ON-LINE INTERACTION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

An avatar display system monitors the activities or status of different members on a network site. Avatars representing the different members are displayed in conjunction with an on-line application according to the different identified member activities or status. Different avatar display techniques and filtering schemes are used to both promote and improve interactions between different members of the on-line application or website.
CHECK USER PROFILE FOR AVATAR PREFERENCES

CHECK PROFILES AND LOG FILES ACCORDING TO USER AVATAR PREFERENCES

DISPLAY MEMBER AVATARS CORRESPONDING WITH USER AVATAR PREFERENCES

MONITOR USER LOG FILES

IF APPLICABLE, DISPLAY MEMBER AVATARS ACCORDING TO USER LOG FILE

FIG. 2
IDENTIFY ONLINE MEMBERS

IDENTIFY AVATAR IMAGES AND OTHER AVATAR PREFERENCES FROM MEMBER PROFILES

IDENTIFY NEW MEMBERS

ASSIGN NEW MEMBERS AS ASSOCIATED TYPE OF AVATAR FRAME

IDENTIFY MEMBERS WITH DIFFERENT MEMBERSHIP LEVELS

ASSIGN AVATAR FRAMES TO THE MEMBERS ACCORDING TO ASSOCIATED MEMBERSHIP LEVELS

IDENTIFY MEMBERS PURCHASING SPECIAL AVATAR FRAMES

ASSIGN SPECIAL AVATAR FRAMES TO THE PURCHASING MEMBERS

ASSIGN REMAINING ONLINE MEMBERS DEFAULT AVATAR FRAMES

DISPLAY AVATAR FOR ONLINE MEMBERS ACCORDING TO ASSIGNED AVATAR FRAMES AND ASSOCIATED IMAGE AND SETTINGS

FIG. 7
SCAN MEMBER PROFILES AND/OR LOG FILES

IDENTIFY NUMBER OF PICTURES UPLOADED BY MEMBERS

IDENTIFY NUMBER OF BLOG POSTINGS BY MEMBERS

IDENTIFY RECENT AND FREQUENT USER INTERACTIONS

IDENTIFY USER ACTIVITY PREFERENCES

IDENTIFY USER CLASSIFICATION OR STATUS

ASSIGN AND DISPLAY DIFFERENT AVATARS AND AVATAR DISPLAYS ACCORDING TO IDENTIFIED MEMBER ACTIVITIES, INTERACTIONS, AND PREFERENCES

FIG. 8
SCAN USER PROFILE, CONTACT LIST, AND LOG FILES

SCAN MEMBER PROFILES, CONTACT LISTS, AND LOG FILES

COMPARE USER CONTACT LIST WITH ON-LINE MEMBERS

ONLY DISPLAY AVATARS FOR MEMBERS IN USER CONTACT LIST
OR HIGHLIGHT AVATARS FOR MEMBERS IN USER CONTACT LIST

COMPARE CURRENT USER BROWSING SITE WITH SITES CURRENTLY BEING BROWSED BY OTHER MEMBERS

FILTER DISPLAYED AVATARS BASED ON COMMON BROWSING SITES

COMPARE USER GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION WITH MEMBER GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

FILTER DISPLAYED AVATARS BASED ON SIMILAR GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

COMPARE SEX, AGE, AND OTHER INTERESTS

FILTER DISPLAYED AVATARS BASED ON SIMILAR DEMOGRAPHICS OR INTERESTS

FIG. 9A
SCAN USER PROFILE, CONTACT LIST, EMAIL DIRECTORY, AND LOG FILES FOR AVATAR OUTGOING FILTER PARAMETERS

CALCULATE OUTGOING AVATAR FILTERS ACCORDING TO IDENTIFIED OUTGOING FILTER PARAMETERS

FILTER OUTGOING USER AVATARS ACCORDING TO CALCULATED OUTGOING AVATAR FILTERS

SCAN USER PROFILE, CONTACT LIST, EMAIL DIRECTORY, AND LOG FILES FOR AVATAR INCOMING FILTER PARAMETERS

CALCULATE INCOMING AVATAR FILTERS ACCORDING TO IDENTIFIED INCOMING FILTER PARAMETERS

FILTER INCOMING USER AVATARS ACCORDING TO CALCULATED INCOMING AVATAR FILTERS

FIG. 9B
Team, there will be a schedule review meeting this evening. Please come prepared with...
139 ACCESS EMAIL SYSTEM

140 IDENTIFY ON-LINE MEMBERS

142 DISPLAY AVATARS IN EMAIL IN-BOX FOR ON-LINE MEMBERS

144 IDENTIFY OFFICE STATUS IDENTIFIED IN MEMBER EMAIL PROFILE (IN OFFICE, OUT OF OFFICE, ON VACATION, ETC.)

146 DISPLAY OR HIGHLIGHT EMAIL AVATARS ACCORDING TO OFFICE STATUS

148 SEARCH USER EMAIL DIRECTORY

150 DISPLAY OR HIGHLIGHT MEMBER AVATARS ACCORDING TO STATUS OF ASSOCIATED EMAIL MESSAGES (NUMBER OF UNREAD EMAILS, AGE OF UNREAD EMAILS, SENT EMAILS, ETC.)

FIG. 11A
SCAN USER CONTACT INFORMATION

SCAN MEMBER CONTACT INFORMATION

DISPLAY AVATARS FOR MEMBERS IN USER CONTACTS

IDENTIFY COMMON MEMBERS IN BOTH USER CONTACTS AND MEMBER CONTACTS

DISPLAY AVATARS FOR IDENTIFIED COMMON MEMBERS

DISPLAY TREE SHOWING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMON MEMBERS

DISPLAY AVATARS FOR RANDOM MEMBERS

USER SELECTS ONE OF DISPLAYED AVATARS

SEARCH CONTACTS FOR BOTH USER AND SELECTED MEMBER

DISPLAY AVATARS AND/OR TREE SHOWING CONTACT LINKS BETWEEN USER AND SELECTED MEMBER AVATAR

FIG. 13
ON-LINE INTERACTION SYSTEM

BACKGROUND

[0001] People use email and chat rooms to interact with each other over electronic networks such as the Internet. Although the advance of the Internet and networking technology in general has improved interaction and communication between people, the tools available for promoting or enabling these interactions are relatively primitive. For example, to interact with a particular person online, a user typically has to manually identify and enter an Internet email address or on-line user name associated with another person. Identifying these cryptic email addresses or user names is at best cumbersome and hinders the interactions between people over electronic networks. The disclosure that follows solves this and other problems.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0002] An avatar display system monitors the activities or status of different members on a network site. Avatars representing the different members are displayed in conjunction with an on-line application according to the different identified member activities or status. In one embodiment the avatars are scrolled across a display page as a human ticker. The avatars can also be used to identify different email message conditions and different contact relationships.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0003] FIG. 1 illustrates an example avatar display system.
[0004] FIG. 2 is a flow diagram showing some of the operations performed by the avatar display system in FIG. 1.
[0005] FIGS. 3A-3C examples of how avatars are displayed by the display system.
[0006] FIG. 4 shows another example of how avatars are displayed by the display system.
[0007] FIG. 5 shows how avatars are faded in and out.
[0008] FIG. 6 shows how the avatars are varied according to different on-line member status.
[0009] FIG. 7 is a flow diagram showing in more detail how the avatars are varied according to different on-line member status.
[0010] FIG. 8 is a flow diagram showing how avatars are varied according to different on-line member activities.
[0011] FIG. 9A is a flow diagram showing how avatars are displayed or varied according to different related member information.
[0012] FIG. 9B is a flow diagram showing how avatars are filtered.
[0013] FIGS. 10, 11A, and 11B show how the avatar display system is used in conjunction with an email system.
[0014] FIG. 12 is a block diagram showing how the avatar display system can be used to identify common contacts for different members.
[0015] FIG. 13 is a flow diagram explaining FIG. 12 in more detail.
[0016] FIG. 14 is a block diagram showing how the avatar display system can be used in conjunction with a social on-line website.

DESCRIPTION OF EXAMPLE EMBODIMENTS

[0017] Several preferred examples of the present application will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings. Various other examples of the invention are also possible and practical. This application may be exemplified in many different forms and should not be construed as being limited to the examples set forth herein.

[0018] FIG. 1 illustrates an example avatar display system 12. An avatar display controller 24 displays different avatars 28 in a computer page 26 displayed on the screen of a computer 32. The avatar display controller 24 may be software that is executed by a computer 13 or computer logic.

[0019] In one example, computer 13 is a server or other type of network processing device that either stores or accesses information from another computer, that includes a user profile 14, log files 16, contact list 18, and an email directory 20. The computer 13 may also store or access the profiles, log files, contacts, and email directories 22 for other members of a same web-site, Local Area Network (LAN), or other on-line application.

[0020] In one embodiment, the computer 13 communicates with multiple different computers 32 for a particular website. For example, a user of computer 32 may access website applications 25 that are operated on computer 13 via the Internet. In another embodiment, the computer 13 may be a server in an enterprise or in a residential location that operates different on-line applications 25 that are accessed by computer 32 via a LAN connection.

[0021] The computer 32 may be a Personal Computer (PC), lap-top computer, cellular telephone, Personal Digital Assistant (PDA), Internet Protocol (IP) phone, IPTV, or any other type of wired or wireless device that accesses the different website or on-line applications 25.

[0022] Any combination of web or on-line applications 25 may be located on the same or different computers 13. Similarly, the profiles 14, log files 16, contact list 18, email directories 20, and other similar user or member information 22 may be located on a same computer 13 or may be distributed on multiple different computers. However, for simplicity of illustration, all of the on-line applications 25 and associated information 14-22 are shown contained on computer 13.

Avatar Display Controller

[0023] Avatars 28 are Internet website or on-line representations or identifiers of a particular user, member, organization, event, content, notification, or any other piece of information that may need to be communicated to others. The avatars 28 can take the form of two or three-dimensional images, icons, sounds, video clips, text, or any other identifier of a particular human-being, content, or event associated with a user name, email address, or other on-line identifier.

[0024] Avatars 28 can also take the form of icons that are associated with different types of events or different types of information. For example, a user may not necessarily want
to display an image of themselves to other members. Alternatively, the user may want to display an icon avatar to other members representing a word document, spread sheet document, power point document, etc. The icon avatar notifies other members that the document exists and further allows each of the other members to see the document simply by selecting the icon avatar 28. Switching from an avatar containing an image of the user to an icon avatar that represents a word document written by the user immediately notifies others that the user has completed drafting a document associated with the icon avatar.

[0025] Other avatars may not necessarily be associated with a user or document, but associated with an activity or event. For example, a user may want to notify other members of a party or meeting on a particular day. The avatar representing this event can be selected in the user profile 14 to replace another avatar that contains an image of the user.

[0026] In yet another embodiment, the avatars 28 may contain additional status information associated with the user. For example, the avatar 28 may provide different bordering or colors according a preferred communication method. For example, any users that prefer to be contacted via email may have a black border around their avatar and users that prefer to be contacted via instant messaging may have a blue border around their avatar. Clicking on the avatar will then automatically connect to the user via the preferred communication method.

[0027] The avatar display controller 24 monitors combinations of different information 14-20 associated with a particular user and possibly other information 22 associated with other members of the web-site or other on-line application 24. Based on this monitoring, the controller 24 displays different avatars 28 that provide the user of electronic page 26 with more intuitive and easier to access information about other on-line members.

[0028] The user profile 14 may include Internet or on-line identifiers 14A such as a user name and email address. Demographic information 14B may include the home or business address, age, and sex of the user, and may identify other user interests. For example, the user interests in demographic information 14B may identify particular sports, groups associations, hobbies, etc.

[0029] Avatar preferences 14C in user profile 14 may identify what image, sound clip, video clip, picture, etc. to display as the avatar for the user of profile 14. Avatar preferences 14C may also identify how avatars for other members should be displayed. For example, a default avatar preference may simply cause controller 24 to randomly display avatars for any members that are currently on-line. Alternatively, the user may change the avatar preferences 14C to only display avatars for on-line members that are in the user’s contact list 18. A variety of other avatar preferences 14C can also be configured and will be described in more detail below.

[0030] Activity information 14D identifies particular involvement, member status, activities, etc. associated with the user. For example, co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/627,326, filed Jan. 25, 2007, entitled: APPARATUS FOR INCREASING SOCIAL INTERACTION OVER AN ELECTRONIC NETWORK, is herein incorporated by reference. This application describes a website that assigns points to users according to different on-line social interactions. For example, points are awarded according to a number of uploaded pictures and associated rankings by other members. Activity information 14D identifies these activities and/or the points or status awarded these activities.

[0031] Activity information 14D may also identify payments made by the user. For example, a user may pay money to join a website. Paying users may then receive a different member status from other members that join the website for free. In one example, a user may pay the operators of the website to display their avatar 28 differently than the avatars displayed for other non-playing website members.

[0032] Contact list 18 may include any of the conventional contact information. For example, the contact list 18 may contain the name, email address, home/business address, phone numbers, etc. of people known by the user.

[0033] Email directory 20 may include any data typically associated with the email messages and configurations contained in a user email system. For example, the email directory may contain all of the emails sent to the user, identify the number of unopened emails, identify the time when each email was received, etc. The email directory 20 may also include other email configuration data such as an out of office status identifier. For example, email configuration data may automatically send email notifications when a user is not in the office.

[0034] Member information 22 contains some or all of the same information 14-20 for other members or users of the same on-line application or website. For example, all of the users that sign-up for a particular website and have an associated user profile may be considered as other members. Similarly, persons working for a same enterprise that have a user login and password may be considered members of the same on-line application by the controller 24. According, the member information 22 may contain information for these other enterprise employees. The other members could also be considered a subgroup within an enterprise, such as the employees associated with a particular email group or organization department. For example, the other member information 22 may only be associated with employees working in the accounting department of a particular enterprise.

[0035] FIG. 2 shows some of the basic operations that may be performed by the avatar display controller 24 in FIG. 1. In operation 40, user profile 14 is checked for any avatar preferences. As described above, the avatar preferences 14C may identify the photograph, sound clip, image, video clip, etc. to use with the user’s avatar 28. Other avatar preferences 14C may also determine what avatars to display for other members. In operation 42, the other member profiles and/or log files 22 are checked according to any user avatar preference settings 14C. For example, a default avatar preference 14C may direct the avatar display controller to randomly display avatars for all members that are currently on-line. Accordingly, operation 42 would identify any members that are currently on-line, and operation 44 would display the avatars for the identified on-line members.

[0036] Alternatively, the avatar settings identified in operation 40 may direct the controller to only display avatars for known on-line members identified in the user contact list 18. In this example, operation 42 may first determine which
members are currently on-line and then determine which of the on-line members are identified in the user contact list 18. The avatars 28 for the known on-line members are then displayed in operation 44.

[0037] In yet another embodiment, the avatar preferences in operation 40 may indicate that avatars only be displayed for members who have posted blogs to a particular website or webpage. Operation 42 determines which members have posted blogs on the identified website and operation 44 displays the avatars 28 for the identified members.

[0038] In operation 46, the user log files 16 may be periodically monitored. The avatars currently being displayed may then be dynamically changed in operation 48 according to the monitored user log file 16. For example, the user could have configured the avatar preferences 14C to only display the avatars for members that are currently accessing or browsing a same website location. Operation 46 monitors the user log files 16 to determine which webpage the user is currently accessing or browsing. Operation 48 then displays the avatars 28 for other members currently accessing or browsing the same webpages.

[0039] The user may configure other avatar preferences 14C. For example, the user may request only displaying avatars, or request displaying special avatars, for members that have just recently logged into the website or other on-line application.

[0040] It should be understood that the examples given above and further examples given below only describe some of the unlimited number of user criteria that may be used to control what avatars are displayed to particular users. Any arbitrary criteria can selected or input into any arbitrarily provided field to control what information or avatars are statically or dynamically displayed on page 26. For example, avatars can be displayed for any combination of on-line male members, on-line female members, zip codes, etc.

[0041] In another business application, an enterprise manager can select parameters that cause only the avatars to be displayed for employees that have some configurable amount of sales for some configurable type of product for some configurable time period based on a configurable employment date. For example, a manager may configure the system in FIG. 1 to display the avatars for sales staff that have sold more than $100,000 worth of software and that have only been working for the company for less than one year.

Displaying Avatars

[0042] FIGS. 3A-3C show one example of how the avatars 28 are scrolled across electronic page 26. A lower part of the page 26 may display any items for the related on-line application 30. For example, the on-line application 30 may display webpages for a website application, email in-box for an email on-line application, or display any other user interface for any on-line application that may be used in combination with avatars 28.

[0043] In this example, different avatars 28A-28E are displayed in a vertical row along the upper half of display page 26. In this example, the avatars 28A-28E constantly move from right to left, similar to a stock ticker. This type of avatar display is referred to generally as a human stock ticker. Each avatar 28A-28E may also have an associated link 29A-29E, respectively, that in one example display the associated member user name.

[0044] Clicking either on the link 29 or on the associated avatar 28 may then cause the on-line application 30 to perform a particular operation related to the associated member. For example, clicking on link 29B may cause the application 30 to move to a personal website for the member BILLY associated with avatar 28B. For an email on-line application 30, selecting avatar 28B could either open an email message that contains the email address of the associated member BILLY. Alternatively, selecting the avatar 28B could display all emails received from the associated member BILLY.

[0045] Any other associated on-line interaction can also be captured or performed. For example, the on-line application 30 could notify the member associated with the selected avatar 28B that the user clicked or hovered over their avatar, thus promoting possible further communication between the two on-line members. This, in a way, simulates an actual face to face social interaction where two people may first catch eye contact and then continue the social interaction by actually initiating a conversation.

[0046] FIG. 3B shows an instant in time after FIG. 3A. Comparing FIGS. 3A and 3B, the left most avatar 28A in FIG. 3A scrolls off the screen at the next instant in time shown in FIG. 3B. All of the remaining avatars 28B-28E are scrolled to the left and a new avatar 28F for another member moves into the right most avatar position in FIG. 3B. FIG. 3C shows an even later instant in time after FIG. 3B. Here, the avatar 28A from FIG. 3A loops back to the right most position with all the other avatars 28C-28F all scrolled further to the left. The previous left most avatar 28B from FIG. 3B scrolls off the left end of the display page 26. As described above, the avatars 28 may be randomly displayed showing the members of a website application or other on-line application that are currently logged in or signed in. Displaying the avatars 28 of the log-in members in combination with scrolling the avatars 28 across the display page 26 provides a more dynamic technique for notifying users of different member status. Statically displaying avatars with no motion may cause the user to stop viewing the avatars and thus not notice members that only recently logged in. Thus, the 'human stock ticker' can be more effective in notifying the user of other on-line members, and thus promoting or simplifying social interactions.

Alternative Avatar Displays

[0047] It should be understood that the avatars 28 can be scrolled in any configurable or selectable pattern and direction. For example, FIG. 4 shows another embodiment where the avatars 28 are scrolled around in a circle or square pattern in a counter clockwise direction. In this example, each avatar 28 may continuously fade in and out with the avatars of other on-line members. In another embodiment, the avatars 28 may be displayed vertically down either side of the display window 26.

[0048] FIG. 5 shows in more detail how avatars 28 may be faded in and out to show either the avatar of another member or to change the avatar for the same member. Any number of existing display techniques can be used to dynamically alter the currently displayed avatar. The example shown in FIG. 5 is purely for illustrative purposes and any other fade in-fade out technique could just as easily be used.
In FIG. 5, a first avatar 28A associated with a first on-line member HIT is displayed in full size and then faded out as the avatar 28A moves to the left. Images or other media associated with different members may be faded out as images or media associated with another member is faded into the same avatar slot while the avatar slot is being scrolled across the computer screen.

Alternatively, avatar 28A may be displayed in a static non-scrolling position and other avatars faded in and out of the same non-scrolling avatar position. For example, a second avatar 28C may be faded into the same avatar position 31 as avatar 28A is faded out. The avatar 28A is shown fading out by getting smaller in different positions moving toward the left and a second avatar 28C is shown fading into the same position by getting larger in different positions moving toward the left. However, in the static avatar example mentioned above, the fade-out of avatar 28A and the fade-in of avatar 28C may all happen in the same avatar location 31.

In another embodiment, the avatars may not necessarily fade-in and fade-out by changing the image size. Alternatively, the brightness of the first avatar may simply be reduced until it can no longer be easily seen. A brightness level of a second avatar is then gradually increased from a very low non-viewable intensity to a normal easily viewable brightness.

Of course any other type of fade-in and fade-out technique can also be used. For example, small pixels of the same or different colors may be randomly displayed over the first avatar until the first avatar is completely covered and no longer viewable. Then the same or different pixels may be gradually removed to eventually display the second avatar.

Thus, either a dynamic scrolling activity, a dynamic fade-in/fade-out activity, or both, can be used to provide the user with better member on-line status notifications. Of course, in another embodiment, avatars may be statically displayed with no scrolling or fade-in and fade-out operations. Any combination of these different display options may be configured by the user in the user preferences 14C.

Similarly, any audio clips, video clips, etc. associated with a particular member may be faded in or out for the associated member. The images associated with a particular member may not necessarily be photos of the member. For example, the images may be an image or picture of something the member wishes to associate with. For example, the image may be of a tiger, cartoon character, etc.

The member may also combine this image with an actual picture of themselves. For example, the avatar 28 associated with the member may first display a picture of a tiger. The tiger avatar may then fade out and the actual picture of the member faded in. This fade in-fade out technique allows the member to display what they believe to be their true inner self, such as a tiger. The tiger avatar is first displayed and then faded out. The actual picture of the member is then faded in showing the actual outer self of the member.

FIG. 6 shows another feature of the avatar display system that varies the avatar frames 50 according to different member status or activity. The avatar frames 50 are shown as different types of dashed, dotted, and bolded lines in FIG. 6. However, it should be understood these different lines can represent any color, outlining, shape, pixel intensity, avatar shape, avatar color, avatar intensity, audio clip, film clip, etc. that may further distinguish between the displayed avatars 28.

Referring to both FIGS. 6 and 7, operation 60 of FIG. 7 identifies all members that are currently on-line. Operation 62 identifies the avatar images and any other avatar preferences for the on-line members. In FIG. 6, avatar 28A may be displayed with a generic default frame 50A that is generally displayed for all on-line members that are not classified under any other avatar category.

The member associated with avatar 28B has been identified by the avatar display controller 24 in FIG. 1 as a new member. For example, the profile associated with avatar 28B may indicate the member has only been signed up to the on-line application 30 for less than one week. Accordingly, the new member is assigned an associated new-member avatar frame 50B in operation 66.

In operation 68, different member status levels are identified. As described briefly above, some on-line applications 30 may assign members points or other classifications. For example, the social networking on-line application 30 described above assigns points to members according to the number of uploaded pictures, the number and types of ratings received from other members, and generally the amount of social interaction with other members.

These points determine a particular membership level, such as master member, intermediate member, novice member, etc. The membership levels are identified in operation 68 and different avatar frames 50 assigned in operation 70 according to the identified membership level. For example, in FIG. 6, the member associated with avatar 28C may be identified as a master member. Accordingly, the member is assigned a master member avatar frame 50C in operation 70.

Some members may pay to have special frames displayed along with their avatars to foster more member attention. The avatar display controller in operation 72 looks in the member profiles for any members that have purchased special avatar frames. The purchased avatars frames are then assigned to the avatars for those purchasing members in operation 74. For example in FIG. 6, the member associated with avatar 28E may have purchased an emboldened frame 50D.

As described above, on-line members that do not qualify under any of these special avatar frame categories may be assigned a default avatar frames in operation 76. For example, similar to avatar 28A, the member associated with avatar 28D also does not qualify for any other special avatar framing. Accordingly, avatar 28D is assigned the same default frame 50A as avatar 28B.

In operation 78, the avatars 28 for all of the on-line members are then displayed with their configured avatar settings and assigned avatar frames. Thus, different member categories, activities, or status can be distinguished using the avatars 28.

Any other information may also be displayed along with the avatars 28. For example, avatar 28D indicates that the associated member is currently browsing the same blog...
site as the user. In other examples, avatar 28A identifies the number of photos uploaded by the associated member and avatar 28C indicates the associated member is currently viewing the user's personal webpage or photos.

Fig. 8 shows other member activities that can change the type of assigned avatar 28 or type of avatar frame 50. In operation 80, the member profiles or log files are scanned for different activities. In one example, operation 81 identifies the number of pictures uploaded by the member and operation 82 identifies the number of blog postings by the member.

Operation 83 identifies recent or frequent user activities. For example, the user may have recently uploaded photos or recently posted a message on a blog. Similarly, other members that have recently or frequently interacted with the user can be identified. Other members that have recently exchanged messages with the user or who have recently exchanged a virtual gift from the user can also be identified. Other members that have a large number of similar activities can also be identified. For example, the user may frequently access a particular website. Other members that also frequently access the same website can be identified.

Recent and frequent user activities can both be identified and weighted to determine which avatars are displayed to which members. For example, fewer more recent activities may be identified and a larger number of similar possibly less recent activities may also be identified. All these parameters can be identified by the controller 24 by searching the user log files 16 and the other member information 22 in FIG. 1.

Operation 84 may also search for user activity preferences in the preferences 14C shown in FIG. 1. For example, a user may indicate in preferences 14C a desire to play on-line games. In another example, the activity preferences may also indicate a request for other members to buy the user electronic issued virtual gifts or virtual drinks. This can be thought of as a virtual "wish list".

Operation 85 determines the user classification or status and displays different avatars according to that classification or status. The contact list 18 and/or the preferences 14C in FIG. 1 may be checked to determine how these classifications or status relate to other members. For example, a formal portrait of the user may be provided in preferences 14C for displaying as an avatar to co-workers and another casual portrait may be provided in preferences 14C for displaying as an avatar to other members of an on-line social networking site or to other user contacts. Other pictures may be provided for displaying to females, males, different age groups, etc.

Different avatars 28, or different associated frames 50, may then be displayed or highlighted in operation 86 according to the number of specific activities identified in operations 82-85. For example, the controller 24 in FIG. 1 may determine that the user has set a preference indicating a desire to play on-line games. The controller 24 then generates a particular avatar that identifies the user as a "gamer". This gamer indication may be a particular color, shading, icon, sound, movement, etc. associated with the avatar.

Other interaction preferences may also be associated with the displayed avatars. For example, a user may request virtual gifts in the activity preferences identified in operation 84. The avatar for that user may be displayed along with a small gift package that represents the requested virtual gift user activity.

In another example, the controller 24 identifies all of the recent and frequent activities of the user and then only displays the avatars for other members that are associated with those activities. For example, the controller 24 may only display the avatars for other members that have recently exchanged messages with the user and display the avatars for other members who have recently accessed the same blogs as the user.

A formal avatar picture may be displayed to co-workers identified in member information 22 in FIG. 1. A casual avatar picture may then be displayed to other non-work related social members. In another example mentioned above, a first avatar contained in preferences 14C may be displayed to female members identified in member information 22 and a second different avatar in preferences 14C may be displayed to male members identified in member information 22.

In another embodiment, different avatars may be displayed to members having different status levels. For example, an expert level member on a social website may only be shown the avatars of other expert level members. Alternatively, a first user avatar may be shown to novice level members and a second user avatar may be shown to expert level members. Similarly, users identified as software programmers in their user profiles may only be shown the avatars of other software programmers while a manager at the same enterprise may be shown the avatars of all employees.

The examples above are only some of the substantially infinite number of activities or interactions that can be associated with the displayed avatars.

Filtering

The avatars 28 displayed to a particular user may not necessarily include all of the on-line members. For example, a particular user may only desire to see avatars for known members or members having particular demographics. In these cases, different avatar display preferences 14C in FIG. 1 may be set to filter certain avatars before being displayed to the user.

FIG. 9A shows just some of the different parameters that may be used to filter avatars. Any combination of the different filtering criteria described in FIG. 9A may be used and other criteria not shown in FIG. 9A can also be used. Referring to FIGS. 1 and 9A, operation 90 scans the user profile 14, user contact list 18, and/or user log files 16 in FIG. 1. Similarly, operation 92 may scan the profiles, contact lists, and log files 22 for other members. Operation 94 compares the user contact list with the identified on-line members. Operation 96 displays any on-line members that are contained in the user contact list 18. Other on-line member avatars may also be displayed in operation 96. In this case, the avatars for the on-line members contained in the user contact list (known members) may be highlighted in a distinguishing manner from other displayed avatars as shown in FIG. 6.

Operation 98 identifies the webpage or display window currently being viewed by the user and identifies
other members browsing the same location in the on-line application. Operation 100 may then display the avatars for other members currently viewing the same webpage or display window. Similar to operation 96, if other avatars are also displayed at the same time, the avatars for the members browsing the same on-line locations may alternatively be highlighted in a distinguishing manner as shown in FIG. 6.

[0079] Operation 102 may compare the geographic information 14B and/or avatar preferences 14C in the user profile 14 with the geographic information 22 of other members. Operation 104 may then displays the avatars 28 for members located in the same city, state, or other geographic region specified by the user.

[0080] Other demographic or social information may also be used as a basis for displaying avatars. For example, operation 106 may compare the sex, age, or other interests specified in demographic information 14B with related information 22 for other members. The avatars for members having similar demographics or other interests are then displayed in operation 108. For example, the user can configure profile 14 to only display avatars for women members that live within 20 miles of the user.

[0081] FIG. 9B shows how other aspects of the filtering system can be used for any combination of user selectable or user non-selectable preconfigured parameters. For example, certain categories of users may not have the ability to control filtering while other categories of users can control the types of filters associated with their own avatars. Different types of filtering may be provided to users based on different status levels, different user activities, or according to an amount of money paid by the user.

[0082] Referring to both FIG. 1 and FIG. 9B, the controller 24 shown in FIG. 1 scans any combination of the user profile 14, log files 16, contact list 18, email directory 20, and other member information 22 to identify any parameters that may be associated with outgoing filter parameters. The user preferences 14C may be used in FIG. 1 may identify different types of outgoing filters that the user may want to activate. For example, the user may only want to show his avatar to other on-line members that are in the user contact list 18.

[0083] In another example, the information in user demographics 14B in combination with the user preferences 14C may be used by the controller 24 to determine that avatars should only be shown to other members of the opposite sex that are within a particular user age range and are within a particular geographic distance from the user’s address.

[0084] In yet another example, the controller 24 first determines if the user has paid for filtering services via the pay status indicated in activity information 14D. If the user has not paid for filtering services, then a default filtering may be used. Otherwise, the controller 24 may display different filtering options to the user. For example, the controller 24 may ask the user what type of highlighting the user wishes to apply to the outline of their avatar or may supply the user with several different options for which types of members to display the user avatar.

[0085] In another advertising application, the user may be associated with a business that wishes to advertise to particular on-line members. The business may pay to display an advertisement to any on-line members that are currently accessing a particular webpage. Similarly, the business user may pay to have their advertisement avatar displayed to any on-line members within a particular geographic range of the address specified in the business user demographics 14B. Based on the amount of money paid, the advertisement avatar may be sent to a greater number of members. In another application, if enough money is paid, the advertisement avatar may override any incoming avatar filters that are described in more detail below.

[0086] In operation 93, the controller 24 calculates the outgoing avatar filters according to the identified filter parameters. For example, the derived outgoing filters may only send the user avatar to those members that have interests similar to those listed in the user demographics 14B. Accordingly, the controller 24 in operation 95 only sends the user avatar to the on-line members that have similar interests in their profiles while filtering the avatar from all other members.

[0087] In another example, the preferences 14C may also be provided to control what avatars are shown to a particular user. For example, the user may not want to see the avatar for every on-line member. If too many avatars are displayed, the user may not easily notice the avatar of a particular member that comes on-line. The avatar of interest may simply be lost in the fray of all of possibly hundreds of displayed avatars.

[0088] To correct this potential problem, the controller 24 in operation 97 scans the same user profile 14, user log file 16, contract list 18, email directory 20, and other member information 22 for any parameters associated with different incoming avatar filters. For example, the user may configure a preference 14C that indicates the user only wants to see avatars for other on-line members that are in the user contact list 18. In another example, the preferences 14C may indicate the user only wants to see the avatars of female on-line members.

[0089] Any identified incoming filter parameters are used by the controller 24 in operation 99 to calculate the incoming avatar filters. Any avatars sent to the user are then filters according to the calculated incoming avatar filters. For example, the user may only want to see the avatars of other on-line members that are currently browsing a same website. If the user moves to another website, the controller 24 may then automatically start displaying only the avatars for members currently viewing the new website.

[0090] In another application, a manager for a particular business or group within a business may set up their preferences 14C to only display the avatars of employees that have sold more than 1 million dollars worth of equipment and that have worked for the company for less than a year. This sales and employment history information could be automatically loaded into the member information 22 by a management and sales software application. The identified employee avatars could be displayed on an on-line webpage or in the manager’s business email application.

[0091] In another application, the user may specifically identify members that will always have their avatars filtered. Similar to the outgoing filters, certain incoming filters may only be available to users with a particular user status or only available to users that have paid a particular fee. For example, a user may only be able to filter incoming avatars for other members that are at or below the same status level.
[0092] Thus, the filters may be user selectable based on different criteria such as paying for a particular service or according to a particular user status or activity. In other applications, filters may be applied to different users based on different user profile information. For example, avatars of other members may automatically be filtered that do not have demographic information 14D, activity information 14D, log file information 16, and/or contact list information 18 in common with the user. In another application, the number of available filters increases with user status. For example, active users on a web-site may have access to more outgoing and incoming filter operations.

[0093] It should also be understood that the outgoing and incoming avatars can be filtered both for on-line and/or off-line members. For example, the user may still want to see other members that are currently off-line that are within a geographic region. This allows the user to send communications or conduct other activities with persons that may not necessarily be logged in.

[0094] All of the filtering operations described above are of course only a small sample of the essentially limitless number of parameters that can be used to generate different types of outgoing and incoming filters. As previously explained, the avatars can be any type of data that may be associated with a particular user and is not limited to pictures or images. For example, icons representing different software work product such as software spread sheets, word documents, power point presentations, etc. could also be displayed to different users based on any of the different filter parameters described above.

Electronic Mail

[0095] As described above, the avatar display system can be used in conjunction with any on-line application 30. Several examples above discussed how the avatars can be displayed according to different activities or status that members obtain on a particular website or according to activities or personal information that other members may have in common with the user. The avatar display system can also display avatars in conjunction with an electronic mail (EMAIL) application 30.

[0096] An image based electronic mail system is described in co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/619,520, filed Jan. 3, 2007 which is herein incorporated by reference. The avatar display system 12 (FIG. 1) in one embodiment is used in combination with this image based electronic mail system.

[0097] FIG. 10 shows an email in-box page 112 that includes a compose new message icon 114 that when selected brings up a new page for composing a new email message. In-box page 112 may also include a scrollable message list (message list) 120, scrollable message pane 124, and scrollable favorites list 128. The message list 120 shows a chronologically sorted list of the most recently received emails. In this embodiment, the message list 120 shows the sender names 122A, subject lines 122B, dates 122C, and size 122D for each of the chronologically sorted emails. The different email information 122A-122D displayed in message list 120 may be changed or reconfigured.

[0098] The message pane 124 shows the body of selected email messages. In an initial default condition, the body of the most recently received email in message list 120 may be displayed in message pane 124. Otherwise, the message pane 124 shows the body of a particular selected email message. The user can reply to the displayed email in message pane 124 by selecting reply icon 126A, forward the email message by selecting forward icon 126B, and delete the displayed email by selecting delete icon 126C.

[0099] Of particular interest is an email senders bar 116 that graphically displays avatars 118 for persons sending email messages to the user. In the description below, pictures, graphics, placeholders, photographs, video clips, audio clips, or any other visual or audio information used to identify an email message sender is referred to generally as an avatar 118.

[0100] The avatars 118 may be displayed statically in sender bar 116 or may be scrolled across or around the sender bar 116 similar to as described above in FIG. 3 or 4. In one configuration, the sender bar 116 may be populated with avatars 118A-118F representing some number of most recent unique email senders to the account holder (user) of in-box page 112. However, the avatars 118 may also be displayed in sender bar 116 according to other email criteria.

[0101] FIG. 11A describes in more detail some of the ways avatars 118A-118F may be displayed in sender bar 116. The email system is accessed and the default inbox page 112 displayed in operation 139. For example, the user may log into the website operating the email system by entering a user name and password. A website may then either automatically display the default inbox page 112 in FIG. 10, or may display the inbox page 112 after the user clicks on an associated link in a home page.

[0102] Operation 140 accesses the email server and may automatically identify other members who may currently be on-line. On-line members may be persons who have logged onto a same website, or other people who are currently logged onto their computers or logged into an email system in a same LAN.

[0103] Operation 142 describes one embodiment where avatars 118 for all the identified on-line members are displayed in sender bar 116. For example, avatars for all of the company employees that are currently logged into their computers may be constantly scrolled across sender bar 116. Of course, this is just one example of which avatars 118 may be displayed in sender bar 116.

[0104] In another embodiment, operation 144 identifies the different on-line or off-line status of members. This may include identifying persons identified as “in the office”, “temporarily out of the office”, or possibly “on vacation” for some period of time. This information can be located via the member profiles and other email configuration information.

[0105] Operation 146 displays or highlights the avatars 118 according to their identified office status. For example, avatars 118 may only be displayed for members identified as currently in the office. Alternatively, all members of a particular enterprise, LAN, website, etc. may be displayed and the avatars dimmed or “grayed-out” for members that are currently off-line or identified as being out of the office.

[0106] In yet another embodiment, operation 148 searches the user email directory 20 in FIG. 1 for other email message information. For example, the email senders associated with the most recently received emails, unread emails, the largest
number of unread emails, the oldest unread emails, etc. may
be identified in operation 148. The avatars 118 or messages
for the identified email senders may then be displayed or
highlighted in operation 150.

[0107] The user receiving the email messages may also
configure the avatar display system to select between displaying
a local picture of the email sender uploaded in the user
contacts list 18 or display a picture obtained from the
sender’s website profile 22 in FIG. 1. If a member profile
picture is preferred, the avatar system may determine if any
of the avatars that will be displayed are associated with
members of the same website. For example, the avatar
display system may compare the sender email address in a
received email message with email addresses of other web-
site members. Sender email addresses matching a website
member email address are identified. Any associated photo,
audio clip, image, graphic, etc., in the identified website
member profile is then displayed as one of the avatars 118
in sender bar 116 of FIG. 10.

[0108] In another embodiment, the member profile may
identify a link to a personal website location that contains
the image or audio clip for displaying in bar 116. Accord-
ingly, the avatar system accesses or selects the link provided
in the user profile and displays the information at the link
location as one of the avatars 118 in bar 116.

[0109] Thus, in one embodiment, the email sender has
control over what photo is displayed as an avatar 118 in
inbox 112. This may be significant in that the email sender
may want to frequently change the images displayed with
particular email messages. In another embodiment, the email
sender may also configure their website member profile to
provide different images for different destination email
addresses. The email system identifies the image in the
member profile associated with the destination email address
and attaches the identified image to the sent email message.

[0110] The email sender may not be a member of a
website operating the email system in FIG. 10; or the user of
in-box 112 may choose to override any photo identified in a
website member profile. In either case, the avatar system
may check the user contacts list 18 in FIG. 1 for previously
uploaded images. For example, the user may add contact
information for a particular person that, in addition to
including an email address, business address and various
phone numbers, may also include an associated photo or
other image. The avatar system checks the user contact list
18 for an email address corresponding with the sender email
address in the received email message. If a matching email
address is located and the located contact includes a photo,
then that photo is displayed as one of the avatars 18 in the
recent sender bar 16.

[0111] The avatar display system may also be configured
to insert advertisements into the sender bar 116 either for
particular sender email addresses, domain names, or gener-
cally for any email sender with no associated photo. For
example, a recently received email may be identified as
coming from a particular airline company. The avatar system
inserts an advertisement or banner advertisement avatar
118C that was previously provided by the airline. The
banner ad avatar 118C may be displayed in the sender bar
116 whenever one of the most recently received emails has
a particular airline email address or domain name.

[0112] FIG. 11B shows some more examples of how the
avatars may be displayed according to different email mes-
sage conditions. In this example, avatars 28A and 28C are
associated with members that are currently in the office.
Avatar 28B is grayed out reflecting a member currently not
in the office. The bolding on avatar 28D represents an email
sender associated with an unread email. The highlighting on
avatar 28E indicates the associated email sender has sent
more than 20 email messages within the last week.

[0113] The avatars 28 associated with particular email
senders or email conditions may be bolded, flashed, dis-
played with an associated sound or video clip, or given any
other display characteristic. A message or other text may
also be displayed next to the avatars 28 as shown in FIG.
113 further explaining the office status or email status for
emails sent by the associated member.

Identifying Common Contacts

[0114] FIG. 12 shows the same avatars 28 previously
shown in FIG. 3. However, in this embodiment, the avatar
display system may filter avatars 28 according to common
contact information. Alternatively, any common contact
information between the user and another member may be
displayed along with that members associated avatar 28.
Identifying these common contacts can increase or simplify
the social interaction between different on-line members.

[0115] Referring to FIGS. 12 and 13, the user contact
information 18 is scanned in operation 160 and other mem-
ber contact information is scanned in operation 162. The
avatars 28 for on-line members identified in the user contact
list may be displayed in operation 164.

[0116] In another embodiment, any members that may
have some direct or indirect association with the user may be
identified in operation 166. For example, a particular mem-
ber SAPPHIRE associated with said avatar 28C, may not be
contained within the user contact list 18. However, one or
more of the members in user contact list 18 may have a
contact for the member SAPPHIRE associated with avatar
28C. This is referred to as a ‘once-removed’ contact. If the
user adds an avatar preference 14C (FIG. 1) to display all
once removed contacts, then the avatar 28C for the once
removed contact member SAPPHIRE displayed in operation
168. Any level of removed contacts may be selected by the
user. For example, the user may configure avatar preferences
14C in FIG. 1 to identify all on-line members that are at least
twice or three times removed from the user contacts 18.

[0117] Another feature in operation 170 may display a
contact tree 156 that shows the relationship between mem-
bers. For example, the contact tree 156 shows that the
member SAPPHIRE is once removed from the user through
a common member BILLY. The contact tree 156 also shows
that the member SAPPHIRE is twice removed from the user
through members HIT and BPLATE123 in the user contact
list 18. This means that neither members HIT or
BPLATE123 have member SAPPHIRE in their contact lists.
However, another member HIPPIE has the members HIT,
BPLATE123, and SAPPHIRE in his contact list. In other
words, the user is twice removed from member SAPPHIRE
though member HIPPIE and either member HIT or
BPLATE123.

[0118] In yet another embodiment, operation 172 displays
avatars 28 for random members. These members may or
may not currently be on-line. User actions either selecting
or hovering a cursor over one of the displayed avatars 28 is
monitored in operation 174. For example, the user may select avatar 28C in FIG. 12. Operation 176 searches the contacts for both the user and the selected member SAPPHIRE. The avatars 28 of the common members or the contact tree 156 showing the links between the user and the member selected for avatar 28C are displayed in operation 178.

[0119] In another embodiment, the number of friends or members in common between the user and the members are also displayed along with avatars 28. For example, avatar 28C indicates the user has one person in their contact list in common with the associated member SAPPHIRE. Avatar 28D indicates the user has two people in their contact list in common with that associated member HIPPIE.

Social Website

[0120] Several examples were given above for use of the avatar display system with social websites. One example of a social website incorporated by reference above is entitled: APPARATUS FOR INCREASING SOCIAL INTERACTION OVER AN ELECTRONIC NETWORK. One aspect of this system is shown in FIG. 14.

[0121] Referring to FIG. 14, a user homepage 229 includes a website name 230. The page 229 also includes a scrolling avatar display 232 that displays the avatars of website members in any of the different ways described above.

[0122] The page 229 displays an alert window 234 that provides various indications about website operation as well as award notifications and indications of activity by other users. The page also includes a messaging window 236 that displays links to other members. The page 229 also includes a user advertisement window 238 that displays messages that are sent from one user to all other members. For example, one user may expend tokens or pay money to have his message and photo sent to all website members for display in window 238.

[0123] The page 229 also includes a link 242 to a user-directory, which displays photos and names of every site member. The page 229 includes a token-biddable spotlight space 244, which spotlights a user’s profile and photo for a predetermined amount of time when a user wins an auction using tokens or money. The page 229 also includes a top referrer field 245 that identifies top referrers identified by a correlator.

[0124] The page 229 also includes profile information 246 that allows a user to view and edit his active profile. Other user objects may be uploaded or changed using the navigation window 240.

[0125] The page 229 also includes a field 248 showing photos of members that have recently viewed the user’s profile included in field 246. Thus, the user is able to identify other members that viewed his profile and that may be interested in communicating with him. A field 250 shows polls that are broadcasted by users having a score sufficient to enable polling functionality.

[0126] A portion 252 organizes links to expend tokens or money, such as by purchasing virtual beers, initiating happy hours, purchasing user advertisements in the window 238, etc. Another window 254 provides various other information such as links to flash games, links to online lounges or chat rooms that may be formed and controlled by high scoring users, links to audio or video segments uploaded by other users, etc. All of these features are described in more detail in the co-pending application referred to above. The avatar display system 12 in FIG. 1 can operate with any of the activities and information contained in page 229.

[0127] Several preferred examples have been described above with reference to the accompanying drawings. Various other examples of the invention are also possible and practical. The system may be exemplified in many different forms and should not be construed as being limited to the examples set forth above.

[0128] The figures listed above illustrate preferred examples of the application and the operation of such examples. In the figures, the size of the boxes is not intended to represent the size of the various physical components. Where the same element appears in multiple figures, the same reference numeral is used to denote the element in all of the figures where it appears.

[0129] Only those parts of the various units are shown and described which are necessary to convey an understanding of the examples to those skilled in the art. Those parts and elements not shown are conventional and known in the art.

[0130] The system described above can use dedicated processor systems, micro controllers, programmable logic devices, or microprocessors that perform some or all of the operations. Some of the operations described above may be implemented in software and other operations may be implemented in hardware.

[0131] For the sake of convenience, the operations are described as various interconnected functional blocks or distinct software modules. This is not necessary, however, and there may be cases where these functional blocks or modules are equivalently aggregated into a single logic device, program or operation with unclear boundaries. In any event, the functional blocks and software modules or features of the flexible interface can be implemented by themselves, or in combination with other operations in either hardware or software.

[0132] Having described and illustrated the principles of the invention in a preferred embodiment thereof, it should be apparent that the invention may be modified in arrangement and detail without departing from such principles. We claim all modifications and variation coming within the spirit and scope of the following claims.

1. A method, comprising:
   - monitoring the activities or status of different members on a network site;
   - identifying avatars representing the different members that may include any combination of image, video, or sounds; and
   - displaying the avatars on a display page according to the different activities or status of the members on the network site.

2. The method according to claim 1 including scrolling the avatars across, down, or around the display as a human ticker.

3. The method according to claim 1 including fading images or sounds in and out of the avatars.
4. The method according to claim 1 including:
   displaying a first image in one of the avatars representing one of the members; and
   fading the first image out of the avatar while fading in a second image in to the avatar representing a second member.
5. The method according to claim 1 including playing out audio clips associated with the members while displaying still or moving images in the avatars associated with the same members.
6. The method according to claim 1 including displaying different avatar colors, highlighting, or shapes according to the member status or activities.
7. The method according to claim 1 including:
   identifying membership levels assigned to the members according to types of interactions performed by the members on the network site; and
   varying how the avatars are displayed for the members according to their assigned member ship levels.
8. The method according to claim 1 including displaying only the avatars for members that are currently logged onto the network site.
9. The method according to claim 1 including displaying the avatars for new members or new users of the network site differently than the avatars for other members.
10. The method according to claim 1 displaying the avatars for members that have paid an associated avatar fee differently than the avatars for other members.
11. An apparatus, comprising:
   a computing device displaying images across one or more display pages of an on-line application representing different users of the on-line application, the computing device varying how the images are displayed for the different users according to activities performed by the users on the on-line application or according to profile information associated with the different users.
12. The apparatus according to claim 11 wherein the computing device varies the color or shape of the displayed images according to a number of pictures uploaded by the users to the on-line application.
13. The apparatus according to claim 11 wherein the computing device varies the color or shape of the displayed images according how long the users have been logged into the on-line application.
14. The apparatus according to claim 11 wherein the computing device varies the color or shape of the displayed images according to a number of blog postings by the users on the on-line application.
15. The apparatus according to claim 10 wherein the computing device:
   searches log files to determine what areas of the on-line application are currently being browsed by the users; and
   displays the images of users that are currently browsing the same areas of the on-line application.
16. The apparatus according to claim 10 wherein the computing device:
   determines what activities are currently being performed on the on-line application by the users; and
   displays the images of other users that are currently performing the same activities.
17. An apparatus, comprising:
   one or more processors; and
   a memory coupled to the one or more processors comprising instructions executable by the processors, the processors operable when executing the instructions to:
   identify avatars representing users for a network site, the avatars including any combination of images and/or sounds;
   display the identified avatars;
   monitor activities, profiles, or contacts for the users of the network site;
   identify users having related activities, profiles, and/or contacts; and
   displaying the avatars for the identified users differently than the avatars for other users.
18. The apparatus according to claim 17 wherein the one or more processors scroll the avatars across or around a webpage as a human ticker.
19. The apparatus according to claim 17 wherein the one or more processors:
   identify geographic location information for the users; and
   display the avatars for the users having related geographic location information differently than the avatars for other users.
20. The apparatus according to claim 17 wherein the one or more processors:
   identify sex, age, or personal interest information for the users; and
   display the avatars for the users having related sex, age, or personal interest information differently than the avatars for other users.
21. The apparatus according to claim 17 wherein the one or more processors:
   identify avatar preferences in the user profiles; and
   display the avatars for users associated with the avatar preferences and filter the remaining avatars for other users.
22. The apparatus according to claim 17 wherein the one or more processors:
   search user contact lists to identify known users; and
   only display the avatars for the identified known users or display the avatars for the identified known users differently than the avatars displayed for other users.
23. A computer, comprising:
   one or more processors to identify members of an associated on-line application or communication group and display images representing the identified members of the associated on-line application or communication group, the one or more processors monitoring activities or status of the identified members with the on-line application or communication group and varying how their images are displayed according to the monitored activities or status.
24. The computer according to claim 23 wherein the one or more processors only display the images of the members that are currently logged into the on-line application or communication group.

25. The computer according to claim 23 wherein the one or more processors scroll the images of the identified members across or around an electronic mail (email) page.

26. The computer according to claim 23 wherein the one or more processors:
   detect selection of any of the displayed images; and
   automatically open a new email containing an email address of the member associated with the selected image.

27. The computer according to claim 23 wherein the one or more processors:
   identify how many unread email messages are associated with the members; and
   display the images for the members having the most unread email messages or display the identified number of unread email messages next to the displayed images of the associated members.

28. The computer according to claim 23 wherein the one or more processors:
   identify how long email messages associated with the members have gone unread; and
   display the images for the members having the oldest unread email messages or display unread email message times next to the displayed images of the associated members.

29. The computer according to claim 23 wherein the one or more processors:
   identify in office and out of office status for the members; and
   either display images or vary a color or other features of the displayed images according to the in office or out of office status of the associated members.

30. The computer according to claim 29 wherein the one or more processors gray or dim out displayed images for members that are identified with out of office status or not currently logged into the on-line application or communication group.

31. The computer according to claim 23 wherein the one or more processors:
   identify the contacts for the members; and
   display the images or modify the displayed images for the members associated with the identified contacts.

32. The computer according to claim 23 wherein the one or more processors detect members that have purchased a particular status level with the on-line application or communication group and vary how the images for the detected members are displayed according to the purchased status level.

33. A method comprising:
   identifying avatars for members of a website or on-line application;
   searching contact information for the members;
   identifying the members having at least some common contact information; and
   only displaying the avatars for the identified members or varying how the avatars are displayed for the identified members.

34. The method according to claim 33 including displaying a contact tree along with the avatars showing a relationship between the common contact information of different members.

35. The method according to claim 33 including:
   searching through the contact information to identify a first list of known members;
   searching through the contacts for the first list of members to identify a second list of members; and
   displaying avatars for at least some of the first and second list of members.

36. The method according to 35 including displaying a contact tree identifying a relationship between the members in the first and second list.

37. The method according to claim 33 including:
   detecting selection by a first member of the avatar associated with a second member;
   identifying any relationships between the members known by the first member and the members known by the second member; and
   displaying the identified relationships to the first member.

38. The method according to claim 33 including:
   detecting a first member selecting or hovering a cursor over the avatar of a second member, and
   notifying the second member that the first member selected or hovered the cursor over the image of the second member.

39. A computer readable medium including instructions that when executed comprise:
   identifying filter parameters from a user profile;
   calculating avatar filters according to the identified filter parameters;
   filtering avatars received from others or filtering avatars sent to others according to the calculated avatar filters.

40. The computer readable medium according to claim 39 further comprising:
   identifying outgoing filter parameters;
   deriving outgoing avatar filters according to the identified outgoing filter parameters; and
   filtering the avatars sent to others according to the derived outgoing filters.

41. The computer readable medium according to claim 39 further comprising:
   identifying incoming filter parameters;
   deriving incoming filters according to the identified incoming filter parameters; and
   filtering avatars received by the user according to the derived incoming filters.

42. The computer readable medium according to claim 39 further comprising:
   identifying a user activity or status; and
filtering the avatars sent to others or filtering the avatars received from others according to the identified user activity or status.

43. The computer readable medium according to claim 39 further comprising:
identifying a paid for filtering status; and
filtering different types of avatars according to the paid for filtering status.

44. The computer readable medium according to claim 39 further comprising:
identifying a user activity or status that match an activity or status of others; and
displaying avatars to the others associated with the matching activities or status.

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