) at a second level of

access over said computer network in response to said user (10) satisfying a

first predetermined condition, said second level of access providing second

access privileges that are excluded from said first level of access; and

providing access to said interactive content to said user (10) at a third level of access

over said computer network in response to both said user (10) satisfying said

first predetermined condition and said user (10) satisfying a second

predetermined condition, said third level of access providing said second

access privileges and third access privileges, said third access privileges

being excluded from said second level of access.

14. The method according to claim 13, wherein said first level of access requires advertisements to be displayed in order for said user (10) to access said interactive content.

15. The method according to claim 13 or 14, wherein said second access privileges include permitting disabling of said advertisements.

16. The method according to any of claims 13 to 15, wherein said first predetermined condition includes at least one of purchasing a product and/or service, obtaining a membership and accumulating points.

17. The method according to claim 16, wherein said product and/or service is at least one of a toy, a figurine, a trading card, a consumer product, an image representing a character, a membership and a subscription.
18. The method according to claim 16, wherein said points are provided in response to said user (10) clicking on and/or viewing advertisements.
19. The method according to any of claims 13 to 18, wherein said second predetermined condition includes at least one of viewing advertisements and purchasing an additional product and/or service.
20. The method according to any of claims 13 to 19, wherein said third access privileges include at least one of free currency, free items, prizes, discounts, priority access to contests and other activities, and access to content excluded from said first level of access and said second level of access.
21. The method according to any of claims 13 to 20, further comprising a step of, after a predetermined period of time has passed after said user (10) satisfying said first predetermined condition, providing access to said interactive content at a fourth level of access over said computer network, said fourth level of access providing said second access privileges without said third access privileges, and said fourth level of access requires said user (10) to view advertisements in order to access said interactive content.
22. The method according to claim 21, wherein at said fourth level of access, said user (10) is subject to restrictions in accessing said interactive content.
23. The method according to claim 22, wherein said interactive content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein said restrictions include said user (10) being limited to obtaining a predetermined number of rooms.
24. The method according to any of claims 13 to 23, wherein said interactive content includes allowing said user (10) to register one of a plurality of characters, wherein at

said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to registering one or more predetermined characters of said plurality of characters, and wherein at said second level of access, additional characters of said plurality of characters may be registered by said user (10).

25. The method according to claim 24, wherein a code is provided with a product that was purchased, and wherein said code causes said one of said plurality of characters that is registered by said user (10) to correspond to said product.

26. The method according to claim 25, wherein the product includes at least one of the code printed on a tag and the code stored in a memory device.

27. The method according to claim 25 or 26, wherein said code causes said one of said plurality of characters that is registered by said user (10) to include an image resembling said product.

28. The method according to any of claims 13 to 27, wherein said interactive content includes a plurality of games, wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to playing one or more predetermined games of said plurality of games, and wherein at said second level of access, said user (10) may play additional games of said plurality of games.

29. The method according to any of claims 13 to 28, wherein said interactive content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to obtaining a predetermined number of rooms, and wherein at said second level of access, said user (10) may obtain more than said predetermined number of rooms.

30. The method according to any of claims 13 to 29, wherein said second access privileges include allowing said user (10) to access additional interactive content.

31. The method according to claim 30, wherein said additional interactive content includes at least one of rooms, games, chatting activities, messaging activities, sending objects to other users, and receiving objects from other users.

32. A method of displaying advertisements on a user computer using an interactive entertainment system, comprising steps of:
providing access to interactive content to a user at a first level of access over a computer network, said first level of access providing first access privileges;
selling a product and/or service to said user (10);
responsive to said selling, providing access to said interactive content to said user (10) at a second level of access over said computer network, said second level of access providing second access privileges that are excluded from said first level of access;
receiving consent from said user (10) to display advertisements to said user (10) along with said interactive content; and
responsive to said selling and said receiving, providing access to said interactive content to said user (10) at a third level of access over said computer network, said third level of access providing said second access privileges and third access privileges that are excluded from said second level of access.
33. The method according to claim 32, wherein said providing access to said interactive content to said user (10) at said first level of access includes displaying said advertisements to said user (10), and further comprising a step of, after said selling, disabling said advertisements.
34. The method according to claim 32 or 33, wherein said product and/or service is at least one of a toy, a figurine, a trading card, a consumer product, an image representing a character, a membership and a subscription.
35. The method according to any of claims 32 to 34, wherein said third access privileges include at least one of free currency, free items, prizes, discounts, priority access to contests and other activities, and access to content excluded from said first level of access and said second level of access.
36. The method according to any of claims 32 to 35 further comprising a step of, after a predetermined period of time has passed after said selling, providing access

to said interactive content at a fourth level of access over said computer network, said fourth level of access providing said second access privileges without said third access privileges, and said fourth level of access requires said user (10) to view said advertisements in order to access said interactive content.

37. The method according to claim 36, wherein at said fourth level of access said user (10) will be subject to restrictions in accessing said interactive content.

38. The method according to claim 37, wherein said interactive content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein said restrictions include said user (10) being limited to obtaining a predetermined number of rooms.

39. The method according to any of claims 32 to 38, wherein said interactive content includes allowing said user (10) to register one of a plurality of characters, wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to registering one or more predetermined characters of said plurality of characters, and wherein at said second level of access, additional characters of said plurality of characters may be registered by said user (10).

40. The method according to claim 39, wherein a code is provided with a product that was purchased, and wherein said code causes said one of said plurality of characters that is registered by said user (10) to correspond to said product.

41. The method according to claim 40, wherein the product includes at least one of the code printed on a tag and the code stored in a memory device.

42. The method according to any of claims 32 to 41, wherein said interactive content includes a plurality of games, wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to playing one or more predetermined games of said plurality of games, and wherein at said second level of access, said user (10) may play additional games of said plurality of games.

43. The method according to any of claims 32 to 42, wherein said interactive content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to obtaining a predetermined number of rooms, and wherein at said second level of access, said user (10) may obtain more than said predetermined number of rooms.

44. The method according to any of claims 32 to 43, wherein said second access privileges include allowing said user (10) to access additional interactive content.

45. The method according to claim 44, wherein said additional interactive content includes at least one of rooms, games, chatting activities, messaging activities, sending objects to other users, and receiving objects from other users.

46. A method of displaying advertisements on a user computer using an interactive entertainment system, comprising steps of:

providing access to interactive content to a user at a first level of access over a computer network, said first level of access providing first access privileges and including displaying advertisements;

selling a product and/or service to said user (10), said product and/or service being at least one of a toy, a figurine, a trading card, a consumer product, an image representing a character, a membership and a subscription;

responsive to said selling, providing access to said interactive content to said user (10) at a second level of access over said computer network, said second level of access providing second access privileges that are excluded from said first level of access and includes permitting said advertisements to be disabled;

receiving consent from said user (10) to display said advertisements to said user (10) along with said interactive content;

responsive to said selling and said receiving said consent, providing access to said interactive content to said user (10) at a third level of access over said computer network, said third level of access providing said second access privileges and third access privileges that are excluded from said second level of access; and

after a predetermined period of time has passed after said selling, providing access to said interactive content at a fourth level of access over said computer network, said fourth level of access providing said second access privileges without said third access privileges, and said fourth level of access requires said user (10) to view said advertisements in order to access said interactive content..

47. The method according to claim 46, wherein said third access privileges include at least one of free currency, free items, prizes, discounts, priority access to contests and other activities, and access to content excluded from said first level of access and said second level of access.

48. The method according to claim 46 or 47, wherein at said fourth level of access said user (10) will be subject to restrictions in accessing said interactive content.

49. The method according to claim 48, wherein said interactive content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein said restrictions include said user (10) being limited to obtaining a predetermined number of rooms.

50. The method according to any of claims 46 to 49, wherein said interactive content includes allowing said user (10) to register one of a plurality of characters, wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to registering one or more predetermined characters of said plurality of characters, and wherein at said second level of access, additional characters of said plurality of characters may be registered by said user (10).

51. The method according to claim 50, wherein said product and/or service is a product, wherein a code is provided with said product, and wherein said code causes said one of said plurality of characters that is registered by said user (10) to correspond to said product.

52. The method according to claim 51, wherein the product includes at least one of the code printed on a tag and the code stored in a memory device.

53. The method according to any of claims 46 to 52, wherein said interactive content includes a plurality of games, wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to playing one or more predetermined games of said plurality of games, and wherein at said second level of access, said user (10) may play additional games of said plurality of games.

54. The method according to any of claims 46 to 53, wherein said interactive content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to obtaining a predetermined number of rooms, and wherein at said second level of access, said user (10) may obtain more than said predetermined number of rooms.

55. The method according to any of claims 46 to 54, wherein said second access privileges include allowing said user (10) to access additional interactive content.

56. The method according to claim 55, wherein said additional interactive content includes at least one of rooms, games, chatting activities, messaging activities, sending objects to other users, and receiving objects from other users.

AMENDED CLAIMS**received by the International Bureau on 16 June 2008 (16.06.2008)**

1. A method comprising:

connecting to a user (10) from a website server (3)
over a network;

5 determining said user's level of access to said website
server (3);

responsive to determining said user (10) having a
first, lower level of access, serving first website content to
said user (10), said first website content including displayed
10 advertisements that cannot be disabled;

responsive to determining said user (10) having a
second level of access, which second level of access is obtained
via said user (10) making a purchase, and which second level of
access provides additional capabilities to said user (10), serving
15 second website content to said user (10);

first permitting a display to said user (10) with said
second level of access in which said user (10) does not receive
advertisements in said second content;

second permitting a display to said user (10) with said
20 second level of access in which said user (10) displays
advertisements in said second content; and

responsive to said second permitting, providing said
user (10) at said second level of access who has allowed said
advertisements to be displayed with a third level of access over
25 said network from said website server (3), said third level of
access providing at least one privilege that is not available to a
user with said second level of access.

2. The method according to claim 1, wherein said purchase includes at least one of a toy, a product, a figurine, a trading card, a service, an image representing a character, a membership, and a subscription.

5 3. The method according to claim 1 or 2, wherein said at least one privilege includes at least one of free currency, free items, prizes, priority access to contests and other activities, discounts and access to content excluded from said first level of access and said second level of access.

10 4. The method according to any of claims 1 to 3, further comprising a step of, after a predetermined period of time has passed after said purchase, providing access to interactive content at a fourth level of access over said network, said fourth level of access including serving said first website content to
15 said user (10), said first website content including displayed advertisements that cannot be disabled.

5. The method according to claim 4 wherein at said fourth level of access, said user (10) is subject to restrictions in accessing said first website content.

20 6. The method according to claim 5, wherein said first website content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein said restrictions include said user (10) being limited to obtaining a predetermined number of rooms.

25 7. The method according to any of claims 1 to 6, wherein at least one of said first website content and said second website content includes allowing said user (10) to register one of a plurality of characters, wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to registering one or more predetermined
30 characters of said plurality of characters, and wherein at said second level of access, additional characters of said plurality of characters may be registered by said user (10).

8 The method according to claim 7, wherein a code is provided with a product that was purchased, and wherein said code causes said one of said plurality of characters that is registered by said user (10) to correspond to said product.

5 9. The method according to claim 8, wherein the product includes at least one of the code printed on a tag and the code stored in a memory device.

10. The method according to claim 8, wherein said code causes said one of said plurality of characters that is registered by said user (10) to include an image resembling said product.

11. The method according to any of claims 1 to 10, wherein said first website content includes one or more games, and wherein at said second website content includes at least one additional game not included in said first website content.

15 12. The method according to any of claims 1 to 11, wherein at least one of said first website content and said second website content includes images representing a world in which rooms may be obtained by said user (10), wherein at said first level of access, said user (10) is limited to obtaining a predetermined number of
20 rooms, and wherein at said second level of access, said user (10) may obtain more than said predetermined number of rooms.

13. A method of delivering interactive content using an entertainment system, comprising steps of:

25 providing access to interactive content to a user at a first level of access over a computer network, said first level of access providing first access privileges;

30 providing access to said interactive content to said user (10) at a second level of access over said computer network in response to said user (10) satisfying a first predetermined condition, said second level of access providing second access privileges that are excluded from said first level of access; and

providing access to said interactive content to said user (10) at a third level of access over said computer network in response to both said user (10) satisfying said first predetermined condition and said user (10) satisfying a second predetermined condition, said third level of access providing said
5 second access privileges and third access privileges, said third access privileges being excluded from said second level of access.

14. The method according to claim 13, wherein said first level of access requires advertisements to be displayed in order
10 for said user (10) to access said interactive content.

15. The method according to claim 14, wherein said second access privileges include permitting disabling of said advertisements.

16. The method according to any of claims 13 to 15, wherein
15 said first predetermined condition includes at least one of purchasing a product and/or service, obtaining a membership and accumulating points.

STATEMENT UNDER ARTICLE 19(1)

This Statement is made in response to the Written Opinion, and in particular regarding the observations under Article 6 on page 6 of the Written Opinion.

The observation regarding the wording of the "connecting" clause in claim 1 has been addressed by amending the claim to explicitly recite connecting to a user from a website server over a network.

It is respectfully submitted that the statements in the claim relating to serving content to a user are clear within the context of the claim. The claim explicitly recites determining a level of access to a website server and subsequently serving first and second content to the user. The original claim referred to first website content, and has been amended to similarly refer to second website content.

Regarding the reference to "advertisement" in respect of the second level of access, it is respectfully submitted that the second level advertisements may, but need not necessarily, be the same as the first level advertisements.

It is further respectfully submitted that the first and second permitting operations are also clear. The conditions for such operations are not important to the claim.

Claims 4, 8, and 15 have been amended to address the antecedent-related observations.

Finally, regarding claims 32 and 46, it is respectfully submitted that operations responsive to "selling" would be readily understood as being responsive to purchases being made.

In light of the foregoing, it is believed that all of the claims meet the requirements of Article 6 PCT.

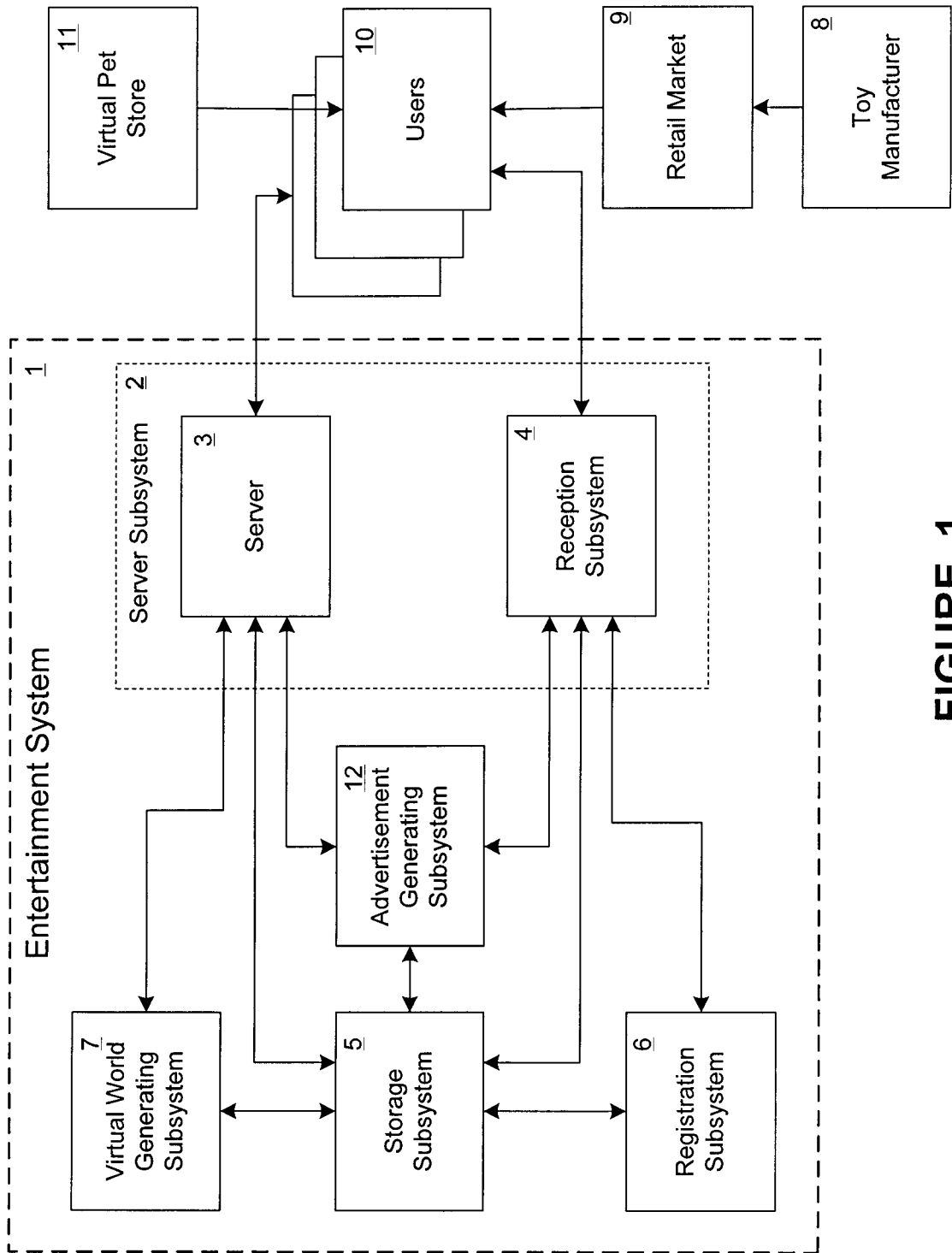


FIGURE 1

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/CA2008/000008

<p>A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER IPC: H04L 12/16 (2006.01) , H04H 60/14 (2008.01) , H04L 12/18 (2006.01) According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC</p>																				
<p>B. FIELDS SEARCHED</p> <p>Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols) IPC: H04L 12/16 (2006.01) , H04H 60/14 (2008.01) , H04L 12/18 (2006.01)</p> <p>Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched</p> <p>Electronic database(s) consulted during the international search (name of database(s) and, where practicable, search terms used) Canadian Patent Database, United States Patent and Trademark Database, European Worldwide Database, Delphion and QPat - Search terms used: purchase, advertisement, entertainment, level, tier, access, privilege, incentive, loyalty, interactive content, deliver*, sponsor*</p>																				
<p>C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT</p> <table border="1" style="width:100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width:10%;">Category*</th> <th style="width:60%;">Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages</th> <th style="width:30%;">Relevant to claim No.</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td align="center">A</td> <td>US 2006/0208074 (EGLLEN et al.) 21 September 2006 (21.09.2006) Whole document</td> <td align="center">1-56</td> </tr> <tr> <td align="center">A</td> <td>US 2006/0129458 (MAGGIO) 15 June 2006 (15.06.2006) Whole document</td> <td align="center">1-56</td> </tr> <tr> <td align="center">A</td> <td>US 2006/0082068 (PATCHEN) 20 April 2006 (20.04.2006) Whole document</td> <td align="center">1-56</td> </tr> <tr> <td align="center">A</td> <td>US 2005/0192864 (GANZ) 01 September 2005 (01.09.2005) Whole document</td> <td align="center">1-56</td> </tr> <tr> <td align="center">A</td> <td>US 6,847,992 (HAITSUKA et al.) 25 January 2005 (25.01.2005) Whole document</td> <td align="center">1-56</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>			Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.	A	US 2006/0208074 (EGLLEN et al.) 21 September 2006 (21.09.2006) Whole document	1-56	A	US 2006/0129458 (MAGGIO) 15 June 2006 (15.06.2006) Whole document	1-56	A	US 2006/0082068 (PATCHEN) 20 April 2006 (20.04.2006) Whole document	1-56	A	US 2005/0192864 (GANZ) 01 September 2005 (01.09.2005) Whole document	1-56	A	US 6,847,992 (HAITSUKA et al.) 25 January 2005 (25.01.2005) Whole document	1-56
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<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> See patent family annex.</p> <table border="1" style="width:100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width:50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>* Special categories of cited documents :</p> <p>"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance</p> <p>"E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date</p> <p>"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)</p> <p>"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means</p> <p>"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed</p> </td> <td style="width:50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention</p> <p>"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone</p> <p>"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art</p> <p>"&" document member of the same patent family</p> </td> </tr> </table>			<p>* Special categories of cited documents :</p> <p>"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance</p> <p>"E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date</p> <p>"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)</p> <p>"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means</p> <p>"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed</p>	<p>"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention</p> <p>"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone</p> <p>"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art</p> <p>"&" document member of the same patent family</p>																
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<p>Date of the actual completion of the international search</p> <p>19 March 2008 (19-03-2008)</p>		<p>Date of mailing of the international search report</p> <p>16 April 2008 (16-04-2008)</p>																		
<p>Name and mailing address of the ISA/CA Canadian Intellectual Property Office Place du Portage I, C114 - 1st Floor, Box PCT 50 Victoria Street Gatineau, Quebec K1A 0C9 Facsimile No.: 001-819-953-2476</p>		<p>Authorized officer</p> <p>Donald Lefebvre 819- 997-2822</p>																		

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