ABSTRACT

Provided are new approaches for providing a product based game. A host may receive a user selection of one or more products. The player may also rank the products. The host manages interaction with the player to provide game play. According to an outcome of the game, the host selects one or both of a product and a promotional offer, including discounts and communicates one or both of these to the user. Graphical representations of the one or more products selected by the user may be used as interface elements in a game interface.
Present Game Entry Point In Network Profile Interface 502

Receive User Selection of Game Entry Point 504

Receive User Selection of Network Profile IDs for Invitees 506

Transmit Invitations for Association with Network Profiles of Invitees 508

Receive Invitee Acceptance 510

Receive Player Fee 512

Present Products for Game Rewards 514

Receive User Selection/Ranking of Products 516

Interact With Players to Provide Game Play 518

Select Prize Products/Promotion Per Game Outcome 520

Present Prize Products/Promotions to Players 522

Receive Affiliate Fees for Redemption of Promotions 524

Fig. 5
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- Present Merchant Interface 602
  - Receive Merchant Upload 604
    - Receive Payment of Sponsorship Fee 606
      - Present Products to Players 608
        - Receive Players' Product Selections/Rankings 610
          - Present Images of Selected Products as Game Interface Elements 612
            - Receive User Interactions with Game Interface 614
              - Assign Product/Promotion per Game Outcome and Product Record 616
                - Present Assigned Product/Promotion to User 618

- Present Early Purchase Incentives 620
  - Retrieve Related Product Records 622
    - Present Exchange/Additional Product Selections and Promotions for Related Product Records 624
      - Detect Promotion Redemption and Associated Purchases 626
        - Receive Payment of Affiliate Fees 628

Fig. 6
Receive Invitation 902

Accept? 904

Register/Sign In 906

Buy Points? 908

Purchase Points 910

Played Before? 912

Tutorial 914

Initiate Game 916

Fig. 9
Players Pay Fee 1002

Players Select Products 1004

Select Products from Player Selections 1006

“Wrap” Gifts, including White Elephant 1008

Label Gifts with Player Names 1010

Fig. 10

Select Player 1102

Notify Player of Time Window 1104

Player Response in Time Window? 1106

N

Y

Interact With Player for Turn 1108

Steal/swap Interactions 1110

Last Player? 1112

N

Y

Give First Player Steal Opportunity 1114

Fig. 11
Buy Hold 1402

Start Game 1404

Player Selects Gift? 1408

Last Gift In Pile? 1410

Half of Game Passed? 1412

Release Hold 1406

Fig. 14
ONLINE SHOPPING/GAMING

RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims priority to U.S. Provisional Application Ser. No. 61/493,357 filed Jun. 3, 2011, and entitled ONLINE SHOPPING/GAMING (Attorney Docket No. MAIT-00200), which is hereby incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

This application also claims priority to U.S. Provisional Application Ser. No. 61/557,782 filed Nov. 9, 2011, and entitled ONLINE SHOPPING/GAMING (Attorney Docket No. MAIT-00300), which is hereby incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

BACKGROUND

The internet has become a primary resource for entertainment. Many popular sites offset internet-based games and videos. Typically such sites are advertisement supports or require payment of a subscription fee. However, banner ads and other forms of advertisements displayed in a browser are easily ignored. Accordingly, the “click-through” rate for such advertisements is extremely low.

Many people also use the internet for shopping including both purchasing products from websites and researching products they wish to buy. The abundance of shopping sites makes it difficult to attract customers. In addition, the browsing habits of many users include only looking at a merchant’s website for a matter of seconds before moving on to another site or navigating to another portion of a merchant’s website.

In view of the foregoing it would be an advancement in the art to provide an approach to internet shopping and advertising that is able to attract customer’s attention as well as providing the entertainment that many internet users seek.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The specific features, aspects and advantages of the present invention will become better understood with regard to the following description and accompanying drawings where:

FIG. 1. is a schematic block diagram of a computing device suitable for use in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2. is a schematic block diagram of a networking environment suitable for use in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 3. is a process flow diagram method for providing a product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 4. is a schematic block diagram of a network profile interface suitable for launching a product based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 5. is a process flow diagram of a method for providing a product-based game in the context of a social networking system in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 6. is a process flow diagram of a method for interfacing a product-based game with a merchant providing products for use in the product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 7. is an illustration of an interface for a product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 8. is a process flow diagram of a method for setting up a product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 9. is a process flow diagram of a method for joining a product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 10. is a process flow diagram of a method for initiating a product-based game interface in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 11. is a process flow diagram of a method for managing player interactions in a product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 12. is a process flow diagram of a method for managing a player's turn in a product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 13. is a process flow diagram of a method for managing exchange of products in a product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 14. is a process flow diagram of a method for holding a product in a product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention; and

FIG. 15. is a process flow diagram for presenting and redeeming product discounts in a product-based game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

In the following description of the preferred embodiment of the present invention, reference is made to the accompanying drawings, which form a part hereof, and in which is shown by way of illustration specific embodiments in which the invention is may be practiced. It is understood that other embodiments may be utilized and structural changes may be made without departing from the scope of the present invention.

In the following description, numerous specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the present invention. However, it will be apparent to one skilled in the art that the present invention can be practiced without these specific details. In other instances, well known circuits, components, algorithms, and processes have not been shown in detail or have been illustrated in schematic or block diagram form in order not to obscure the present invention in unnecessary detail. Additionally, for the most part, details concerning networking, interfaces, computing systems, and the like have been omitted inasmuch as such details are not considered necessary to obtain a complete understanding of the present invention and are considered to be within the understanding of persons of ordinary skill in the relevant art. It is further noted that, where feasible, all functions described herein may be performed in either hardware, software, firmware, digital components, or analog components or a combination thereof, unless indicated otherwise. Certain terms are used throughout the following description and Claims to refer to particular system components. As one skilled in the art will appreciate, components may be referred to by different names. This document does not intend to distinguish between components that differ in name, but not function. In the following discussion and in the claims, the terms “including” and “comprising” are used in an open-ended fashion, and thus should be interpreted to mean “including, but not limited to”.

Embodiments of the present invention are described herein. Those of ordinary skill in the art will realize that the
following detailed description of the present invention is illustrative only and is not intended to be in any way limiting. Other embodiments of the present invention will readily suggest themselves to such skilled persons having the benefit of this disclosure. Reference will be made in detail to implementations of the present invention as illustrated in the accompanying drawings. The same reference indicators will be used throughout the drawings and the following detailed description to refer to the same or like parts...

[0025] In the interest of clarity, not all of the routine features of the implementations described herein are shown and described. It will, of course, be appreciated that in the development of any such actual implementation, numerous implementation-specific decisions must be made in order to achieve the developer’s specific goals, such as compliance with applications and business-related constraints, and that these specific goals will vary from one implementation to another and from one developer to another. Moreover, it will be appreciated that such a development effort might be complex and time-consuming, but would nevertheless be a routine undertaking of engineering for those of ordinary skill in the art having the benefit of this disclosure.

[0026] The following description relates to methods for providing product-based gaming. A user may select a product or products and may also provide a ranking of a list of products. A host receives the selection of a product or products and possibly a ranking. The host then manages interaction with the user to provide game play. According to an outcome of the game, the host selects one or both of a product and a promotion, which may include a discount amount, and presents one or both of these to the player. In some embodiments, images of the one or more products selected by the user are used as interface elements in the game. The player may pay a fee to play the game and the promotion may include a discount amount chosen to be at least as great as the fee. Upon redemption of the promotion, a merchant may pay a fee to an entity providing the product-based game.

[0027] Various additional features and alternative embodiments are disclosed herein. An example “white elephant” type game is also disclosed.

[0028] FIG. 1 is a block diagram illustrating an example computing device 100. Computing device 100 may be used to perform various procedures, such as those discussed herein. Computing device 100 can function as a server, a client, or any other computing entity. Computing device 100 can perform various monitoring functions as discussed herein, and can execute one or more application programs, such as the application programs described herein. Computing device 100 can be any of a wide variety of computing devices, such as a desktop computer, a notebook computer, a server computer, a handheld computer, a tablet computer, and the like.

[0029] Computing device 100 includes one or more processor(s) 102, one or more memory device(s) 104, one or more interface(s) 106, one or more mass storage device(s) 108, one or more Input/Output (I/O) device(s) 110, and a display device 130 all of which are coupled to a bus 112. Processor(s) 102 include one or more processors or controllers that execute instructions stored in memory device(s) 104 and/or mass storage device(s) 108. Processor(s) 102 may also include various types of computer-readable media, such as cache memory.

[0030] Memory device(s) 104 include various computer-readable media, such as volatile memory (e.g., random access memory (RAM) 114) and/or nonvolatile memory (e.g., read-only memory (ROM) 116). Memory device(s) 104 may also include rewritable ROM, such as Flash memory.

[0031] Mass storage device(s) 108 include various computer readable media, such as magnetic tapes, magnetic disks, optical disks, solid state memory (e.g., Flash memory), and so forth. As shown in FIG. 1, a particular mass storage device is a hard disk drive 124. Various drives may also be included in mass storage device(s) 108 to enable reading from and/or writing to the various computer readable media. Mass storage device(s) 108 may include removable media 126 and/or non-removable media.

[0032] I/O device(s) 110 include various devices that allow data and/or other information to be input to or retrieved from computing device 100. Example I/O device(s) 110 include cursor control devices, keyboards, keypads, microphones, monitors or other display devices, speakers, printers, network interface cards, modems, lenses, CCDs or other image capture devices, and the like.

[0033] Display device 130 includes any type of device capable of displaying information to one or more users of computing device 100. Examples of display device 130 include a monitor, display terminal, video projection device, and the like.

[0034] Interface(s) 106 include various interfaces that allow computing device 100 to interact with other systems, devices, or computing environments. Example interface(s) 106 include any number of different network interfaces 120, such as interfaces to local area networks (LANs), wide area networks (WANs), wireless networks, and the Internet. Other interfaces include user interface 118 and peripheral device interface 122.

[0035] Bus 112 allows processor(s) 102, memory device(s) 104, interface(s) 106, mass storage device(s) 108, and I/O device(s) 110 to communicate with one another, as well as other devices or components coupled to bus 112. Bus 112 represents one or more of several types of bus structures, such as a system bus, PCI bus, IEEE 1394 bus, USB bus, and so forth.

[0036] For purposes of illustration, programs and other executable program components are shown herein as discrete blocks, although it is understood that such programs and components may reside at various times in different storage components of computing device 100, and are executed by processor(s) 102. Alternatively, the systems and procedures described herein can be implemented in hardware, or a combination of hardware, software, and/or firmware. For example, one or more application specific integrated circuits (ASICs) can be programmed to carry out one or more of the systems and procedures described herein.

[0037] FIG. 2 is a block diagram illustrating an example operating environment 200, including a host server 202 operably coupled to a build database 204. The host server 202 and other components of the environment 200 may be embodied as the computing device 100 and include some or all of the components illustrated in FIG. 1. The database 204 may be a memory device, such as a hard drive, operably coupled to the host server 202 or may be another computing device 100 communicatively coupled to the host server 202. The host server 202 may be coupled to a network 206 such as a LAN, WAN, or the Internet. One or more additional servers 208a-208d may also be operably coupled to the network 206. The servers 208a-208d may host build systems or may provide application subscription services as described hereinbelow. The servers 208a-208d may also provide other services
including custom services programmed by an end user. In some embodiments, the host server 202 may also provide an application subscription service as described hereinbelow. One or more of the servers 208a-208d may be operably coupled to a database 210 to facilitate provision of an application subscription service.

In some embodiments, a user does not select products and is not presented with an opportunity to select products. For example, a user may simply be presented with an invitation to play a game for the opportunity to win a promotion, such as a discount, for a pre-determined product. In some embodiments, a user may be presented with an invitation to play a game for the opportunity to win a promotion, such as a discount, for a pre-determined product. In some embodiments, a user does not select products and is not presented with an opportunity to select products. For example, a user may simply be presented with an invitation to play a game for the opportunity to win a promotion, such as a discount, for a pre-determined product.

The host server 202 may then present 308 a game interface to one or more prospective players. The game interface may be a locally executed application. In such embodiments, presenting 308 the game interface may include transmitting an authorization or instruction to the local interface to present the game interface upon payment of the game fee and selection of one or more products. Alternatively, the game interface may be a web-based interface such that presenting 308 the game interface may include transmitting a web page operable to provide a game interface when rendered by a browser. Presenting 308 the game interface may include presenting 310 images of one or more produces selected by a player as interface elements. For example, game pieces, buttons, and other elements that a user may manipulate using a mouse may be displayed on the user workstation with an image of a selected product.

The game interface receives 312 user interactions therewith. For web-based applications, receiving 312 user interactions may include receiving 312 these interactions at the host server 202 as transmitted from a web-based application or browser executing on the workstation 212. The host server 202 may interpret the user interactions and update the state of the game and transmit any updates to the game interface to the user workstation 212. For locally executing applications, the locally executing application receives 312 the user interactions and updates the state of the locally executing game and locally presented game interface as necessary.

Upon conclusion of the game, the method 300 includes determining 314 which product and/or promotion or discount the player receives according to the outcome of the game. In some embodiments, the discount is fixed and the product is selected according to the outcome of the game. In some embodiments, an awarded promotion may include buy one, get one deals, gifts with purchase of a prize product, access to limited supply goods, access to events, access to special content, and the like. In other embodiments, the product is always one of the products selected by the player but the amount of the discount or type of promotion depends on the outcome of the game. In still other embodiments, the product and the promotion, such as a discount amount, are selected based on the outcome of the game. In embodiments where a fee is paid to play the game, the value of the promotion or amount of the discount is preferably greater than or equal to the amount of the game fee. In some embodiments, the product and/or promotion are selected by a random process where the likelihood of receiving one of the products selected by the player and/or a larger valued promotion, e.g., discount amount, increases based on the outcome of the game, i.e., number of points, win or loss, completion of a task, or the like. In embodiments, where users select products and rank them in terms of desirability, the likelihood that the user will receive a promotion, such as a discount, for a higher ranked product may increase based on the outcome of the game. For example, a larger number of points may increase the likelihood of getting a higher ranked product. The step of determining 314 the prize product and/or promotion may be performed by the host server 202 or by an application executing on the workstation 212.
A promotion message may then be transmitted 316 to the player, such as by transmitting a message to the workstation 212 by means of a web browser, email application, text message, or interaction with another locally executing application on the workstation 212. The promotion message may identify the prize product determined at step 314 and the promotion, such as a discount amount. The promotion message may further include a time limiter indicating how long the promotion will be available or providing other incentives to redeem the promotion in a timely manner. Other incentives may include promotions for accessories for the prize product that expire if not redeemed by a given time or an additional discount for the prize product that expires unless the promotion is redeemed by a given time. In addition to any incentives, offers, advertisements, and discounts, or other promotions for other products, which may relate to the prize product, may also be included in the promotion message. The promotion message may include a promotional code, electronic coupon, or other data enabling the player to redeem the promotion for the prize product at a website or physical store of a merchant.

Upon redemption of the promotion for the prize product by the player, the merchant that sold the product to the player may remit an affiliate fee or other compensation to the entity owning or controlling the host server 22. Accordingly, the method 300 may include receiving 320 payment of an affiliate fee. The fee may be paid to a financial institution such that receiving 320 payment of the affiliate fee may include receiving 320 notice of payment of the affiliate fee. In some embodiments, a merchant providing products for selection using the method 300 may pay a sponsorship fee such that payment of an affiliate fee upon redemption of a promotion message is not performed.

FIG. 4 illustrates a network profile interface 400 that may be used for launching a product-based game as described above with respect to FIG. 3. The network profile interface 400 may be an interface to a social or professional networking site such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace, Twitter, or the like. The network profile interface 400 may be presented in a browser and may reflect data stored in a database accessed by a user of the device, such as one of the servers 208a-208d. The network profile interface 400 may display profile data 402 for a user profile data 404 for one or more friends linked to the user's profile. The profile data 402, 404 may include postings 406 of text, images 408, and other biographic data 410.

The network profile interface 400 may additionally display an entry point 412 to launch a product-based game, such as described above with respect to FIG. 3. The entry point 412 may be a hyper text link, linked image, button, or other user interface element. The entry point 412 may include an interface element 414 allowing a user to invite friends, such as friends having their profile data 404 linked to the user's profile data 402 to join in a product-based game.

FIG. 5 illustrates a method 500 for initiating and managing a product-based game using a network profile interface 400. The method 500 may include displaying 502 an entry point 412 for a product-based game in a network profile interface 400 of a prospective player. The entry point may be a button, link, or any other user interface element. The entry point may be linked to a host server 202 such that interaction by a user with the entry point instructs the host server to take actions necessary to initiate a product-based game. In some embodiments, the method 500 may also be executing using a social networking interface. Other network interfaces such as email and the like may also be used to perform the method 500.

The method 500 may include receiving 504 a user selection of the game entry point. This may include receiving a message at a host server 202 as a result of user selection of the game entry point on a workstation 212. The method 500 may further include receiving 506 a user selection of network profile identifiers and transmitting 508 invitations to join in a group game to the identified users.

Various methods may be used to receive 506 a selection of invitees and transmit 508 the invitations to the invitees using a social networking interface. An invitee player may, for example, select invitee players from a contact list or friends list including identifiers for the network profiles of other users and then issue invitations to an inbox or other messaging data structure of a social networking profile of an invitee player using communication methods known in the art of social networking. The invitation may include hyperertext, buttons, or other user interface elements allowing the invitee player to click on the invitation when viewed in the network profile interface to indicate to the host server 202 an acceptance of the invitation. The invitation may be generated by the host server 202 and transmitted by means of the host server 202. For example, a locally executing application or interface to an application executing on the host server 202 may receive identifiers for prospective players and transmit invitations with required codes or user interface elements to the inbox of the invitee player's networking profile.

Alternatively, the invitation may include a game identifier. The invitee player may then transmit the game identifier to the host server 202 identifier upon initiating a game, such as by performing steps 502 and 504 using a network profile interface. The game identifier may be supplied by the user to the host server 202 upon initiating the game by performing steps 502 and 504. Alternatively, the game identifier may be transmitted from the host server 202 to the user's inbox upon performance of the steps 502 and 504. In some embodiments, invitations including a link, game identifier, or other access code, may be transmitted by email, text message, or the like, and accepted in the same manner as described above.

The host server 202 may receive 510 acceptances from one or more of the invitees. As noted above, acceptance may be initiated by an invitee player clicking on a link in the invitation or by selecting a game entry point and entering a game identifier or other code in a game interface presented on the invitee computer. In embodiments where payment of a game fee is required the host server 202 may receive 512 payment of a game fee. As noted above, this may include receiving at the host server notification of payment of a game fee by a financial institution or other payment processing entity.

The method 500 therefore includes steps of presenting 514 products for game rewards on the user computers, and receiving 516 user selections of one or more desired products, which may include a ranking of the desired products. Interacting 518 with the players to provide the game play may be through a web browser executing on each of the invitee and invitee computers or an independent application. Interaction 518 between players may be managed on the host server 202 in data communication with the user computers or may be performed by the user computers with interaction achieved by communication between user computers.
The method 500 may include selecting 520, by the host server 202 or an application executing on the player computers, one or both of a prize product and a promotion, such as a discount amount, according to the outcome of the game. In some embodiments, selection 520 of a prize may be as described hereinabove except that the prize product selected 520 for an individual player may be any of the products selected by any of the other players of the group. Alternatively, the pool of products from which the prize product is selected 520 may include those of some or all of the players in the group as well as one or more other products that were not selected by any of the players. As already noted hereinabove, in embodiments where a game fee is required to play the value of the promotion, such as the value of a discount, is preferably at least as great as the game fee. The prize product and promotion may then be presented 522 to the players. Upon redemption of one or more of the promotions, the host server 202 may receive 524 or verify receipt of an affiliate fee from the merchant providing the prize product and promotion.

FIG. 6 illustrates a method 600 for obtaining products for use in a product-based game from a merchant. The method 600 may include presenting 602 an interface to a merchant. The interface may be graphical interface presented in a browser executing on a workstation 212 associated with a merchant. Alternatively, the interface presented may be a network interface available for communication with a merchant computer according to a protocol. The host server may receive 604 an upload from the merchant. The upload may include product records identifying one or more items of information such as a consumer identifiable product name, a product code such as a UPC, a permitted discount amount or range of permissible discount amounts, one or more promotion parameters (e.g., buy one get one, free gift, etc.), a price, an expiration date after which the product will no longer be available for use in a product-based game, and like information. The information received 604 may also include information establishing a merchant account such as a merchant identifier and password, payment information for paying sponsorship or affiliate fees, and the like.

The method 600 may further include receiving 606 payment of a sponsorship fee. In some embodiments, receiving 606 payment of the sponsorship fee may include receiving verification of payment of the fee from another entity, such as a financial institution. The sponsorship fee may be a fee paid in order for the host server 202 to provide the merchant’s product as part of the product-based game and may also include a fee for providing advertising, e.g., banner ads, as part of a game interface. Where a merchant has a paid up sponsorship fee or a fee is otherwise not required, the step of receiving 606 payment of the sponsorship fee may be omitted.

The products received 604 from a merchant may then be presented 608 to players for selection as part of a product-based game. The products presented 608 may include those received 604 from multiple merchants. As noted above, presenting 608 products to players may include providing a web-based interface that is navigable and searchable. As in the other methods described herein, the method 600 may include receiving 610 a player's selection of one or more products from the interface for each player. Receiving 610 a player's selection may include receiving multiple products along with a ranking of the selected products.

The method 600 may include describing game play to one or more players. This may include presenting 612 one or more of a player's selected products as interface elements in a game interface and interacting 614 with one or more players to provide game play. In some embodiments, steps 612 and 614 may be performed by a software module executing on a user workstation 212.

Upon conclusion of the game, a player may be assigned 616 one or both of a product and a product promotion, such as a discount amount, based on the outcome of the game. The product assigned and the promotion may be defined by product records received 604. The product and/or promotion assigned 616 may then be presented 618 to the player. Presenting 618 the promotion may include transmitting a promotion message identifying the product and/or promotion to a workstation 212 associated with a user.

The method 600 may include presenting other information to the user along with the promotion message. This may include presenting 620 early purchase incentives. The purchase incentives may include free products for purchase by a deadline, additional promotions for the prize product, and like. The method may also include retrieving related product records 622 and presenting 624 the retrieved products along with discounts or offers to purchase the retrieved products. As in other steps of the method 600, presenting 624 may include transmitting the information to a user workstation 212.

The method 600 may further include detecting 626 redemption of any promotions or product offers presented in steps 618, 620, or 624. Detecting 626 may include receiving notice from a merchant that uploaded a record for the product redeemed that a product associated with one of the products offered in steps 618, 620, or 624. The method may also include receiving payment 628 of an affiliate fee, which may include receiving notice of payment of the affiliate fee from a financial institution.

FIGS. 7A through 15 illustrate an interface and flow diagrams for an example of a product-based game. The illustrated game may be a “white elephant” type game. Referring specifically to FIG. 7A, one or more players select products and graphical representations of these products are presented as user interface elements 702. The user interface elements 702 may include other products not selected by any of the users. Referring to FIG. 7B, during game play, the interface elements 702 may be replaced with wrapped representations 704 that obscure the identity of the products. The wrapped representations 704 may be labeled with the name of the player to which they correspond. One of the wrapped representations 704 may correspond to a white elephant gift that was not picked by any of the players but which is nonetheless labeled with the name of one of the players to obscure its identity. The interface 700 may further include a message board 706 for posting messages during game play as described hereinabove.

FIG. 8 illustrates a method 800 for initiating a game, such as a product-based game or a product-based white elephant type game. The method 800 may be used with a social networking system and may be integrated with a social networking profile interface. The method may include presenting 802 a game setup interface. Presenting 802 may include defining an interface for presentation on a social networking profile interface viewed by an invitee player. The method 800 may include determining 804 whether a player intends to add invitee players from contacts associated with
the player’s social networking profile. This may include receiving a user input such as a mouse click on a button or other interface element. If the player intends to invite contacts to play, then the player selects 806 invitees from those associated with the profile and these invitees are received by the host server 202. The invitations are then transmitted 810 to the invitees and the game is initiated 810. The method 800 may include evaluating 812 whether the user intends to play a public game. This may include evaluating 812 whether a user has clicked or otherwise interacted with a user interface element indicating intent to play a public game. If so, then the user may be presented 814 with a public game interface and the game may be initiated 810. The public game interface may be presented along with the social networking profile interface. A public game may be initiated when a minimum number of players have chosen to play a public game. If the user does not intend to select invitee players from contacts or play a public game, then the method 800 may refrain 816 from initiating a game.

FIG. 9 illustrates a method 900 for adding an invitee and inviter to a game. The method 900 may be executed following execution of the method 800 as part of initiating 810 a game. The method 900 may include receiving 902 an invitation, for the case of an invitee. The invitation may be received by associating the invitation with the invitee’s social networking profile such that the invitation is visible when the invitee is viewing the social networking profile interface. The invitee’s acceptance of the invitation may be evaluated 904. This may include whether the user has clicked or otherwise interacted with a link, button, or other user interface element. If the invitee accepts the invitation, the user may register and/or sign in 906 to the game. This may be performed automatically upon acceptance automatically or may require the invitee to enter a user name and password or generate a new user account with a user name and password. An inviter may also sign in or register.

The method 900 may include evaluating 910 whether a user wishes to buy points. If so, then the host server 202 manages interactions required for the user to transfer money to the entity owning or controlling the host server and associates points with the purchaser of the points. The method 900 may also include evaluating 912 whether a prospective player has played before. If not, then the host server 202 may present 914 a tutorial to the player. In either case, a game is then further initiated 916.

The following figures and description describe the logic of providing a white elephant type game. The method steps described may be executed on the host server 202, on a player workstation 212, a combination of the two, or by some other device alone or in combination with these devices. Interaction and instructions from players may be received and processed on a player workstation 212 or received on the player workstation 212 and transmitted to the host server 202 for processing.

A game may begin with execution of a method 1000 of FIG. 10. The method 1000 may be executed after the methods 800 and 900. The method 1000 may include receiving 1002 player fees and receiving 1004 the player selections of products for each of the players as described hereinabove. The method 1000 may then include selecting 1006 products from among the products selected by each player. In some embodiments, one product may be selected 1006 from each player’s selections. Each of the gifts selected at step 1006 may be wrapped 1008, this may include presenting interface elements representing the products with symbols that do not reveal the identity of the products. One of the wrapped gifts may include a white elephant gift. The white elephant gift may include an undesirable product, no product at all, or a randomly selected product. In some embodiments, the wrapped gifts may be labeled 1010 with player’s names. The player’s name labeling a gift may correspond to the player that selected the gift, except for the white elephant gift. Labeling may include displaying the player’s name on or by an interface element representing a gift.

FIG. 11 illustrates a method 1100 outlining game play for a white elephant type game. A player is selected 1102 from among the players associated with the game and the selected player is notified of a time window for completing and/or commencing the player’s turn. If the player is found 1106 to have responded within the time window, the method 1100 includes interacting 1108 with the player and managing 1120 stealing and swapping interactions between players during the player’s turn, such as is described in greater detail below. If the selected player is found 1112 not to be the last player than another player is selected 1102. If the selected player is found 1112 to be the last player, than the player first selected to take a turn is given 1114 an opportunity to steal a gift from any other player. Some exceptions to this may be permitted, for example, if another player has paid a lock fee or has immunity from stealing, stealing by the first selected player may not be permitted in some embodiments.

FIG. 12 illustrates a method 1200 for conducting a player’s turn in a white elephant type game. A player’s turn may include picking 1202 a gift from a pile of gifts. The contents of the gift may be obscured and may include gifts selected by each player as described in the methods hereinabove. The gifts may also include a white elephant gift which may correspond to no product at all, an undesirable product, or a randomly chosen product. Upon picking the gift, the product corresponding to the picked gift may be revealed to the player and possibly to the other players.

The player may then choose 1204 whether to swap the gift with another gift from the pile. If not, the player will keep 1206 the gift from the pile. If so, then the player swaps gifts with the pile and has an option to keep the gift swapped from the pile may choose 1208 whether to keep the second gift from the pile, after finding out the product associated with the second gift. If the player chooses to keep the gift, then the user may choose 1210 to pay a lock fee to prevent loss of the gift during later game play. If the player chooses to pay a lock fee then the lock fee is paid 1212 and received by the entity associated with the host server. The player may also choose 1214 whether to pay an early fee. If the player chooses 1214 to pay the fee, then the fee is paid 1216 and the game ends 1218 for that player.

If a player chooses 1208 not to keep a gift selected from the pile on that turn, the player may choose 1220 to steal a gift from another player. If so, then the method 1200 may include evaluating 1222 whether steal is permitted according to game logic described hereinabove. If so, then the gift associated with the player is exchanged 1224 with a gift associated with another player chosen by the player. A player may choose 1226 to swap gifts with another player rather than to steal a gift. If the other player is found 1228 to agree with the swap, then the player and the other player exchange 1230 gifts. This may include changing the gifts associated with each player’s game state.
In some embodiments, a message board as known in the art may be accessible and viewable by the players and may provide the ability for player’s to post comments. In such embodiments, a player’s turn may include marketing 1232 the product associated with a user on the message board to earn points, posting messages 1234 regarding transactions (swaps or steals) that took place during the player’s turn, and post 1236 responses to other messages. Messages 1234 regarding transactions (swaps or steals) may include automatically generated text that the player may edit or not and then post to the message board or transmit to the other part of the transaction. Marketing messages may result in points being associated with the user for use at different points in the game.

FIG. 13 illustrates a method 1300 for controlling the exchange of gifts between players. The method 1300 may include evaluating whether a player chooses 1302 to swap gifts with a second player and evaluating 1304 whether the second player agrees to the swap. If the player chooses to swap and the second player agrees, then the exchange of gifts is performed by swapping the identifiers of the products associated with the swapping players.

The player may also indicate a choice 1308 to steal a product from a second player. If so, then the method 1300 may include evaluating 1310 whether the player has any steals left. Upon the commencement of the game a player may be given a certain number of steals that are used up with each steal. In some embodiments, additional steals may be purchased using points acquired by purchase or during gameplay. In some embodiments, a steal may be purchased outright. If the player is found 1310 to have free steals, the method 1300 may include evaluating 1312 whether the gift the player wishes to steal has remaining steals. Each gift may have a number of permitted steals associated therewith such that it can only be stolen a certain number of times before it can no longer be stolen. If the gift is found 1312 to not have any more steals, the method 1300 may include evaluating whether the stealing player has an extra steal. An extra steal may be purchased with points or money and allows a player to steal a gift notwithstanding the fact that the gift has no more steals left.

If the player chooses to steal the gift, has free steals left, and the player has an extra steal or the gift has steals left, the method 1300 may include evaluating 1316 whether the second player has and chooses to use immunity from stealing. An immunity may be purchased with points or money and is used up by choosing to invoke the immunity in response to an attempt to steal. In some embodiments, once the immunity is used it cannot be used again and another immunity must be purchased if one is to be used.

If the player cannot or chooses not to use immunity, then the gift of the second player is stolen 1318. This may include swapping the product identifiers of the products associated with the stealing player and the second player. If the player uses immunity or the steal is otherwise not permitted according to other method steps, then the steal is refused 1320.

FIG. 14 illustrates a method 1400 for providing a hold to a player. A player may not be able to participate at the commencement of a game or may otherwise wish to prevent others from selecting a product selected by that player. Accordingly in some embodiments a user may purchase 1402 a hold prior to the start of a game. The hold may be purchased with points or money. The game may then commence 1404 as described hereinabove, for example player turns may commence according to the method 1100. The product associated with the player will then be unavailable for choosing from the gift pile by any of the other users until the hold is released. The hold is released 1406 if the held product is found 1408 to have been selected from the gift pile by the player who purchased the hold, the held product is found 1410 to be the last gift in the pile, or half the game is found 1412 to have passed. Half the game may be found 1412 if half the players have already taken their turn or half of a defined play time period has elapsed.
memory storage devices, Internet-related hardware, and other devices that relate to the transmission of data in accordance with the invention. The software code may be configured using software formats such as Java, C++, XML (Extensible Markup Language) and other languages that may be used to define functions that relate to operations of devices required to carry out the functional operations related to the invention. The software code may also include scripting languages such as Perl, Python, PHP, and the like. The code may be written in different forms and styles, many of which are known to those skilled in the art. Different code formats, code configurations, styles and forms of software programs and other means of configuring code to define the operations of a microprocessor in accordance with the invention will not depart from the scope of the invention.

[0084] Within the different types of devices, such as laptop or desktop computers, hand held devices with processors or processing logic, and also possibly computer servers or other devices that utilize the invention, there exist different types of memory devices for storing and retrieving information while performing functions according to the invention, this is used for transitive and non-transitive storage. Cache memory devices are often included in such computers for use by the central processing unit as a convenient storage location for information that is frequently stored and retrieved. Similarly, a persistent memory is also frequently used with such computers for maintaining information that is frequently retrieved by the central processing unit, but that is not often altered within the persistent memory, unlike the cache memory. Main memory is also usually included for storing and retrieving larger amounts of information such as data and software applications configured to perform functions according to the invention when executed by the central processing unit. These memory devices may be configured as random access memory (RAM), static random access memory (SRAM), dynamic random access memory (DRAM), flash memory, and other memory storage devices that may be accessed by a central processing unit to store and retrieve information. During storage and retrieval operations, these memory devices are transformed to have different states, such as different electrical charges, different magnetic polarity, and the like. Thus, systems and methods configured according to the invention as described herein enable the physical transformation of these memory devices. Accordingly, the invention as described herein is directed to novel and useful systems and methods that, in one or more embodiments, are able to transform the memory device into a different state during transitive and non-transitive storage. The invention is not limited to any particular type of memory device, or any commonly used protocol for storing and retrieving information to and from these memory devices, respectively.

[0085] Although the components and modules illustrated herein are shown and described in a particular arrangement, the arrangement of components and modules may be altered to process data in a different manner. In other embodiments, one or more additional components or modules may be added to the described systems, and one or more components or modules may be removed from the described systems. Alternate embodiments may combine two or more of the described components or modules into a single component or module.

[0086] Finally, although specific embodiments of the invention have been described and illustrated, the invention is not to be limited to the specific forms or arrangements of parts so described and illustrated. The scope of the invention is to be defined by the claims appended hereto, any future claims submitted here and in different applications, and their equivalents.

[0087] The foregoing description has been presented for the purposes of illustration and description. It is not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise form disclosed. Many modifications and variations are possible in light of the above teaching. Further, it should be noted that any or all of the aforementioned alternate embodiments may be used in any combination desired to form additional hybrid embodiments of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for product-based gaming comprising:
receiving, at a host server, from a user computing device associated with a user, a user selection of one or more selected products from a product selection;
determining, at the host server, an outcome of a game according to user interactions with a game interface presented the user computing device;
according to the outcome of the game, selecting, at the host server, a prize product from the product selection, the product being at least one of one of the one or more selected products and a product other than the one or more selected products; and
transmitting, by the host server, to the user computing device, a promotional message identifying the prize product and a promotional offer.

2. The method of claim 1, further comprising transmitting, by the host server, a product selection to a user computing device.

3. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
receiving the user interactions with the game interface at the host server; and
transmitting updates to the game interface to the user computing device from the host server.

4. The method of claim 1, further comprising verifying, at the host server, payment of a game fee by the user,
wherein the promotional message indicates a discount amount that is at least as great as the game fee.

5. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
verifying, at the host server, payment of a lock fee by the user,
wherein the prize product is a product associated with the user according to a state of the game at a time of payment of the lock fee.

6. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
verifying, at the host server, payment of an early fee by the user; and
determining, at the host server, an outcome of the game upon verifying payment of the early fee by the user prior to termination of the game according to a state of the game and rules of the game.

7. The method of claim 1, wherein the one or more selected products include at least two selected products, the method further comprising:
receiving, at the host server, a user ranking of the at least two selected products;
wherein, selecting, at the host server, the prize product from the product selection, further comprises selecting the prize product according to the user ranking and the game outcome.

8. The method of claim 1, wherein determining, at the host server, an outcome of the game according to user interactions with the game interface presented on the user computing
The method of claim 8, wherein interactions of a user of the plurality of users with the game interfaces further comprise:

9. associating a chosen product with the user, the chosen product selected by the user from a group of products including the one or more selected products of the user and one or more selected products selected by others of the plurality of users;

stealing products associated with other users of the plurality of users; and

exchange products associated with the user with products associated with other users of the plurality of users.

10. A method for product-based gaming comprising:

receiving, at a host server, from a network interface, an instruction to initiate a merchandise game for a plurality of users;

receiving, at the host server, one or more selected products for each user; and

managing, at the host server, participation in the merchandise game, including, for each user of the plurality of users:

receiving user inputs from the user;

updating a game state according to the user inputs; and

according to an outcome of the merchandise game, transmitting to the user a promotional message identifying a prize product and a promotion for the prize product, the prize product including one of the one or more selected products of the user for each product other than the one or more selected products of the user.

11. The method of claim 10, further comprising:

receiving, from an inviter network interface to a network profile of an inviter, an instruction to associate an invitation with a plurality of invitee network profiles; whereas receiving, at the host server, an instruction to initiate a merchandise game for a plurality of users includes receiving, from a plurality of invitee network interfaces displaying network profile information of a plurality of invitees, acceptances of the invitation.

12. The method of claim 11, further comprising, selecting the invitee network profiles from a plurality of network profiles linked to the network profile of the inviter.

The method of claim 12, wherein the inviter network interface comprises a browser displaying an interface to the network profile of the inviter; and

wherein the network profile is a social networking profile.

13. The method of claim 11, further comprising, selecting the invitee network profiles from a plurality of contacts in a contact database.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein the contact database stores a plurality of email addresses.

The method of claim 11, further comprising:

transmitting, by the host server, a product selection to the invitee network interface and plurality of invitee network interfaces; and

receiving user selections of the one or more desired products of each user from the invitee network interface and plurality of invitee network interfaces.

15. The method of claim 10, further comprising verifying, at the host server, payment of a game fee by the plurality of users wherein the promotional message includes a discount for the prize product, the discount having a value at least as great as the game fee.

16. The method of claim 10, further comprising verifying, at the host server, for each user of the plurality of users, a user ranking of the at least two selected products for the user; and

selecting the prize product for each user according to the user ranking and the outcome of the merchandise game.

17. The method of claim 10, wherein the one or more selected products of each user include at least two selected products, the method further comprising:

receiving, at the host server, for each user of the plurality of users, a user ranking of the at least two selected products for the user; and

selecting the prize product for each user according to the user ranking and the outcome of the merchandise game.

18. The method of claim 10, wherein updating the game state according to the user inputs comprises, for each user:

associating a product with the user upon selection of the product from a product pool by the user;

associating a product with the user upon stealing of the product from another user; and

associating a product with the user upon receiving the product from another user as a result of an exchange.

19. The method of claim 10, further comprising, receiving messages from the plurality of users and posting the messages on a message board accessible by the plurality of users.

20. A method for providing a product-based game comprising:

providing, by a host server, a merchant interface to a product selection database;

receiving, at the host server, a plurality of product records from one or more merchants using the merchant interface;

storing the plurality of product records in the product selection database;

providing, by the host server, access to the product selection database to a plurality of players;

receiving, by the host server, at least one selected product identifier from a player, the selected product identifiers corresponding to product records stored in the product selection database;

providing a game interface to the player;

determining, by the server, an outcome of a game played using the game interface;

according to the outcome of the game, selecting a prize product identifier, by the host server, from the product selection database, the prize product identifier being one of the at least one selected product identifiers and a product identifier other than the at least one selected product identifiers; and

transmitting a promotional message including a promotional offer and the prize product identifier to the player.

21. The method of claim 20, further comprising:

detecting, by the server, redemption of the promotional message;

verifying, by the server, payment of an affiliate fee due to redemption of the promotional message to an entity associated with the server.

22. The method of claim 20, wherein the promotional offer is a discount amount, the method further comprising:

verifying payment of a game fee by the player prior to transmitting the promotional message to the player; wherein the discount amount is at least as great as the game fee.
23. The method of claim 20, further comprising:
verifying, at the host server, payment of a lock fee by the player;
wherein selecting the prize product identifier, by the host server comprises selecting a product associated with the player according to game logic of the game interface at a time of payment of the lock fee.

24. The method of claim 20, wherein the promotional message is a first promotional message, the method further comprising transmitting a second promotional message for additional products.

25. The method of claim 20, wherein the promotional message includes a time limitation.

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