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Bhattacharya et al.

(54) **PROCESSING VALUE-ASCERTAINABLE ITEMS**

(76) Inventors: **Ashmit Bhattacharya**, Pleasanton, CA (US); **Bruce Bower**, Menlo Park, CA (US); **Gary Briggs**, Los Gatos, CA (US); **Marc Gendron**, Clovis, CA (US); **Steve Grove**, San Jose, CA (US); **Tina Henson**, Fresno, CA (US); **Parker Thomas**, Alameda, CA (US)

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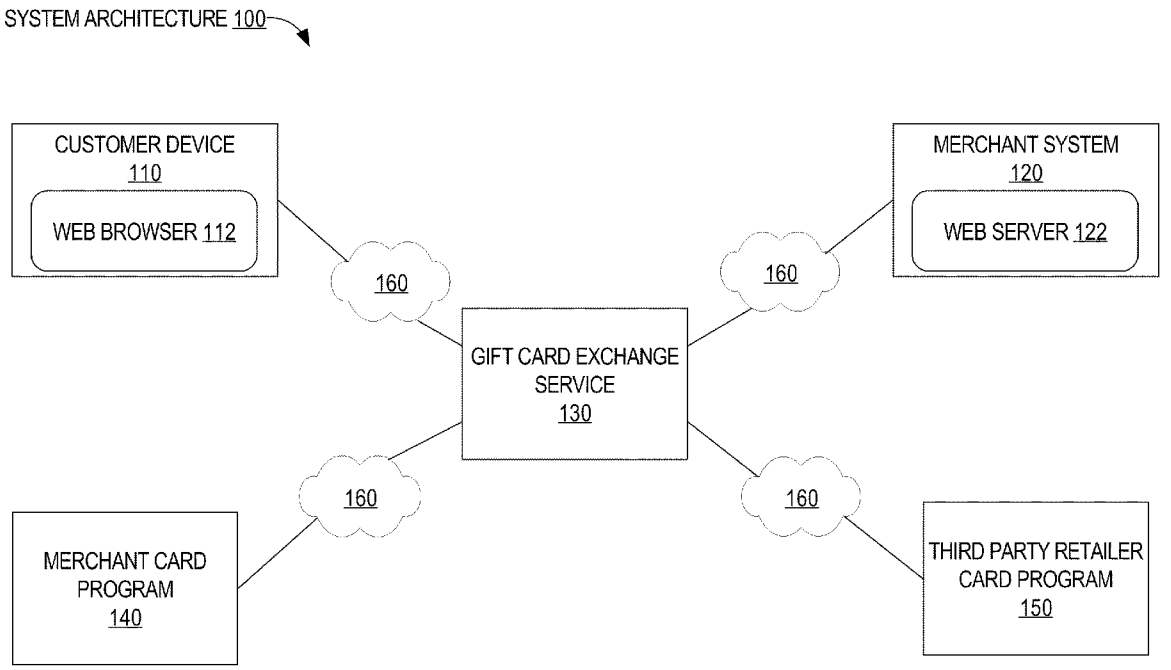
(57) **ABSTRACT**

Techniques are provided for allowing a merchant to process third party closed-loop instruments (such as gift cards) as if the closed-loop instruments were open-loop instruments. A customer provides card data of a third party gift card to a merchant, e.g., online or in a merchant store, for the purchase of one or more items provided by the merchant. The merchant sends the gift card data to an intermediary that deducts at least a portion of the balance of the gift card. The intermediary sends an offer for the gift card to the customer. If the customer accepts the offer, then the merchant applies the offer towards the total purchase price of the one or more items.



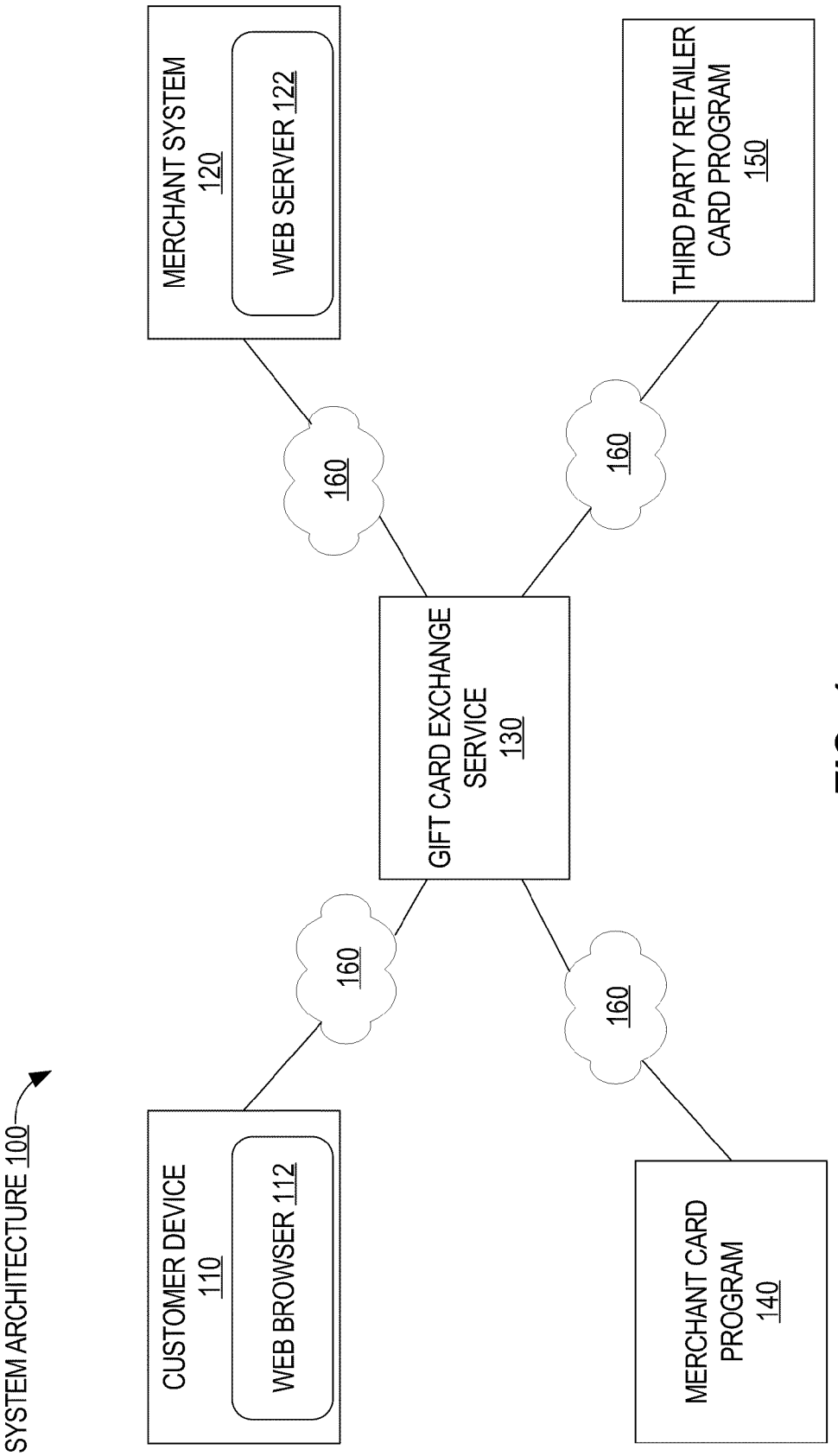

SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE 100
CUSTOMER DEVICE 110
WEB BROWSER 112
MERCHANT SYSTEM 120
WEB SERVER 122
GIFT CARD EXCHANGE SERVICE 130
MERCHANT CARD PROGRAM 140
THIRD PARTY RETAILER CARD PROGRAM 150
160
160
160
160

FIG. 1

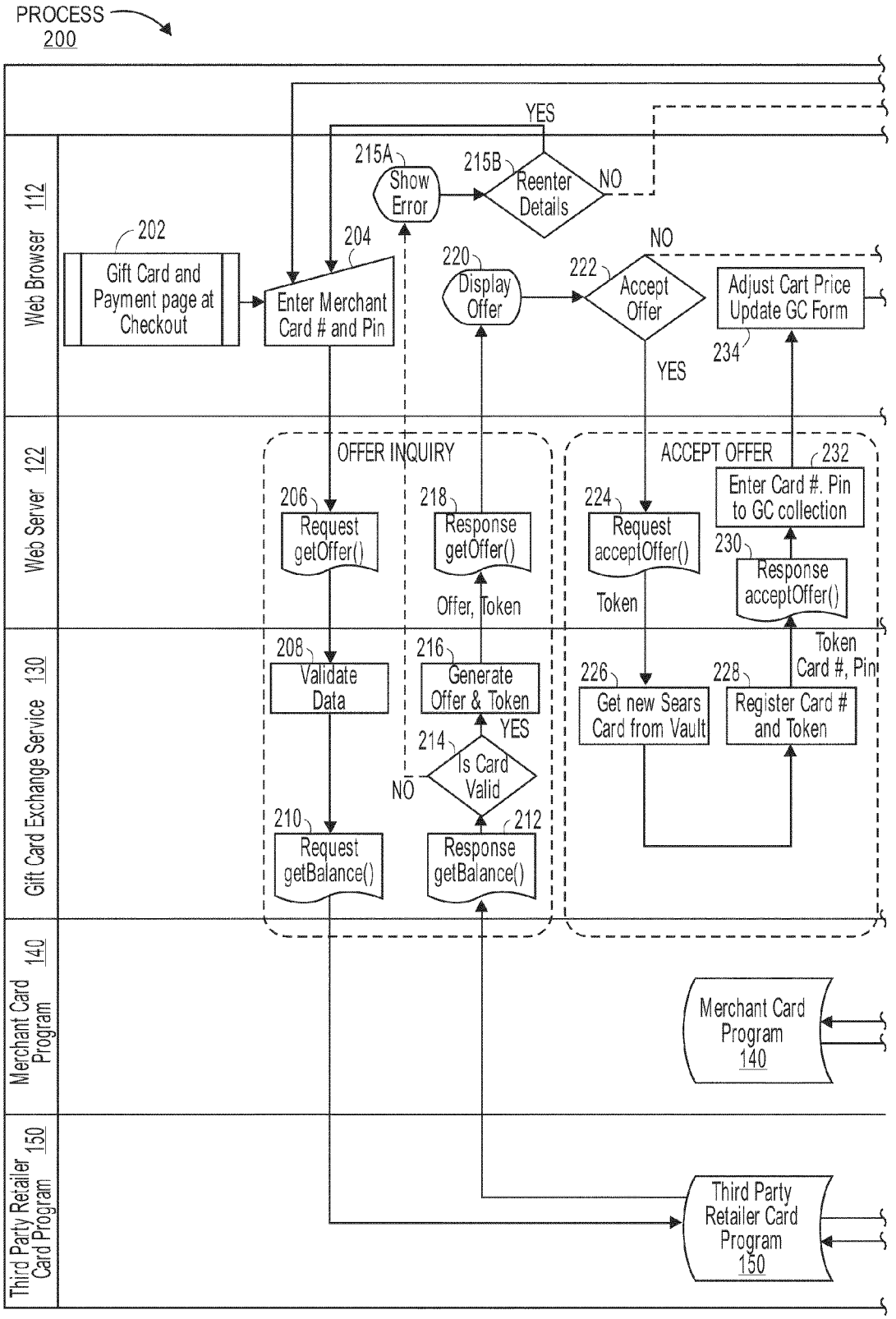

PROCESS 200
Web Browser 112
Web Server 122
Gift Card Exchange Service 130
Merchant Card Program 140
Third Party Retailer Card Program 150
202
Gift Card and Payment page at Checkout
204
Enter Merchant Card # and Pin
215A
Show Error
215B
Reenter Details
YES
NO
220
Display Offer
222
Accept Offer
NO
YES
Adjust Cart Price Update GC Form
234
OFFER INQUIRY
206
Request getOffer()
218
Response getOffer()
Offer, Token
208
Validate Data
216
Generate Offer & Token
214
Is Card Valid
YES
NO
210
Request getBalance()
212
Response getBalance()
ACCEPT OFFER
224
Request acceptOffer()
Token
232
Enter Card #. Pin to GC collection
230
Response acceptOffer()
Token Card #, Pin
226
Get new Sears Card from Vault
228
Register Card # and Token
Merchant Card Program 140
Third Party Retailer Card Program 150

FIG. 2A

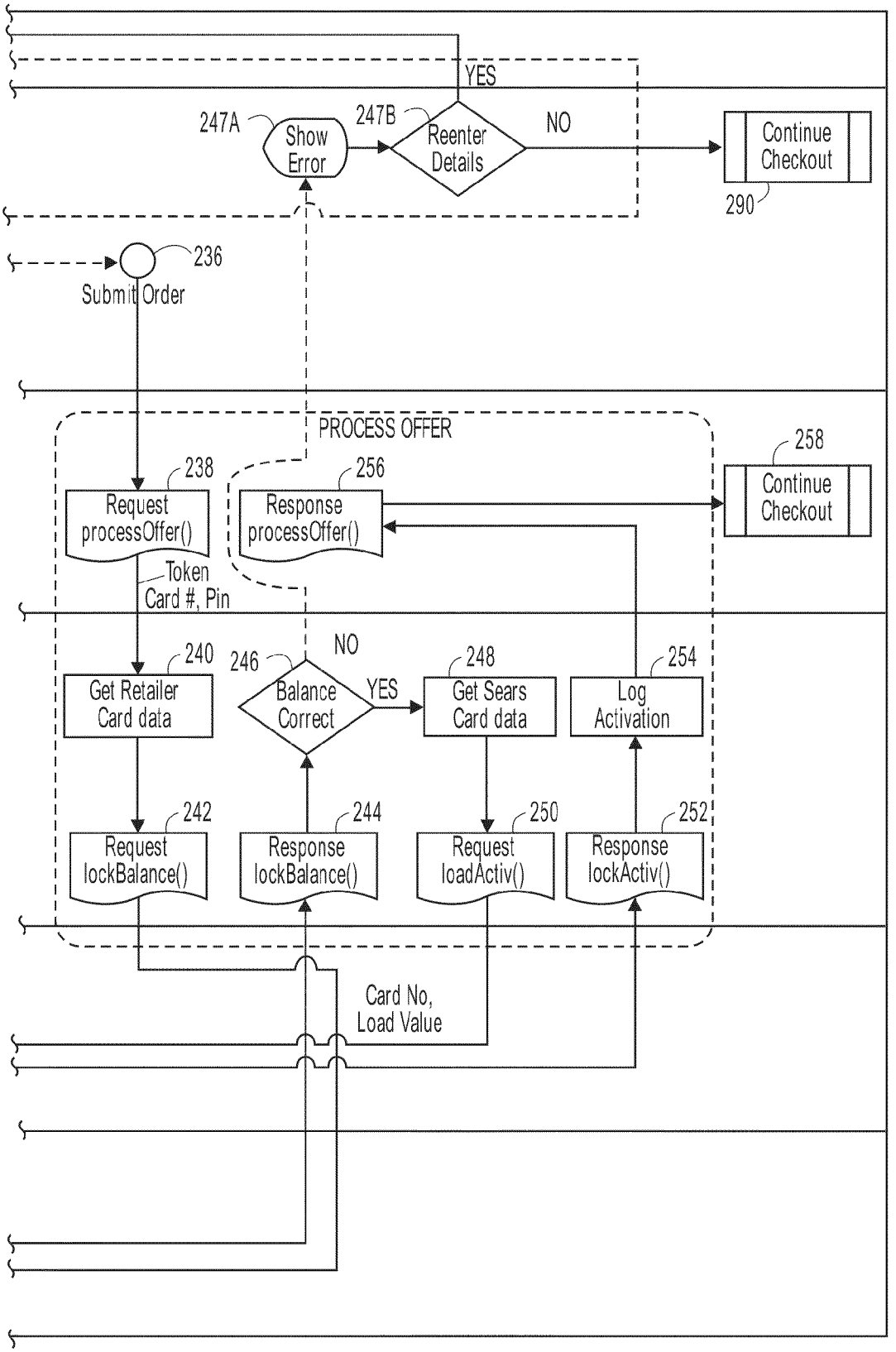

YES
247A
Show Error
247B
Reenter Details
NO
Continue Checkout
290
236
Submit Order
PROCESS OFFER
258
238
Request processOffer()
256
Response processOffer()
Continue Checkout
Token
Card #, Pin
NO
240
246
Balance Correct
YES
248
254
Get Retailer Card data
Get Sears Card data
Log Activation
242
244
250
252
Request lockBalance()
Response lockBalance()
Request loadActiv()
Response lockActiv()
Card No,
Load Value

FIG. 2B

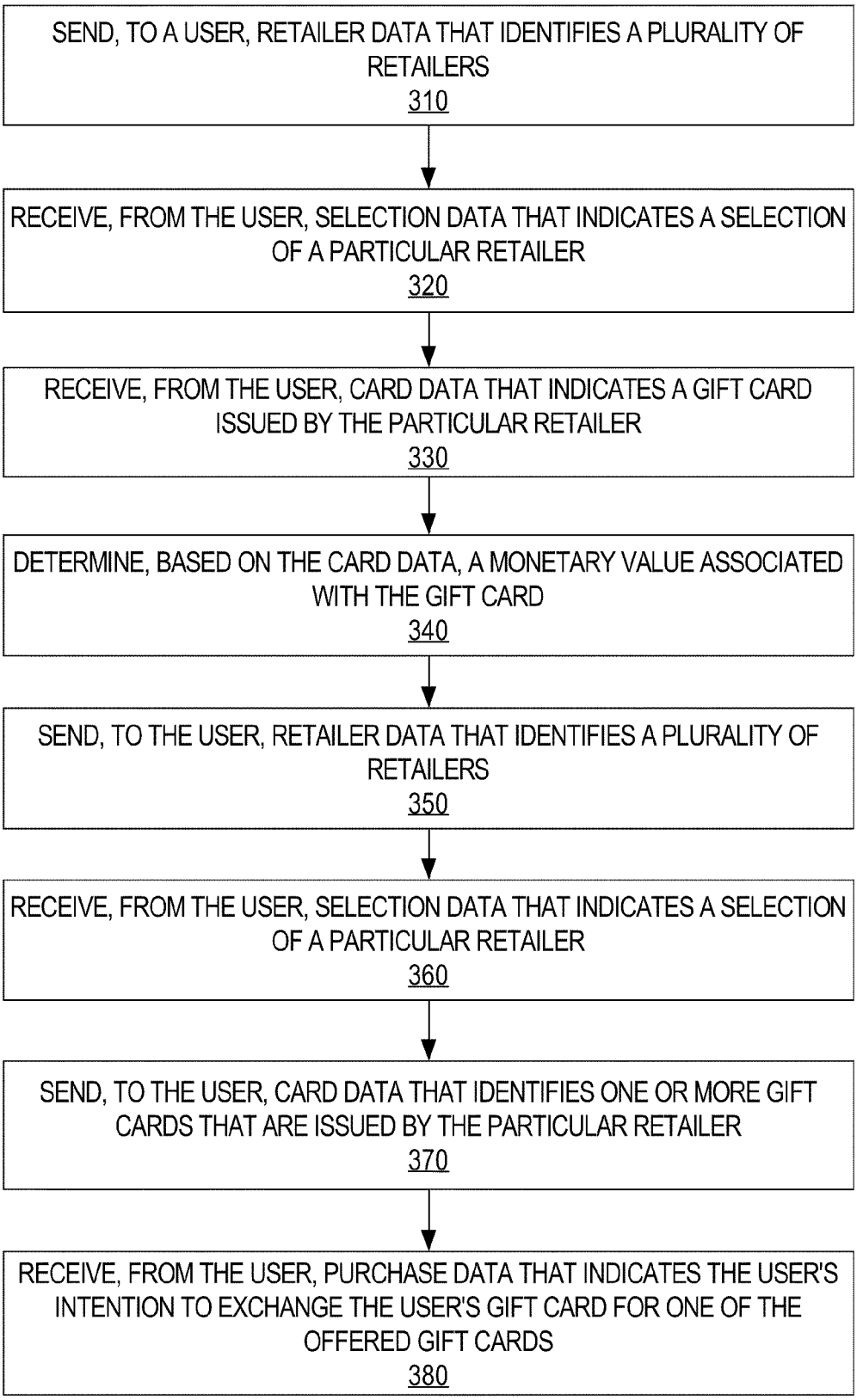

SEND, TO A USER, RETAILER DATA THAT IDENTIFIES A PLURALITY OF RETAILERS
310
RECEIVE, FROM THE USER, SELECTION DATA THAT INDICATES A SELECTION OF A PARTICULAR RETAILER
320
RECEIVE, FROM THE USER, CARD DATA THAT INDICATES A GIFT CARD ISSUED BY THE PARTICULAR RETAILER
330
DETERMINE, BASED ON THE CARD DATA, A MONETARY VALUE ASSOCIATED WITH THE GIFT CARD
340
SEND, TO THE USER, RETAILER DATA THAT IDENTIFIES A PLURALITY OF RETAILERS
350
RECEIVE, FROM THE USER, SELECTION DATA THAT INDICATES A SELECTION OF A PARTICULAR RETAILER
360
SEND, TO THE USER, CARD DATA THAT IDENTIFIES ONE OR MORE GIFT CARDS THAT ARE ISSUED BY THE PARTICULAR RETAILER
370
RECEIVE, FROM THE USER, PURCHASE DATA THAT INDICATES THE USER'S INTENTION TO EXCHANGE THE USER'S GIFT CARD FOR ONE OF THE OFFERED GIFT CARDS
380

FIG. 3

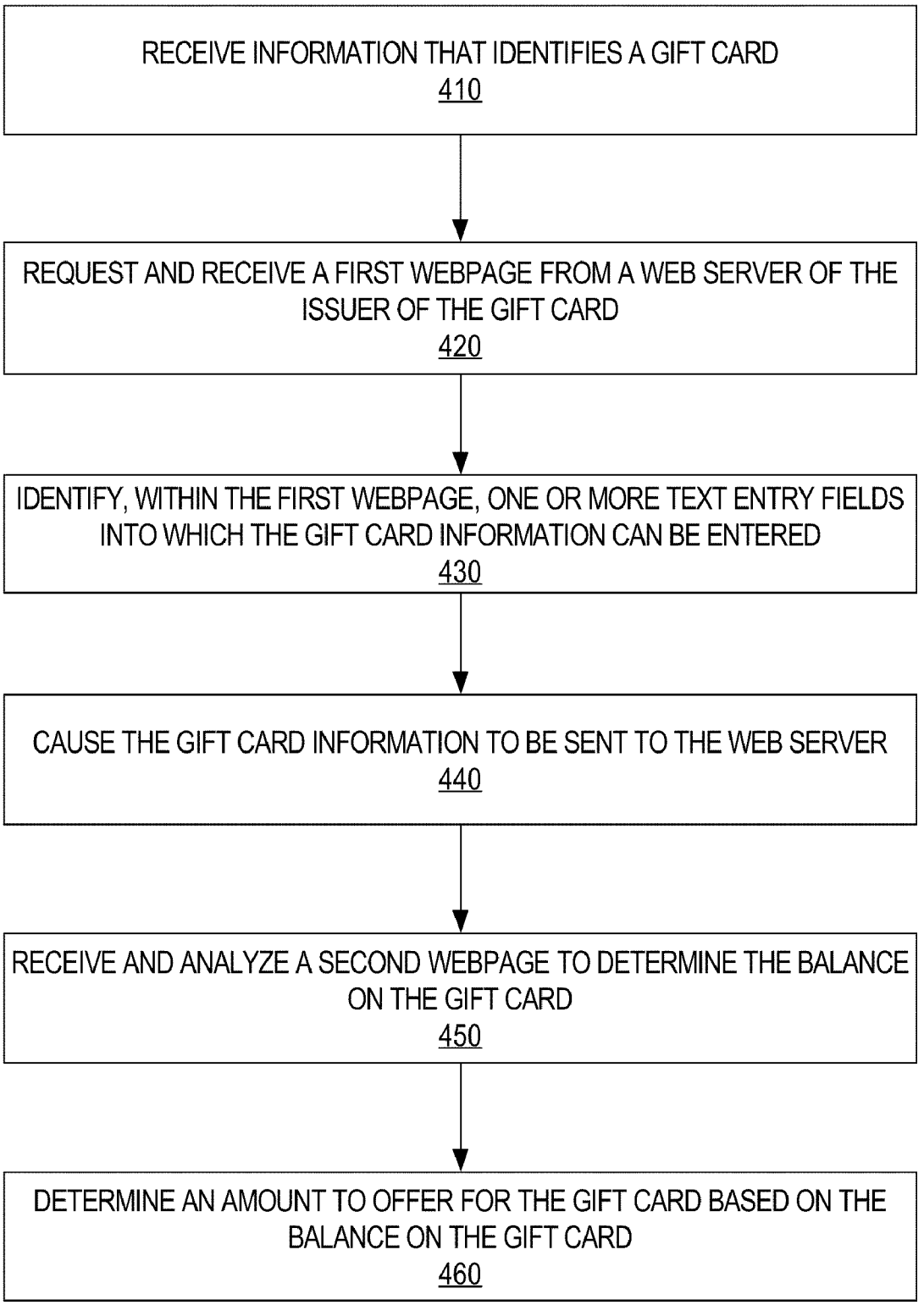

RECEIVE INFORMATION THAT IDENTIFIES A GIFT CARD
410
REQUEST AND RECEIVE A FIRST WEBPAGE FROM A WEB SERVER OF THE ISSUER OF THE GIFT CARD
420
IDENTIFY, WITHIN THE FIRST WEBPAGE, ONE OR MORE TEXT ENTRY FIELDS INTO WHICH THE GIFT CARD INFORMATION CAN BE ENTERED
430
CAUSE THE GIFT CARD INFORMATION TO BE SENT TO THE WEB SERVER
440
RECEIVE AND ANALYZE A SECOND WEBPAGE TO DETERMINE THE BALANCE ON THE GIFT CARD
450
DETERMINE AN AMOUNT TO OFFER FOR THE GIFT CARD BASED ON THE BALANCE ON THE GIFT CARD
460

FIG. 4

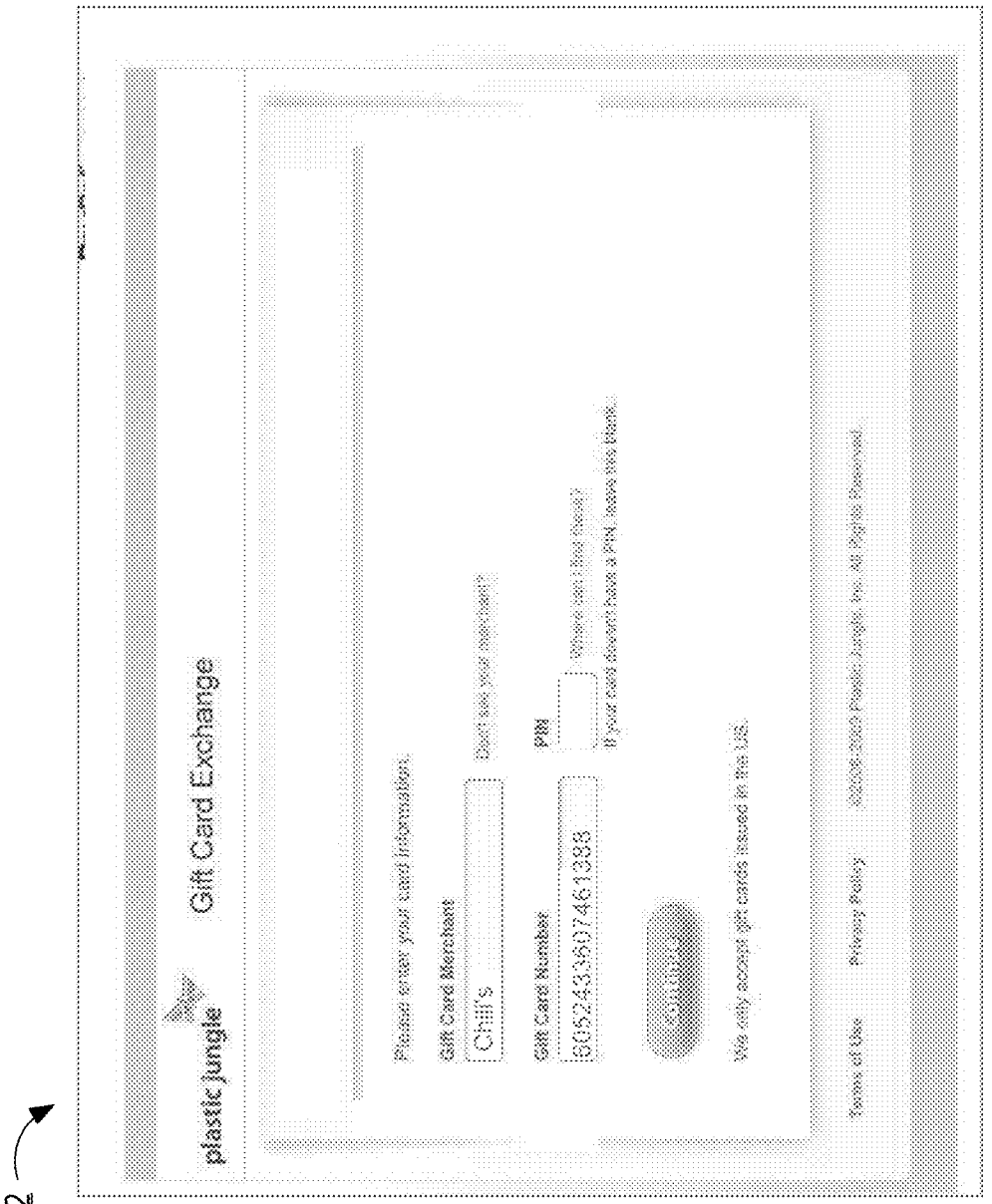

WEBPAGE 502
plastic jungle
Gift Card Exchange
Please enter your card information.
Gift Card Merchant
Chili's
Don't see your merchant?
Gift Card Number
6052433607461383
PIN
Where can I find these?
If your card doesn't have a PIN, leave this blank.
Continue
We only accept gift cards issued in the US.
Terms of Use
Privacy Policy
2008-2009 Plastic Jungle, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

FIG. 5A

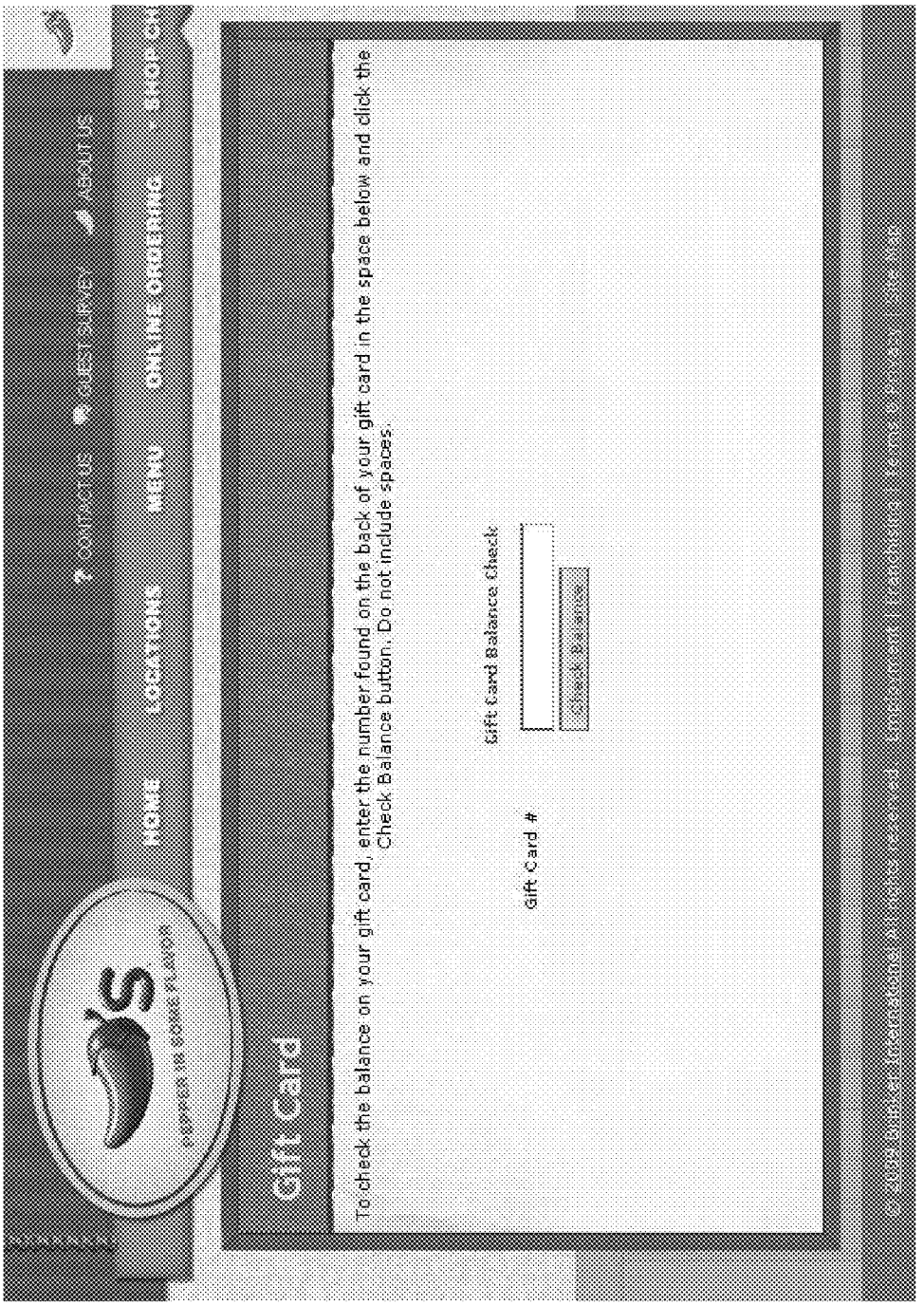

WEBPAGE 504
HOME
LOCATIONS
MENU
ONLINE ORDERING
ABOUT US
CONTACT US
GUEST SURVEY
Gift Card
To check the balance on your gift card, enter the number found on the back of your gift card in the space below and click the Check Balance button. Do not include spaces.
Gift Card Balance Check
Gift Card #
Check Balance

FIG. 5B

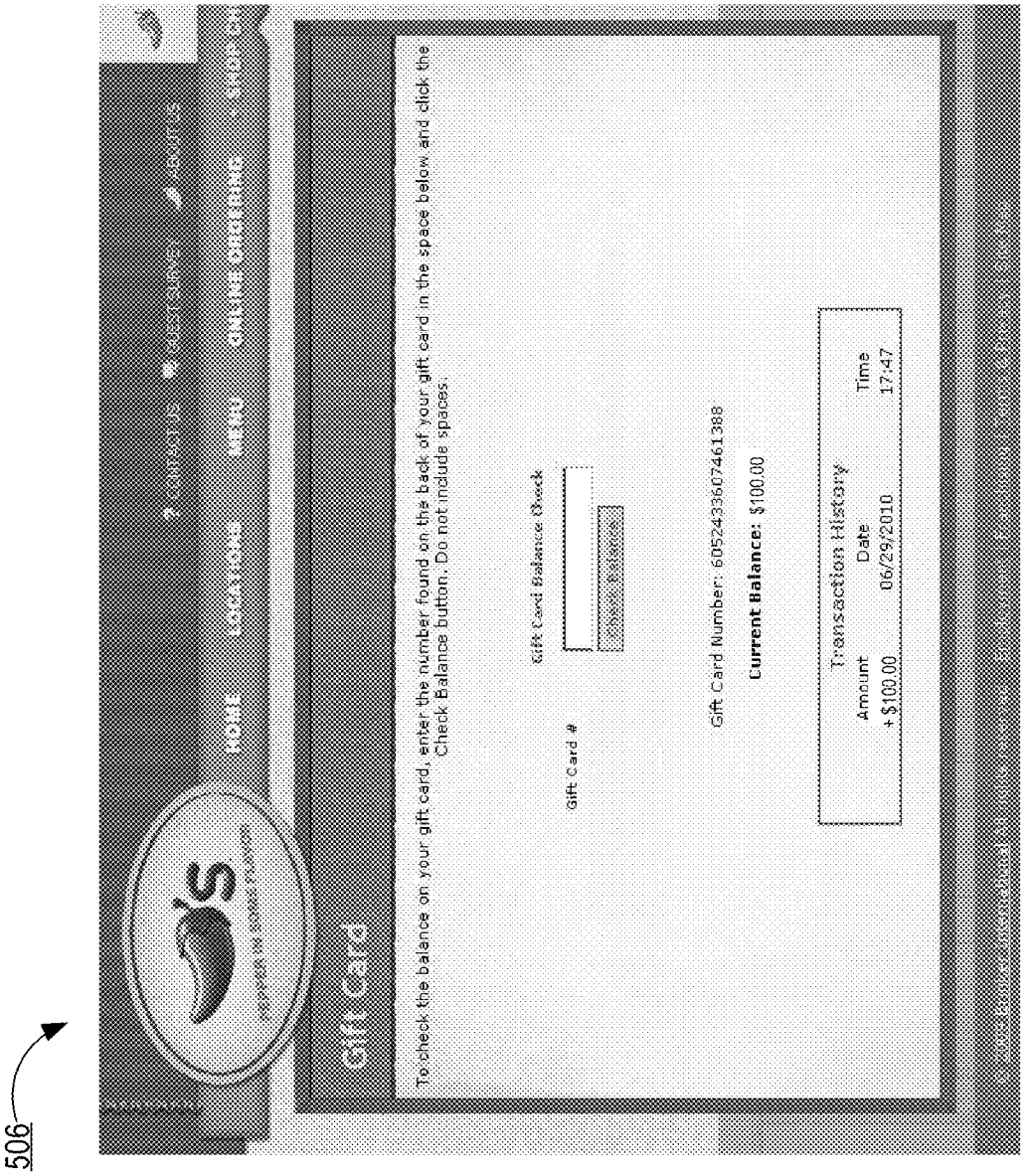

WEBPAGE 506
Gift Card
To check the balance on your gift card, enter the number found on the back of your gift card in the space below and click the Check Balance button. Do not include spaces.
Gift Card Balance Check
Gift Card #
Check Balance
Gift Card Number: 6052433607461388
Current Balance: $100.00
Transaction History
Amount
Date
Time
+ $100.00
06/29/2010
17:47

FIG. 5C

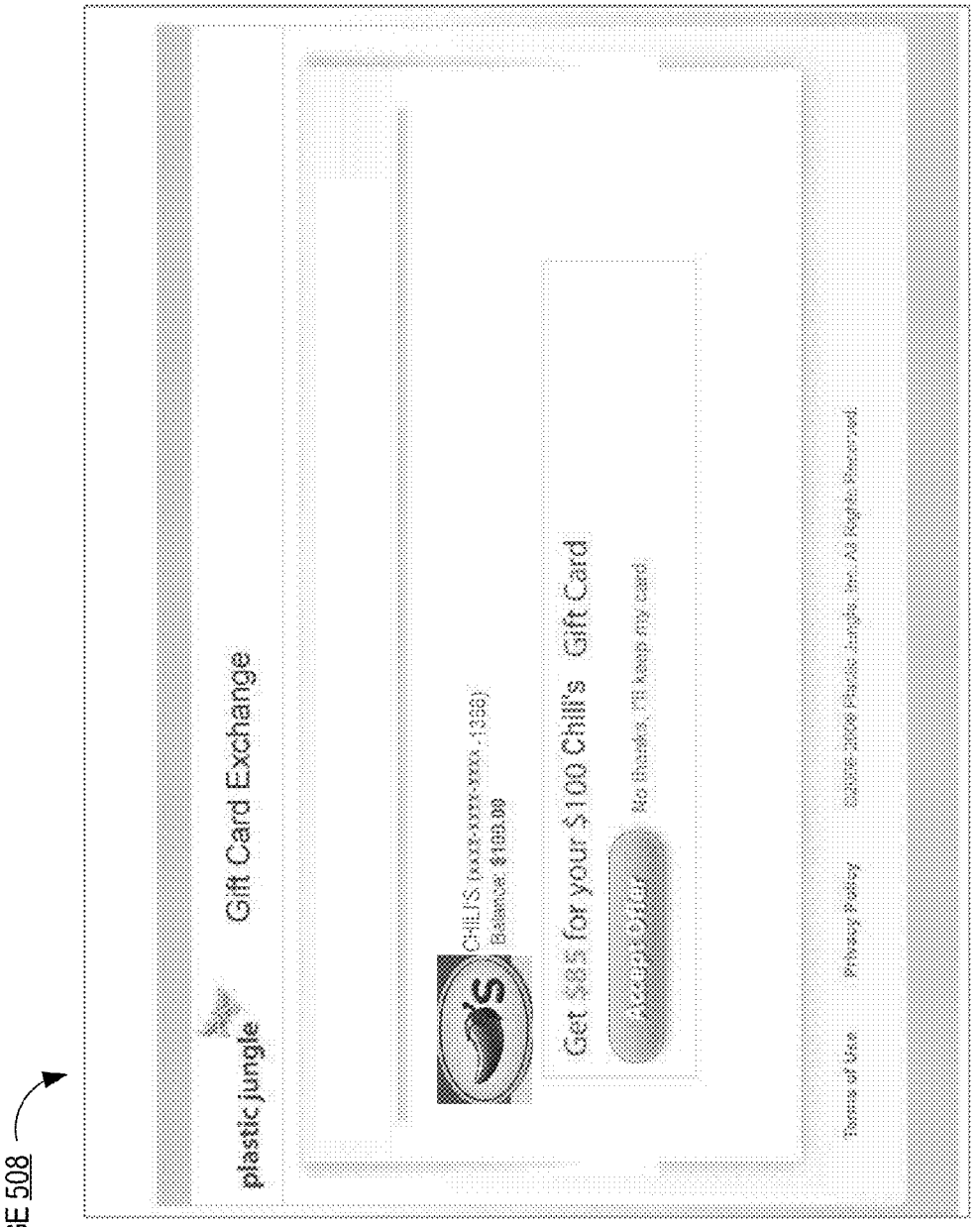

WEBPAGE 508
plastic jungle
Gift Card Exchange
Get $85 for your $100 Chili's Gift Card

FIG. 5D

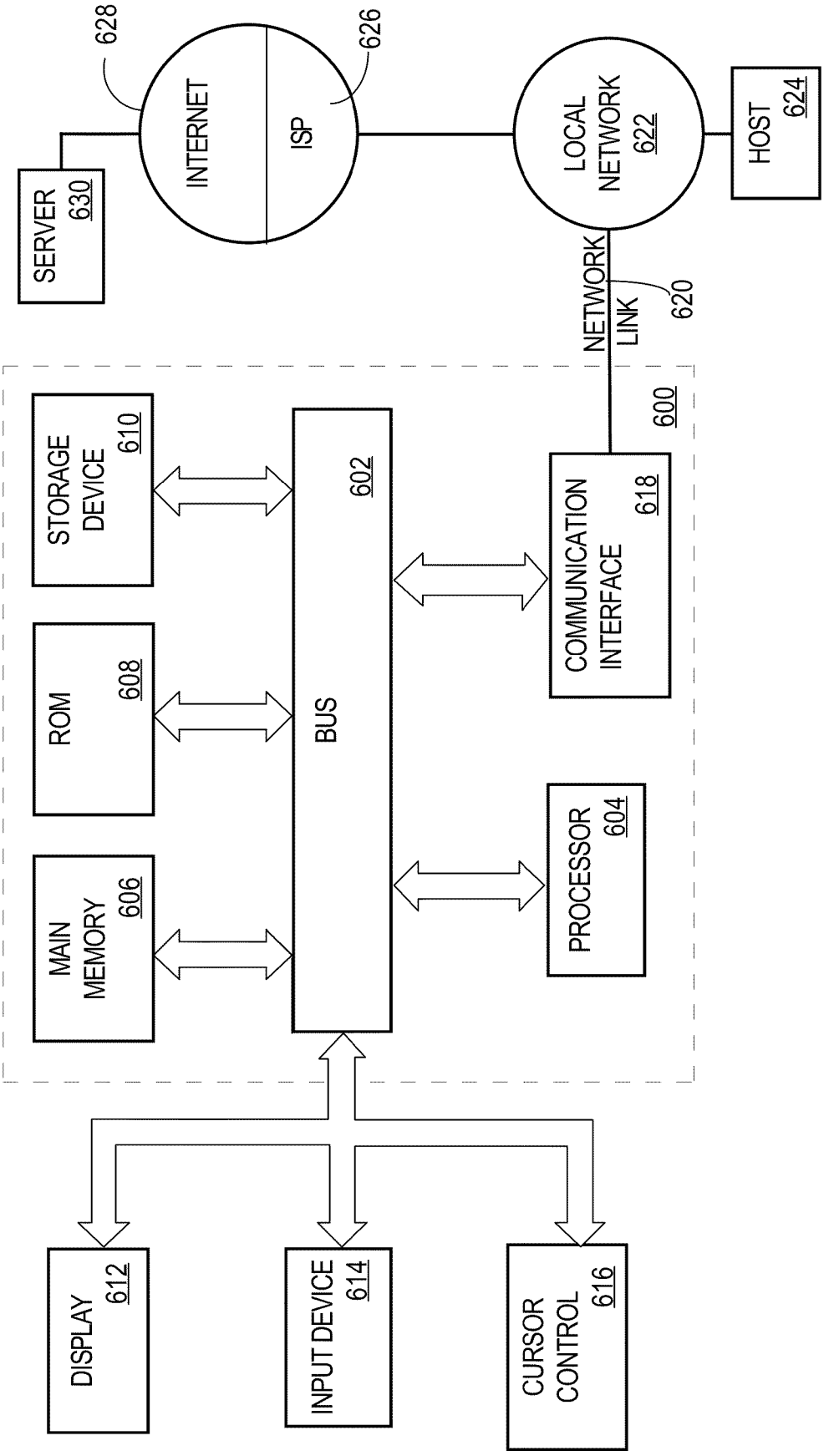

628
INTERNET
ISP
626
SERVER
630
LOCAL
NETWORK
622
HOST
624
NETWORK
LINK
620
600
STORAGE
DEVICE
610
602
BUS
COMMUNICATION
INTERFACE
618
ROM
608
MAIN
MEMORY
606
PROCESSOR
604
DISPLAY
612
INPUT DEVICE
614
CURSOR
CONTROL
616

FIG. 6

PROCESSING VALUE-ASCERTAINABLE ITEMS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application claims the benefit of priority from U.S. Provisional Application No. 61/266,910 filed Dec. 4, 2009, entitled "SYSTEMS AND TECHNIQUES FOR PROCESSING GIFT CARD INFORMATION"; the entire content of which is incorporated by this reference for all purposes as if fully disclosed herein.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to using value-ascertainable items, including stored-value instruments, to purchase goods or services in contexts in which the value-ascertainable items were not previously accepted as payment. More specifically, techniques are provided that allow stored-value instruments issued by one entity to be used to pay for goods or services provided by another entity that is unaffiliated with the issuer. Techniques are also provided to support the sale of stored-value instruments in an unaffiliated environment in a safe and secure manner.

BACKGROUND

[0003] A stored-value instrument is a financial instrument, usually structured as a means for payment, in which funds are associated with the instrument and not necessarily associated with any individual. Other types of financial instruments include credit cards and debit cards. Gift and pre-paid cards are a common form of stored-value instrument. Gift cards in particular have become extremely popular in recent years. Gift cards essentially relieve the donor of the burden of selecting a specific and individually appropriate gift for the recipient, instead allowing the recipient to choose, from the range of products sold by the issuer, the actual goods or services s/he wishes upon redemption. Most gift cards resemble credit cards in size and composition, although increasingly gift cards are becoming virtualized for delivery and redemption across digital networks. Gift cards also tend to display a specific theme that corresponds to the issuer of the card. Although gift cards are typically identified by a specific number or code, gift cards are typically not associated with an individual name or account. Thus, gifts cards can be used by anybody. In order to support gift cards, an issuer of gift cards maintains (directly or indirectly) an on-line electronic system for authorization and accounting of gift cards issued by the issuer. Some gift cards can be "reloaded" with additional monetary value. Thus, the funds associated with such gift cards can be depleted and replenished multiple times.

[0004] One disadvantage of gift cards over other forms of payment is that many gift cards have an expiration date, which may vary between a few months to a few years. If the holder of a gift card does not use the gift card before the expiration date, then the issuer of the gift card may deplete or completely eliminate the associated credit from the associated card. Alternatively, due to laws in some states, the funds represented by the gift card may be claimed by the state in which the issuer resides or where the purchase of the gift card took place as "lost property."

[0005] Another disadvantage of gift cards is that gift cards can only be used to make purchases from merchants designated by the issuers of the gift cards. Typically, the issuers of the gift cards only designate themselves. For example, a CompanyX's gift card can only be used at a CompanyX's store (whether online or in a "brick and mortar" store). The CompanyX's gift card cannot be used to purchase items from CompanyY because CompanyY does not recognize CompanyX's gift card as valid payment. Further, CompanyY is incapable of removing any balance from CompanyX's gift card. In this way, gift cards are considered "closed-loop" stored-value instruments. With respect to CompanyX's gift card, CompanyY is said to be "outside of the loop." A closed-loop stored-value instrument (or simply "closed-loop instrument") is typically sold by an individual retailer, serviced by the retailer (or its agents), and is accepted for purchases only at that particular retailer's locations. Another characteristic of a closed-loop instrument is that such an instrument is issued by an entity and liability is incurred by the same entity. For example, a merchant (such as CompanyX) issues a gift card with a positive balance and, upon issuance, incurs liability to offer goods or services in exchange for the monetary value reflected by the balance on the gift card. The gift card may only be used to purchase goods or services from that particular merchant.

[0006] Yet another disadvantage of a gift card is that, because it may be used only for goods or services offered by the issuer, a gift card recipient may not be able to fully utilize the card and put it to its best use. For example, the recipient of the gift card may not wish to purchase any of the goods or services offered by the issuer, or may have more of a need to purchase goods or services from another merchant. Or there may not be a stored location convenient to the recipient such that the card is not convenient to use. In these instances, the recipient may prefer to receive the market value for the card in cash or may prefer to deploy the market value of the card against a purchase at another merchant, rather than have the card either expire or simply go unused.

[0007] In some situations, a holding company may own multiple merchants, and allow its gift cards to be used at any of the merchants that it owns. However, even in this situation, the issuing entity and the entity that incurs the liability are the same. Consequently, even though one of the gift cards issued by the holding company may be labeled with one of its merchants and used to purchase an item from another of its merchants, such gift cards are still closed-loop instruments. With respect to gift cards issued by the holding company, the multiple merchants owned by the holding company are considered to be "inside the loop."

[0008] In contrast, an "open-loop" instrument is an instrument that is issued by a bank or other financial institution that has a banking license. A banking license requires its holder to comply with general banking regulations to which issuers of closed-loop instruments need not comply. Open-loop instruments, unlike closed-loop instruments, also may operate over debit or credit networks, carry a network logo (e.g., Visa®), and can be used at any retail location that accepts the payment form. Common open-loop instruments include debit cards that are issued by banks and credit cards that are issued by Visa®, MasterCard®, American Express® or Discover®. When a customer with an open-loop instrument completes a purchase from a merchant using the open-loop instrument, the customer incurs liability to pay the issuing bank while the issuer of the open-loop instrument authorizes and settles against the liability.

[0009] Some instruments may be considered "semi-open" in that they may be accepted by a limited number of different

merchants. An example of such an instrument is a "mall card" that is accepted by most or all merchants in a particular mall. Another example of such an instrument is a "university card" that is accepted by most or all merchants located on or around a particular university's campus. These "semi-open" instruments are considered closed-loop because the issuer is not a financial institution that is required to have a banking license and the merchants that accept the instruments are limited to those designated by the issuer of the instrument.

[0010] Based on the foregoing, what is needed is a way for a gift card holder to maximize the value of a gift card while being able to avoid some of its drawbacks.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] FIG. **1** is a block diagram that depicts an example system architecture that supports the use of closed-loop instruments to purchase items from a merchant that is "outside of the loop," according to an embodiment of the invention;

[0012] FIGS. **2**A-B are flow diagrams that depict a process for allowing a customer to use a closed-loop instrument to purchase items from a merchant that is "outside of the loop," according to an embodiment of the invention;

[0013] FIG. **3** is a flow diagram that depicts a process for exchanging one closed-loop instrument for another, according to an embodiment of the invention;

[0014] FIG. **4** is a flow diagram that depicts a process for determining the balance of a gift card, according to an embodiment of the invention;

[0015] FIGS. **5**A-D are diagrams that depict webpages that are generated during the process of a card holder receiving an offer for a gift card, according to an embodiment of the invention; and

[0016] FIG. **6** is a block diagram that depicts a computer system upon which an embodiment of the invention may be implemented.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0017] In the following description, for the purposes of explanation, numerous specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the present invention. It will be apparent, however, that the present invention may be practiced without these specific details. In other instances, well-known structures and devices are shown in block diagram form in order to avoid unnecessarily obscuring the present invention.

Extending Liquidity to Value-Ascertainable Items

[0018] The Internet has enabled the development of markets in select goods that have only been supported thus far by in-person, physical trade. Several techniques are described herein for extending the liquidity created by such markets into a payment means of tender. Although the examples that shall be given hereafter are in the context of closed-loop stored-value instruments, the techniques described herein may be applied to any items whose values are reasonably ascertainable without having the items present. Such items are referred to herein as "value-ascertainable items."

[0019] A closed-loop stored-value instrument (such as a gift card) is merely one example of a value-ascertainable item. Other examples include baseball cards, rare coins, gems, comic books, etc. As used herein, "value-ascertainable item" includes closed-loop stored-value instruments, but does not include traditional forms of payment, such as cash, credit cards, and debit cards.

[0020] Virtually any item may be a value-ascertainable item as long as there is an authoritative source for ascertaining the value of the item without the item itself being present. The authoritative source may be a recognized "pricing guide" for a particular type of item, or may be empirically derived. For example, the average selling price of identical items in an online auction system may be established as the authoritative source for the value of an item.

[0021] Applying the techniques described hereafter to value-ascertainable items, a cell phone may be used to purchase concert tickets and vice versa as long as the value of the cell phone and the value of the concert tickets may be ascertained to a reasonable degree of accuracy. As another example, if the value of a set of music CDs and an item of clothing may be ascertained, then that set of CDs may be used to purchase the item of clothing and vice versa.

[0022] In an embodiment, a value-ascertainable exchange service (or VAES) (similar to gift card exchange server **130** that shall be described hereafter) hosts a website where a user (e.g., using a web browser) searches for an item and requests to pay for the item using a second item. In response, the VAES determines the value of the second item from an authoritative source. The VAES then determines an offer for the second item based on the value that the authoritative source provided for the second item. As shall be explained in greater detail hereafter in the context of closed-loop stored-value instruments, the offer value may be greater than, the same, or less than the determined value of the second item. Typically, however, the offer value will be less than the determined value of the second item.

[0023] If the user accepts the offer, the VAES applies the offered amount towards the purchase of the first item and the user pays the difference. If the offered amount is more than the price of the first item, then the VAES may pay the full price, and pay the user the difference in the form of cash or credit.

Creating Liquidity in Closed-Loop Stored Value Instruments

[0024] As mentioned above, closed-loop stored-value instruments are a common example of value-ascertainable items. The techniques described hereafter include techniques in which a close-loop stored-value instrument is used as a payment means at an outside-the-loop merchant. One of the techniques involves using a closed-loop stored-value instrument (i.e., that is issued by one party that does not have a banking license) as a means to pay, in whole or in part, for a purchase from a non-issuing party. For example, a CompanyX gift card is used to make a purchase at CompanyY, where CompanyY is outside the loop designated by CompanyX. Such a transaction is made possible through an intermediary. In some embodiments, the intermediary has a business relationship with both the gift card's issuer (which is typically a retailer) and the non-issuing merchant. In alternative embodiments, the intermediary facilitates the transaction without having any particular business relationship with the gift card issuer.

[0025] The following is a brief non-limiting example of the steps that may be performed to allow a customer to use a CompanyX gift card to make a purchase at a CompanyY store. This is referred to as "POS (or Point of Sale) Payment"

because the gift card is used "at the point of sale." Hereafter, POS Payment will be contrasted with "Online Payment," which is the use of a gift card to make a purchase in an online setting. These techniques may also be used to generate an offer to purchase a closed-loop card in a plurality of settings at its market value as determined by a network operator.

[0026] At check-out, after one or more of the customer's desired items have been scanned for purchase, the customer, using a graphical user interface (GUI) on a display device, selects a drop-down menu that lists multiple merchants, including CompanyX. The customer selects CompanyX and then enters a number indicated on the CompanyX gift card or swipes the CompanyX gift card through a card reader. CompanyY's payment system routes the gift card data to a third party intermediary, referred to hereinafter as a "gift card exchange service," which in turn routes that information to CompanyX's gift card processing system. Based on the gift card data, the gift card exchange service determines whether the CompanyX gift card is valid and, if valid, determines the balance on the CompanyX gift card. If the gift card exchange service determines that the gift card is valid and that there is balance remaining on the gift card, then the gift card exchange service sends, to CompanyY's payment system, value data that indicates an amount that CompanyY's payment system may apply to the total purchase price of the scanned items. In other words, the gift card exchange service converts the value of the gift card to an acceptable payment type that CompanyY recognizes.

[0027] Although the term "gift card" is used herein to describe embodiments of the invention, embodiments of the invention are not limited to gift cards or even to cards. Other non-limiting examples of closed-loop stored-value instruments include pre-paid cards, post-paid cards, smart cards, merchandized credit, layaways, virtual currencies, airline miles, residual insurance values, etc.

System Architecture

[0028] FIG. **1** is a block diagram that depicts an example system architecture **100** that supports the use of gift cards to purchase items from a merchant that is "outside of the loop," according to an embodiment of the invention. FIG. **1** depicts five systems, two of which are from the same party. The five systems include: (1) a customer's web browser **112** that executes on customer's device **110**; (2) a merchant's web server **122** that executes on merchant system **120**; (3) a gift card exchange service **130**; (4) a merchant card program **140**; and (5) a third party retailer card program **150**, where the third party retailer is the issuer of the gift card in question. Merchant system **120** and merchant card program **140** are part of the out-of-loop merchant's payment system. Merchant card program **140** may be operated by another party (e.g., First Data Valuelink™ or Comdata SVS™) that provides card management services to multiple merchants that issue their own gift cards.

[0029] Customer device **110** is not limited to any particular device. Non-limiting examples of customer device **110** include a laptop computer, a desktop computer, a cell phone or a PDA.

[0030] Although gift card exchange service **130** is depicted as a single device in FIG. **1**, gift card exchange service may comprise multiple devices that perform in concert to provide a gift card service to the customer through the merchant. In one embodiment, a gift card exchange service is an entity that employs a network to facilitate the purchase and sale of closed-loop stored-value instructions, an example of which is gift cards. An example of gift card exchange service **130** is Plastic Jungle.

[0031] Each of the five systems may communicate via respective networks **160**. Alternatively, merchant system **120** and merchant card program **140** do not communicate over a network **160**, but rather communicate over a direct link. Network **160** may be implemented by any medium or mechanism that provides for the exchange of data between various nodes in the network. Examples of such a network include, without limitation, a network such as a Local Area Network (LAN), Wide Area Network (WAN), Ethernet, and/or the Internet, and/or one or more terrestrial, satellite, or wireless links. The network may include a combination of networks such as those described. The network may transmit data according to Transmission Control Protocol (TCP), User Datagram Protocol (UDP), and/or Internet Protocol (IP), for example.

Processing a Third Party Retailer Gift Card—Online Payment

[0032] FIGS. **2**A-B are flow diagrams that depict a process **200** for allowing a customer to use a gift card to purchase items from a merchant that is "outside of the loop," according to an embodiment of the invention. Process **200** is described in the context of "Online Payment," i.e., where a gift card is used to make a purchase in an online environment, as opposed to POS Payment, described above. As shall be described in greater detail hereafter, many of the steps in process **200** that are performed by gift card exchange service **130** in the online payment scenario are also performed by gift card exchange service **130** in the POS Payment scenario.

[0033] For the purposes of explanation, the party that issued the gift card is referred to herein as the "issuing merchant" and the party from which the purchase is made is referred to herein as the "outside-the-loop merchant." As indicated above, FIG. **2** is an example of an online check-out flow at an outside-the-loop merchant's website.

[0034] Process **200** begins at step **202**, where web browser **112** displays a payment page (provided by merchant web server **122** or, alternatively, by gift card exchange service **130** acting as a payment service operator) that allows the user to enter payment information in order to complete a purchase of one or more items, whether goods, services, or non-traditional items such as virtual currency used in online gaming. The payment page includes page elements that allow the consumer to (a) select a third party retailer from among a plurality of third party retailers and (b) enter information of a gift card issued from the selected third party retailer. The page elements may be a drop down menu, a set of radio buttons, or any other visual model.

[0035] At step **204**, the customer enters information that identifies the gift card, such as the gift card's number and, if necessary, a personal identification number (PIN). The customer then submits the gift card information. Alternatively, the customer may have an account with the gift card exchange service **130**, and the customer may enter information that identifies the customer. Based on the customer's identity and information previously registered with the gift card exchange service **130**, the gift card exchange service **130** may determine which gift cards the customer has available for use. The gift card number, or the customer's identity, are merely examples of the type of information that may be used by the gift card exchange service **130** to determine the gift card(s) that are involved in the transaction.

[0036] For the purpose of explanation, it shall be assumed that the customer desires to use a single gift card to make the purchase. However, the customer may alternatively specify and use multiple gift cards during a single purchase.

Offer Inquiry

[0037] At step **206**, merchant's web server **122** receives the gift card information, including data that identifies the third party retailer. Step **206** also includes merchant web server **122** sending an offer request to gift card exchange service **130** to obtain, for the customer, an offer for the gift card.

[0038] In an embodiment, card information that is sent between web server **122** and gift card exchange service **130** and between gift card exchange service **130**, merchant card program **140**, and third party retailer card program **150** is first secured. A non-limiting example of a protocol that parties **120**, **130**, **140**, and **150** may rely on for secure data transmission over a network is HTTPS.

Validating

[0039] At step **208**, in response to receiving the request from merchant web server **122**, gift card exchange service **130** performs a validation step based on the data in the request. Gift card exchange service **130** may "validate" the third party retailer, the outside-the-loop merchant, or both, in step **208**. For example, gift card exchange service **130** may determine whether the outside-the-loop merchant that sent the request is an outside-the-loop merchant that gift card exchange service **130** recognizes as a merchant. If so, gift card exchange service **130** may determine, based on the request, whether the pending transaction is "in-store" or online. If the pending transaction is "in-store" and there is no magnetic strip data (i.e., which would be generated by physically swiping the retailer gift card through a card reader) that accompanies the request, then gift card exchange service **130** may determine not to proceed with generating an offer for the third party retailer gift card without additional data, such as a PIN.

[0040] Similarly, if the pending transaction is online and there is no PIN that accompanies the request, then gift card exchange service **130** might determine not to proceed with generating an offer for the third party retailer gift card.

[0041] As another example of validation, gift card exchange service **130** may determine whether the third party retailer is a retailer that gift card exchange service **130** recognizes as a retailer. Additionally, gift card exchange service **130** may determine whether the entered gift card number (and optionally PIN) has the correct format known for that third party retailer. If gift card exchange service **130** determines that the gift card is not valid, then gift card exchange service **130** may reply to the request in step **206** with an error message (e.g., that indicates that the submitted gift card information is not valid). Merchant web server **122**, in response, would provide an error message to web browser **112** to be displayed to the customer.

[0042] As another example of validation, gift card exchange service **130** may determine whether the gift card belongs to a list of blacklisted card numbers that are suspected of being acquired through fraudulent means. This blacklist may be maintained by gift card exchange service **130** or the issuing merchant or both. In addition to blacklisting a specific card number, the validation logic can be (a) built around any attribute of the card, issuing merchant, or out-of-the-loop merchant and (b) determined by the gift card exchange service **130** or issuing merchant.

Balance Response

[0043] If gift card exchange service **130** determines that the gift card is valid, then, at step **210**, gift card exchange service **130** sends a balance request to retailer card program **150** (or alternatively, to a third party card management service, such as First Data™ or SVS™ discussed previously). The balance request includes the gift card number and, optionally, a PIN.

[0044] At step **212**, gift card exchange service **130** receives, from retailer card program **150** (or third party card management service), a balance response message to the balance request sent in step **210**.

[0045] At step **214**, gift card exchange service **130** analyzes the balance response message to determine whether the gift card is valid. The gift card could be determined to be invalid in step **214** and not in step **208** if the gift card number entered by the customer has the correct format for the retailer but (a) the gift card number does not exist, (b) the gift card had expired, (c) the gift card no longer has a balance, (d) the gift card has been deactivated, or (e) the gift card has been marked for fraud. If the response in step **214** indicates that the gift card is invalid, then an error report is generated and sent from retailer card program **150** to gift card exchange service **130**. Gift card exchange service **130** might handle the error or change the error code and description and send an error to merchant system **120**. Merchant system **120** can also modify the error code and description before sending it to web browser **112** to be displayed (at step **215**A). At step **215**B, the customer is presented an option to reenter details about the gift card. If the customer selects the option, then the process proceeds to step **204**. If the customer does not selection the option, then process **200** proceeds to step **290** where an existing checkout process is utilized, i.e., without using the gift card.

[0046] If the balance response message received in step **212** indicates that the gift card is valid, then the balance response message indicates a balance for the gift card and process **200** proceeds to step **216**.

[0047] At step **216**, gift card exchange service **130** generates, based on the balance for the gift card, an offer for the gift card. The value specified in the offer (referred to herein as the "offer value") may be greater than, less than, or equal to the balance indicated in the response received in step **212**. In most cases, the offer value is likely to be less than the balance of the gift card. For example, for a $100 CompanyX card, gift card exchange service **130** might offer $90.

[0048] In other cases, the offer value may be the same as or more than the balance on the gift card. For example, gift card exchange service **130** might offer $100 for a $100 CompanyX gift card. As yet another example, as part of a promotion by CompanyY or gift card exchange service **130**, gift card exchange service **130** might offer a $110 for a $100 CompanyX gift card. In yet other cases, the offer value may be in a different currency.

Varying Offer Depending on Various Factors

[0049] In an embodiment, gift card exchange service **130** takes into account one or more factors (other than the balance of the gift card) to determine an offer for the gift card. These factors are not limited to the Online Payment or POS Payment

scenarios. In fact, these factors may be used whenever an offer for a customer's gift card is determined.

[0050] One factor may be physical presence of the gift card. Thus, if the customer is purchasing one or more items at an outside-the-loop merchant's "brick and mortar" store and presents his/her physical gift card, then the offer would be greater than if the customer were purchasing one or more items online and enters the gift card information into a user interface (e.g., a web browser). For example, an offer for a $100 "physical" gift card may be $90 whereas an offer for a $100 "virtual" gift card may be $80.

[0051] Other factors to determine how much the gift card exchange service offers for a gift card may be related to information known about the customer. Non-limiting examples of such factors include credit score of the customer, whether the customer has registered with the entity that operates gift card exchange service **130**, and whether the customer has agreed to have his/her credit card charged in case the customer (or someone else) attempts to use the gift card after acceptance of the offer. This last factor is important in the scenario where gift card exchange service **130** does not "lock" the gift card upon the customer's acceptance of the offer, where locking ensures that the gift card's balance cannot be reduced.

Multiple Offers Per Card

[0052] In one embodiment, an "offer engine" operated by gift card exchange **130** presents to a customer multiple offers for a single gift card during the same transaction. The multiple offers may presented all at once or sequentially. For example, in an embodiment that presents multiple offers all at once, the user may be presented with several dollar amounts, and the actions that must be taken to qualify for those dollar amounts. For example, for a single gift card worth $100, the offer engine may indicate:

[0053] $75 (with no further information)

[0054] $80 (with submission of valid credit/debit card information)

[0055] $85 (registered user with no registered credit/debit card)

[0056] $90 (registered user with registered credit/debit card)

[0057] By presenting the user with the various offer amounts at once, the user may have more incentive to provide the additional information required to obtain the better offers. In this example, a customer that provides credit/debit card information obtains a better offer because the gift card exchange service **130** may debit the credit card in case the customer does not keep to any agreements entered into with gift card exchange service **130**. Further, a customer that is registered with the gift card exchange service **130** is entitled to a better offer because the customer represents less risk to the gift card exchange service **130** (assuming that the customer has a problem-free history of gift card purchases and/or trade-ins).

[0058] As an example of a sequential increase in the offer amounts, a customer, presently unidentified to gift card exchange service **130**, may receive from the offer engine a $75 "current offer" for the $100 gift card. If the customer signs into an account at the gift card exchange service **130**, the current offer may increase to $85. If the customer then registers credit card information, the current offer may increase to $90.

Non-Monetary Offers

[0059] The offers presented by the offer engine may be monetary (e.g. $70 for a $100 gift card) or non-monetary. For example, instead of or in addition to an offer of $70, the offer engine could offer a gift card issued by Retailer B worth $80 in goods and services at Retailer B, or offer to load talk time into a mobile phone plan for the customer worth $90. The offers presented by the offer engine may even be combinations of monetary and non-monetary items. For example, the offer engine may present the following offers for a $100 gift card for Retailer A:

[0060] $75

[0061] $10 and $90 gift card for Retailer B

[0062] $50 gift card for Retailer B and $55 gift card for Retailer C

[0063] 10,000 "gold coins" in a virtual game currency

Alternative Balance Response—Web Data Harvesting

[0064] Many gift card issuers offer card holders the ability to view the current balance on a gift card. For example, a card holder, using a web browser, sends a request for a "balance inquiry" web page from a website of the third party retailer. The balance inquiry web page will typically have controls that allow the card holder to enter information that uniquely identifies a gift card. The information entered by the user is sent back to the website of the third party retailer. The website responds by sending back a "current balance" web page to the card holder. The current balance web page indicates the current balance associated with the gift card.

[0065] According to one embodiment, instead of sending a balance request to retailer card program **150** (or alternatively, to a third party card management service) in step **210**, gift card exchange service **130** makes use of the balance inquiry mechanism that the third party retailer makes available to card holders. Specifically, in one embodiment, a process executed by the gift card exchange service (referred to herein as a "balance inquiry bot") interacts with the website of the third party retailer in the same manner as a card holder, to retrieve the balance inquiry web page, fill out the balance inquiry web page, receive the current balance web page, and extract the current balance amount from the current balance web page. Because the balance inquiry bot needs to parse the web pages it receives from the third party retailer's website in order to extract specific pieces of information (e.g. the current balance), the process performed by the balance inquiry bot is referred to as "Web data harvesting." Thus, Web data harvesting simulates human Web browsing.

[0066] In an embodiment that uses a balance inquiry bot, step **210** may involve gift card exchange service **130** (or another process) using a balance inquiry bot to request and receive a balance inquiry webpage of the third party retailer's website. Typically, the balance inquiry webpage includes one or more text entry fields for entering necessary card information, such as a gift card number and a PIN. The balance inquiry bot enters the necessary card information based on information received from the card holder and submits the card information to the retailer's website.

[0067] In step **212**, gift card exchange service **130** receives, in response to the submission, a current balance webpage that contains data indicating the current balance of the gift card and analyzes the second webpage to extract from the web page the text that indicates the current balance. If the card number and/or PIN of the gift card are invalid, then the second webpage will so indicate. Additional details related to "Web data harvesting" are described below.

[0068] Through the use of a balance inquiry bot, gift card exchange service **130** can use publicly available information to determine the current balance of a gift card without gift card exchange service **130** having to integrate with a retailer's card program.

[0069] Embodiments of the invention are not limited to any particular means or mechanism for determining the current balance of a gift card. For example, instead of submitting a request for a webpage of the third party retailer's website, gift card exchange service **130** might submit a SQL query to a relational database that stores balance information of a number of gift cards issued by the retailer.

Tokenization

[0070] In one embodiment, gift card exchange service **130** generates a unique token at step **216**, which gift card exchange service **130** associates with the offer and the gift card information. Step **216** also comprises sending the offer and token to web server **122**.

[0071] One purpose for a token is to associate the offer with a lifetime. As long as gift card exchange service **130** recognizes the token, gift card exchange service **130** will honor the offer. In the in-store scenario, the lifetime of a token (and, thus, the lifetime of the offer) may only be a few minutes or less. In the online scenario, the lifetime of a token may be a number of days. This difference in respective lifetimes reflects the difference in how online sessions may last compared with in-store purchases where the time to deliberate on which manner of payment will be used is relatively short.

[0072] Another purpose for a token is to prevent the gift card information from potentially being stolen if the outside-the-loop merchant's systems are compromised, e.g., by a hacker. Because gift card exchange service **130** maintains an association between a token and a third party retailer's gift card information, the outside-the-loop merchant does not need to store the gift card information as long as the outside-the-loop merchant retains the token.

[0073] While the technique illustrated in FIG. **2** involves using a token, alternative embodiments do not generate a token. In such other embodiments, the card information or some other identifier may be used to keep track of the card and corresponding offer.

[0074] At step **218**, merchant web server **122** forwards the offer to web browser **112** to be displayed to the customer at step **220**.

[0075] At step **222**, the customer submits data (e.g., via a keyboard entry or a mouse click on a UI control) that indicates that the customer either accepts or rejects the offer. If the customer rejects the offer, then process **200** proceeds to step **290** where an existing checkout process is utilized, i.e., without using the gift card. For example, web browser **112** might display a page that allows the customer to enter credit card information in order to complete the purchase.

[0076] If the customer submits data that indicates that the customer accepts the offer, then the process proceeds to the accept offer stage, which begins at step **224**.

Accept Offer

[0077] At step **224**, merchant web server **122** receives, from web browser **112**, data that indicates that the customer accepted the offer. In response to this data, web server **122** sends an accept offer message to gift card exchange service **130**. The accept offer message may include the token and offer ID that gift card exchange service **130** generated in step **216**.

[0078] At step **226**, gift card exchange service **130** receives the accept offer message. In an embodiment, the accept offer message includes the retailer gift card information instead of the token. However, similar to other messages described herein, an accept offer message may not be needed to complete the transfer of balance.

Applying Offer Amount to a Merchant Card

[0079] According to one embodiment, the amount of the offer is added to a merchant card, and the merchant card is applied to the purchase. In such an embodiment, step **226** also comprises gift card exchange service **130** retrieving a new merchant gift card number (and, optionally, a PIN). The new merchant gift card number identifies an inactive account that has a zero balance. The new merchant gift card number may be from a list of valid numbers that gift card exchange service **130** maintains for the outside-the-loop merchant and that the outside-the-loop merchant previously provided to gift card exchange service **130**, or may be generated by a coupon engine or other means to accept value at checkout. Alternatively, the new merchant gift card number may be requested (not shown) from merchant web server **122** (or another process executing on a device maintained by the outside-the-loop merchant) that stores valid gift card numbers. The new gift card number represents a virtual gift card from the outside-the-loop merchant. The virtual gift card might not be activated or involved in processing the transaction.

[0080] At step **228**, gift card exchange service **130** registers the token, the new merchant gift card number, and, optionally, the PIN by storing an association between the token and the new merchant gift card number. Step **228** also comprises gift card exchange service **130** sending the token, the new merchant gift card number, and PIN to merchant web server **122**.

[0081] At step **230**, merchant web server **122** receives the token, new merchant gift card number, and PIN as a response to the accept offer message sent in step **224**.

[0082] At step **232**, merchant web server **122** adds the new gift card number and PIN to the collection of gift card numbers that are recognized by the outside-the-loop merchant. Step **232** also comprises merchant web server **122** sending data that updates the total purchase price to reflect the offer value that is applied to the total purchase price. For example, if the total purchase price is $200 and the offer value for a $100 gift card is $90, then the updated total purchase price will be $110. As another example, if the total purchase price is $80 and the offer value is $90, then the total purchase price will be $0. The scenario in which the offer value is greater than the total purchase price is described in more detail below.

[0083] At step **234**, web browser **112** adjusts the total purchase price based on the data sent from merchant web server **122**. Notably, at this point in process **200**, the third party

retailer gift card is not modified and the balance of the gift card is not locked. Therefore, the customer has not lost any value associated with the gift card. Similarly, the new merchant account identified by the new merchant gift card number is still inactive and has a zero balance. Thus, there is no change in liability associated with the new merchant account.

Persisting the Accepted Offer

[0084] After the customer accepts the offer and before completion of the purchase, the customer might modify the set of one or more items that are part of the purchase. This set of items is said to be in the customer's "cart." In an embodiment, gift card exchange service **130** stores, for a period of time, acceptance data that indicates acceptance of the offer. Such persistence allows the customer to modify his/her cart after acceptance of the offer and before completion of the purchase. Furthermore, the acceptance data may be used in a different session between web browser **112** and web server **122**. For example, the customer may choose to not complete the purchase. Later, while attempting to make another purchase (e.g., of the same or different items), the customer may enter in the same third party gift card information as entered in step **204** during a previous session. Gift card exchange service **130** may then determine that the gift card information is the same gift card information entered in the previous session and, based on the acceptance data, provide the same offer (via web server **122**) to the customer.

Submission of the Order

[0085] At step **236**, the customer submits the order, which step comprises web browser **112** sending submission data to merchant web server **122**. The submission data indicates that the customer submitted the order.

[0086] However, instead of submitting the order, the customer might abandon the purchase (not depicted), e.g., by closing web browser **112** or via a selection of an "Abandon Purchase" button. Similarly, the customer may select an option to complete the checkout process without using the third party gift card. In this case, process **200** proceeds to step **290**.

[0087] In both of these scenarios, the third party gift card is still not modified. The customer may use the full balance on the third party gift card for another purchase, whether at the third party retailer or another outside-the-loop merchant. Further, the virtual gift card remains inactive with a zero balance. The card number associated with the virtual gift card may be used for a subsequent transaction and associated offer. Therefore, in the case of customer abandonment of the purchase, there is no change in the financial value of any stored-value instruments.

Process Offer

[0088] At step **238**, in response to receiving the submission data, merchant web server **122** sends a process offer request to gift card exchange service **130**. The process offer request includes the token (generated in step **216**) and/or the new merchant gift card number, and, optionally, the PIN (retrieved in step **230**).

[0089] At step **240**, in response to receiving the request and associated data, gift card exchange service **130** retrieves the retailer gift card information using the token included in the request of step **238**. As noted above, gift card exchange service **130** stores an association between the token and the third party retailer gift card information.

[0090] At step **242**, gift card exchange service **130** sends a lock balance request to retailer card program **150** to lock the balance on the third party retailer gift card (or, alternatively, to zero out the balance). The lock balance request includes any information that is needed to identify the third party retailer gift card, such as the retailer gift card number and, optionally, PIN. Once the retailer gift card is locked, then no other party (including the retailer) can use the funds associated with the retailer's gift card. The locked gift card acts as a deactivation of the gift card.

[0091] At step **244**, gift card exchange service **130** receives, from retailer card program **150**, a lock balance response message that indicates (1) that the balance is locked and (2) the balance of the third party retailer gift card. In an embodiment, some of the balance is used and the remaining balance is retained and useable.

Additional Balance Check

[0092] At step **246**, gift card exchange service **130** determines whether the balance indicated in the response received in step **244** (referred to as the "post-offer balance") is the same as the balance indicated in the response received in step **212** (referred to as the "pre-offer balance"). If not, then gift card exchange service **130** sends, to merchant web server **122**, an error message that indicates an error occurred. In turn, merchant web server **122** provides an error message to web browser **112**, which displays the error message to the customer in step **247**A. At step **247**B, the customer is presented an option to reenter details about the third party gift card or another third party gift card. If the customer selects the option, then the process proceeds to step **204**. If the customer does not select the option, then process **200** proceeds to step **290** where an existing checkout process is utilized, i.e., without using the gift card.

[0093] One reason why the post-offer balance may be different than the pre-offer balance is that there is an attempt to use the third party gift card to purchase another item after the balance request is processed by retailer card program **150** and before the lock balance request is processed by retailer card program **150**. For example, a person attempts to use a CompanyX gift card to purchase an item online from CompanyY. After the person receives an offer for the CompanyX gift card, the person does not respond to the offer for a few minutes, hours, or days. While the offer is still pending, the same or different person attempts to the use the same CompanyX gift card to purchase another item, whether from CompanyX or another outside-the-loop merchant.

[0094] If the post-offer balance is the same as the pre-offer balance, then the process proceeds to step **248**, where gift card exchange service **130** uses the token received in step **240** (and generated in step **216**) to retrieve the new gift card data retrieved in step **226**.

Load Offer Value onto New Gift Card

[0095] At step **250**, gift card exchange service **130** sends a load request to merchant card program **140**. The load request includes the new gift card number and the offer value. In response, merchant card program **140** loads the offer value onto the account associated with the new gift card number. The stored-value instrument associated with the account is referred to herein as a virtual gift card.

[0096] At step **252**, gift card exchange service **130** receives, from merchant card program **140**, a response (to the request in step **250**) that indicates that the load operation completed successfully.

[0097] At step **254**, gift card exchange service **130** creates a record that stores details of the completed transaction and stores the record in a transaction log.

[0098] At step **256**, merchant web server **122** receives, from gift card exchange service **130**, a response to the process offer request sent to gift card exchange service **130** in step **238**. If the pre-offer balance is the same as the post-offer balance and offer value was successfully loaded onto the virtual gift card, then the process proceeds to step **258** where merchant web server **122** continues with the checkout process.

[0099] Step **258** represents the final checkout stage where the customer may complete or abandon the purchase. The customer may complete the purchase by, e.g., selecting a "Complete Purchase" button displayed by web browser **112**. Step **258** may further comprise merchant system **120** debiting at least a portion of the balance on the virtual gift card as payment for the intended purchase.

Gift Card Processing by a Party Other Than Issuer

[0100] As described above, gift card exchange service **130**, like the outside-the-loop merchant, is not "part of the loop" associated with a third party gift card. Importantly, however, gift card exchange service **130** performs a number of actions with respect to a gift card that previously have only been performed by the issuer of the gift card. Such actions include activating a gift card, determining the balance of the gift card, locking the balance of the gift card, redeeming the value of the gift card, reloading value onto the gift card, and transferring the balance of the gift card.

Additional Checkout Scenarios

[0101] There are numerous checkout scenarios, some of which may depend on whether the offer value is greater than, equal to, or less than the original total purchase price. If the offer value (or the balance value loaded on the virtual card) is the same as or more than the original total purchase price, then step **256** does not require any more steps that pertain to payment. Instead, step **256** may further comprise sending, to web browser **112**, display data that requests verification of other information about the customer, such as a mailing address and/or other contact information. Alternatively, the display data sent to web browser **112** might confirm that the online transaction is complete and that the item(s) purchased will be delivered (e.g., electronically or via mail).

[0102] If the offer value is more than the original total purchase price, then merchant web server **122** may send, to web browser **112**, data about the virtual gift card (i.e., new merchant gift card number and PIN) to be displayed to the customer. Similarly, the outside-the-loop merchant may send an email to an email address of the customer where the email contains the virtual gift card information. Additionally or alternatively, the outside-the-loop merchant might mail, to a mailing address of the customer, a physical gift card that corresponds to the virtual gift card.

[0103] If the offer value is less than the original total purchase price, then step **256** may further comprise sending, to web browser **112**, display data that requests the customer to submit additional payment information (e.g., a credit card number) to pay for the difference between the offer value and the original total purchase price. The single purchase of one or more items using two different payment instruments is known as a "split tender."

Alternative Checkout Flow

[0104] The above approach described in FIG. **2** is one example of a checkout flow, which is modified from a "normal" checkout flow where cash, check, a credit card, or a debit card is used. In an alternative embodiment, once a gift card of an issuing merchant is presented as payment for one or more items sold by an out-of-the-loop merchant, the card holder is presented with an interface provided by a gift card exchange service, where the gift card exchange service accepts payment.

[0105] For example, in an Online Payment scenario, once a user indicates, via web browser **112**, to web server **122**, that the user would like to use a gift card to make a purchase from an out-of-the-loop merchant, web server **122** directs the user to a web page provided by gift card exchange service **130**. The gift card exchange service **130** directly receives (i.e., via web browser **112**, but not via web server **122**) all data entered by the user and directly sends (i.e., via web browser **112**, but not via web server **122**) any response data directly to customer device **110**. At the end of a successful payment received by gift card exchange service **130**, gift card exchange service **130** notifies web server **122** (or another computing element of the out-of-the-loop merchant). Gift card exchange service **130** remits payment to the non-issuing merchant upon completion of the transaction with the user or at some later time.

[0106] As another example in a POS Payment scenario, a user indicates, via a user interface presented at checkout, an option to pay by credit card, debit card, or a gift card exchange service, such as gift card exchange service **130**. By selecting the latter option, the user is presented with a user interface provided by the gift card exchange service. The user interface instructs the user to scan the user's gift card. If the offer value for the gift card is less than the total purchase price at checkout, then the user pays for the difference by swiping a credit or debit card (or other form of payment) that the gift card exchange service accepts.

Virtual Currency

[0107] Instead of using third party gift cards to purchase traditional goods and services (such as food, clothes, appliances, and entertainment), third party gift cards may be used to purchase other non-traditional items, examples of which are nearly limitless. One popular example of a non-traditional item is virtual currency, which many online games employ.

[0108] As an example, an online GameX operated by CompanyZ may allow players to manage a virtual farm by planting, growing, and harvesting virtual crops and trees, and raising virtual livestock. The GameX may be based around a virtual market, where different virtual items can be purchased, including seeds, trees, animals, buildings, decorations, vehicles, and more land. Such purchases may be made using (1) "farm coins," which is the generic money of GameX (which is earned by selling crops) or (2) "farm cash," which a player earns based on the player's experience level. A player can also choose to buy GameX coins or cash from CompanyZ using an open-loop instrument such as a credit card.

[0109] Therefore, in an embodiment of the invention, an online game allows a player to enter details of a third party gift card owned by the player and receive virtual currency in

exchange. For example, a player of GameX might enter the details of a CompanyZ gift card with a balance of $100 and, via messaging with gift card exchange service **130** (similar to the process described above), receive 1000 "farm coins" or $1000 in "farm cash." In this manner, any discount on the value of the gift card may be transparent to the user.

[0110] Therefore, a holder of a third party gift card may use the gift card to purchase a good or service from a outside-the-loop merchant without being notified of the actual dollar value represented by the purchased good or service. As another example, using gift card exchange service **130**, a CompanyX gift card with a $100 balance may be exchanged for 40 weeks of a video service provided by a company that has no relationship with CompanyX.

Gift Card Exchange

[0111] In addition to the alternative embodiments described above, embodiments of the invention are not limited to the scenario where a holder of a third party gift card is attempting to purchase one or more items from another outside-the-loop merchant. For example, according to one embodiment, a holder of a gift card might desire to exchange the holder's gift card for another merchant's gift card. For example, a holder of a CompanyX gift card might want to exchange the CompanyX gift card for a CompanyY gift card. Thus, in this embodiment, an intermediary (such as gift card exchange service **130**) provides a mechanism to make such an exchange possible.

[0112] FIG. **3** is a flow diagram that depicts a process for exchanging one closed-loop stored-value instrument (or gift card) for another, according to an embodiment of the invention. The steps of process **300** are performed from the perspective of a gift card exchange service, such as gift card **130**, that is "outside of the loop" with respect to both the exchanged gift card and the exchanged-for gift card.

[0113] At step **310**, a gift card exchange service sends, to the user, first retailer data that identifies a first plurality of retailers. As used hereinafter, "sending data to a user" is shorthand for sending data to a device that is operated by the user. Similarly, "receiving data from a user" is shorthand for receiving data from a device that is operated by the user.

[0114] At step **320**, the gift card exchange service receives, from the user, selection data that indicates a selection of a first retailer from the first plurality of retailers.

[0115] At step **330**, the gift card exchange service receives, from the user, card data that indicates a gift card that is issued by the first retailer. This card data may include a number and a PIN associated with the gift card.

[0116] In an alternative embodiment, steps **310** and **320** are optional and the process begins at step **330**.

[0117] At step **340**, the gift card exchange service determines, based on the card data, a monetary value associated with the gift card.

[0118] At step **350**, the gift card exchange service sends, to the user, second retailer data that identifies a second plurality of retailers from which the user may select. The second plurality of retailers may be the same as or different than the first plurality of retailers.

[0119] At step **360**, the gift card exchange service receives, from the user, selection data that indicates a selection of a second retailer of the second plurality of retailers. The second retailer is different than the first retailer. This selection indicates the user's intent to exchange his/her gift card for a gift card issued by the second retailer.

[0120] At step **370**, in response to this selection, the gift card exchange service sends, to the user, card data that identifies one or more gift cards that are issued by the second retailer.

[0121] At step **380**, the gift card exchange service receives, from the user, purchase data that indicates the user's intention to exchange the user's gift card for one of the offered gift cards in step **370**.

[0122] Alternatively, step **350** may comprise the gift card exchange service sending, to the user, exchange data that identifies a plurality of gift cards from which the user may select. The plurality of gift cards may be issued by a plurality of different retailers. In this alternative embodiment, the gift card exchange service receives (in place of steps **360** and **370**), from the user, selection data that indicates a selection of a particular gift card from among the plurality of gift cards.

Gift Card Exchange Example

[0123] For example, the gift card exchange service hosts a web server that provides web pages in response to HTTP requests from client devices. A card holder operates a network device and causes the network device to request a web page from the gift card exchange service's web server. The web page includes a mechanism, (e.g., a drop down menu) to allow the card holder to select, from among a first plurality of retailers, the party that issued the card holder's gift card. Additionally or alternatively, the web page includes one or more fields into which the holder may enter the gift card number and PIN. The same (or subsequent web page, depending on the implementation) provides a mechanism to allow the user to select, from among a second plurality of retailers (e.g., via another drop down menu), a second party that issues gift cards. One of the gift cards owned by the gift card exchange service and issued by the second party will be presented to the card holder for selection.

[0124] In either scenario, the gift card exchange service determines a gift card from another retailer (i.e., one "outside of the loop" with respect to the card holder's gift card) to provide to the card holder by sending the gift card data to the card holder's network device. The gift card exchange service may determine the gift card based on input from the card holder's network device or automatically based on other factors. For example, the card holder may select one or more gift cards for which the card holder may desire to exchange his/her gift card. Alternatively, the gift card exchange service may determine one or more gift cards to provide, to the card holder, as options for exchange based on the balance of the card holder's gift card, the availability and balance of other gift cards owned by the gift card exchange service, and/or a profile of the card holder. For example, based on previous business interactions with the card holder, the gift card exchange service accesses data that identifies which gift cards (including the retailers and balances of the gift cards) the card holder has purchased from the gift card exchange service in the past. If the card holder has purchased, from the gift card exchange service, a number of $100 CompanyY gift cards, then it is likely that, with a $100 CompanyX gift card, the holder may wish to exchange his/her gift card for a $100 (or similar amount) CompanyY gift card.

[0125] Similar to embodiments described above, the gift card exchange service may make an offer for a card holder's gift card where the value of the sought-for gift card is less than, the same as, or more than the balance on the card holder's gift card. For example, the gift card exchange service

might offer a $90 CompanyY gift card for a $100 CompanyX gift card. As another example, the gift card exchange service might offer a $100 CompanyY gift card for a $100 CompanyX gift card. As yet another example, as part of a promotion by CompanyY or the gift card exchange service, the gift card exchange service might offer a $110 CompanyY gift card for a $100 CompanyX gift card.

Gift Card "Redemption"

[0126] In some situations, a card holder might want to receive cash (or other currency) for his/her gift card from a party that is different than the party that issued the gift card, i.e., without the card holder purchasing any items from the issuing party. In this way, although balance remains on the gift card, the gift card is "redeemed" from the perspective of the card holder. A card holder may present his/her gift card for "redemption" in a POS (point of sale) environment or an online environment. For example, in a POS environment, a card holder may present her gift card in a pawn shop, at a kiosk or ATM, or in a merchant's store, each of which is "outside of the loop" with respect to the issuer of the gift card). In an online environment, a card holder may enter, via a web browser or another software application, information that uniquely identifies his/her gift card and cause that gift card information to be sent, over a network, to an entity that is "outside of the loop" with respect to the issuer of the gift card. In both environments, the entity that receives the gift card information from the card holder determines the validity and balance of the gift card or contracts with another entity that makes the determination.

[0127] The entity that determines the validity and balance of the gift card may do so through means that are available to any card holder through a web interface, similar to the process referred to as "Web data harvesting," described above under the subheading "ALTERNATE BALANCE OFFER." FIG. **4** is a flow diagram that depicts an example process **400** for determining the balance of a gift card, where the process relies on Web data harvesting, according to an embodiment of the invention. Although described as being performed by a single entity (such as a gift card exchange service), the steps of process **400** may be performed by multiple entities that are associated with each other. For example, a gift card exchange service might rely on another process or service to determine the balance on a gift card.

[0128] In step **410**, a gift card exchange service receives information that uniquely identifies a gift card and that is sufficient to determine the balance on the gift card. The gift card exchange service may receive this information (a) from the card holder through a web interface (e.g., a web browser of the card holder sending data to a web server of the gift card exchange service) provided by the gift card exchange service or (b) from another party, such as a pawn shop, an ATM, or kiosk to which the card holder presented his/her gift card.

[0129] FIG. **5**A depicts a webpage **502** generated by the gift card exchange service and displayed at a client device, according to an embodiment of the invention. Webpage **502** includes a text entry field for identifying the issuer of the gift card, a text entry field for the gift card number, and a text entry field for a PIN, if any. In this embodiment, the gift card exchange service receives the gift card information in response to user selection of the "Continue" button.

[0130] In step **420**, in response to receiving the information, a balance inquiry bot controlled by the gift card exchange service requests and receives a first webpage from a web server of the issuer of the gift card. FIG. **5**B depicts a webpage **504** generated by the issuer of the gift card, which issuer is Chili's™ in this example. Webpage **504** is an example of this "balance inquiry webpage" referred to in step **420**.

[0131] In step **430**, the balance inquiry bot analyzes the first webpage to identify, within the first webpage, one or more text entry fields into which the gift card information is to be entered. One text entry field might be for a card number while another text entry field might be for a gift card's PIN. The balance inquiry bot enters the gift card information in the appropriate one or more text entry fields of the webpage. In FIG. **5**B, webpage **504** includes a text entry field for the gift card number.

[0132] In step **440**, the gift card exchange service selects a button or other submission means in the webpage to cause the gift card information to be sent to the web server of the issuer of the gift card. In FIG. **5**B, webpage **504** includes a "Check Balance" button.

[0133] In step **450**, the gift card exchange service receives a second webpage from the web server and analyzes the second webpage to determine whether the gift card is valid and what the current balance is on the gift card.

[0134] FIG. **5**C depicts a webpage **506** generated by a web server operated by Chili's™. Webpage **506** indicates that the current balance of the gift card (identified by the gift card number entered in webpage **502** of FIG. **5**A) is $100. Because a current balance is indicated, the gift card is valid.

[0135] Steps **420**-**450** may be performed by another entity with which the gift card exchange service contracts to perform the retrieval of the balance of the gift card through publicly available means. "Publicly available means" indicates that no username or password is required to obtain balance information about the gift card. As FIGS. **5**B and **5**C illustrate, "publicly available means" might include a website that is accessible by a web browser executing on a client device.

[0136] In step **460**, if the gift card is determined to be valid and has a positive balance, then gift card exchange service determines an amount to offer the card holder (or other party that accepted the gift card). For example, FIG. **5**D depicts a webpage **508** that indicates that the gift card exchange service offers the card holder $85 for the $100 Chili's™ gift card.

[0137] As another example, if the balance on the gift card is $100 and the card holder presents his/her card to a pawn shop attendant, then the attendant might swipe the gift card through a card reader that sends the gift card data to the gift card exchange service, which might offer the pawn shop $85 for the gift card. The pawn shop attendant, in turn, might offer a lower amount for the gift card, such as $50. In a related example, a kiosk or ATM may be in the role of the pawn shop in reading the gift card data, receiving an offer from the gift card exchange service, and providing, to the card holder, its own offer for the gift card.

[0138] In the above examples, a card holder effectively trades in his/her gift card for dollars (or other cash currency, such as the Euro). However, embodiments of the invention are not so limited. For example, a card holder might trade in his gift card for airline miles, virtual currency, or practically any other item (virtual or not) that the card holder values (or vice versa, e.g., airline miles for merchant currency) and that the gift card acceptor (e.g., outside-the-loop merchant, pawn shop, ATM, kiosk, etc.) can provide.

Captcha

[0139] Some gift card issuers, through their publicly available websites, employ CAPTCHA when accepting gift card

information in order to verify that the issuers are dealing with people instead of an automated program. CAPTCHA is a type of challenge-response test used in computing to ensure that the response is not generated by a computer. The test usually involves an automated process asking a user to complete a simple test which the automated process is able to generate and grade. Because other automated processes are unable to solve the CAPTCHA, any user entering a correct solution is presumed to be human. The CAPTCHA challenge may involve an image, video, or audio, or any combination thereof. A common type of CAPTCHA requires that the user type letters or digits from a distorted image that appears on the screen. If the user enters the correct letters and/or digits, then the user is provided the information that the user requested.

[0140] Therefore, for those card issuers that use CAPTCHA, the balance inquiry bot copies the CAPTCHA challenge from a webpage generated by a web server of the card issuer. The gift card exchange service then causes the CAPTCHA challenge to be presented to the user, e.g., via a webpage. In the above example comprising FIGS. **5**A-**5**D, the CAPTCHA challenge would be displayed to the user after the gift card exchange service receives webpage **504** and before submission of the gift card number to the web server of the issuer. Subsequently, the gift card exchange service receives the CAPTCHA response (whether text or audio) from the user and causes the response to be sent to the card issuer's website along with the gift card information received from (e.g., entered by) the card holder.

Offering a Discount for a Purchase Absent a Gift Card From the Purchaser

[0141] Over time, a gift card exchange service might come into the possession of hundreds or even thousands of gift cards, each of which has a significant balance. "Possession" of a gift card may include (a) actual possession of the physical gift card or (b) electronic storage of information that identifies the gift card, such as the gift card's number and any PIN, without actual possession of the physical gift card. In order to divulge itself of such a large inventory of gift cards, the gift card exchange service might use the gift cards without end users ever knowing about the gift cards while the end users are making purchases.

[0142] For example, a user visits the website of CompanyX, identifies three items to purchase, and continues to the checkout phase of the payment flow where the user is presented an option on how to pay for the three items, which totals $100. A browser plug-in, acting for the gift card exchange service and executing on the user's computing device, detects a specific condition. The condition may be that the user has navigated to the website of CompanyX, or that the user is about to make a payment to CompanyX. The browser plug-in identifies that CompanyX is the merchant and, in response, notifies the gift card exchange service, which, in turn, identifies a gift card (a) that CompanyX issued and (b) that the gift card exchange service currently possesses. The gift card has a current balance of $100. Previous to this transaction, the gift card exchange service purchased the gift card from another user for $90. The gift card exchange service then sends instructions to the browser plug-in to offer the user a 5% discount on the $100 purchase. If the user accepts, then the browser plug-in may direct the user to a webpage of the gift card exchange service, or cause a form to be displayed where the user can enter payment information, such as credit card or a debit card of the user. Thus, the user pays the gift card exchange service $95 and the gift card exchange service applies the $100 gift card to the purchase of the three items. [Is this correct? What if the purchase price is greater than or less than the gift card balance? Ashmit, you wrote, "In this situation the gift card will only be activated for the exact amount of the transaction." Does this mean that if the purchase price is greater than or less than the gift card balance, then the gift card cannot be activated?

[0143] As another example, a user instructs a web browser to access a website of CompanyX. A browser plug-in of a gift card exchange service generates a message that is subsequently displayed to the user and that indicates that the user can receive immediate discounts up to $10 off. For example, a gift card exchange service may own (1) a $10 gift certificate from CompanyX that it purchased for $9, (2) a $50 gift certificate from CompanyX that it purchased for $45, and (3) a $100 gift card that it purchased for $90. In this case, the browser plug-in generates another message that indicates that the user can receive 50 cents off any purchase over $10, $2 off any purchase over $50, and $5 off any purchase over $100. In this example, the user intends to make a purchase of one or more items totaling $152. Under these circumstances, the gift card exchange service applies a $147 charge to the user's credit card. The gift card exchange service also pays for the purchase using the $100 gift card, the $50 gift certificate, and $2 cash. In this scenario, the user receives a $5 discount, and the gift card exchange service obtains $147 in exchange for $137 ($90+$45+$2).

Loading Value into a Preexisting Account ["Top-Up"]

[0144] According to an embodiment of the invention, a gift card exchange service receives a gift card data from a card holder and, in exchange for the gift card, funds (or upload value to) a pre-existing account of the card holder. Non-limiting examples of a pre-existing account include a PayPal™ account, a Facebook™ credits account, or a wireless phone account. Thus, the value of the purchase by the gift card exchange service is used to increase the balance of an account of the card holder, whether the balance is in dollars or another currency, including virtual currency.

[0145] For example, a card holder sends, to a gift card exchange service (e.g., through a web interface), information that identifies a gift card of the card holder. The gift card was issued by CompanyX and has a current balance of $100. The gift card exchange service, in exchange for the gift card, offers to pay $90 to the card holder's utilities account, which will be applied by the card holder's utility company to pay for a pending water bill of the card holder.

E-Codes

[0146] According to an embodiment of the invention, a gift card exchange service offers an "e-code" to a card holder in exchange for the card holder's gift card. An "e-code" is a value that a gift card exchange service associates with (a) information that identifies the gift card or (b) information that identifies the transaction (i.e., the exchange of the gift card for an e-code). An e-code may comprise letters, numbers, or any combination thereof. An e-code may be a unique value relative to all the e-codes generated by a gift card exchange service. The card holder (who no longer owns the gift card) can then use the e-code when purchasing an item from a

certain party, whether or not the certain party is same as or different than the party that issued the gift card.

[0147] Additionally, a user may decide to buy a gift card issued by a specific merchant from a website operated by the gift card exchange service. On payment, the gift card exchange service delivers only an e-code to the user.

[0148] For example, a user sends, to a gift card exchange service (e.g., through a web interface or via cell phone), information that identifies a gift card of the card holder. The gift card was issued by CompanyX and has a current balance of $100. The gift card exchange service, in exchange for the gift card, offers to pay $90 to the user. Rather than sending any form of payment to the user, the gift card exchange service generates an e-code (or retrieves an e-code from a list of pre-generated e-codes) and associates the e-code with this transaction or with information that identifies the gift card number. This e-code may be the card number of the gift card sold to the gift card exchange service, or it may be a separate code that represents the card value. The gift card exchange service sends (e.g., via email or cell phone) the e-code to the user. The user then accesses (e.g., via a web browser) the website of CompanyY, identifies one or more items to purchase from CompanyY, and proceeds to a checkout webpage. At the checkout webpage, the user enters the e-code into his/her browser window and submits the e-code as payment for the one or more items. The gift card exchange service applies some or all of the $90 (i.e., that the gift card exchange service offered to the user) to the purchase of the one or more items sold by CompanyY.

Hardware Overview

[0149] FIG. **6** is a block diagram that depicts a computer system **600** upon which an embodiment of the invention may be implemented. Computer system **600** includes a bus **602** or other communication mechanism for communicating information, and a processor **604** coupled with bus **602** for processing information. Computer system **600** also includes a main memory **606**, such as a random access memory (RAM) or other dynamic storage device, coupled to bus **602** for storing information and instructions to be executed by processor **604**. Main memory **606** also may be used for storing temporary variables or other intermediate information during execution of instructions to be executed by processor **604**. Computer system **600** further includes a read only memory (ROM) **608** or other static storage device coupled to bus **602** for storing static information and instructions for processor **604**. A storage device **610**, such as a magnetic disk or optical disk, is provided and coupled to bus **602** for storing information and instructions.

[0150] Computer system **600** may be coupled via bus **602** to a display **612**, such as a cathode ray tube (CRT), for displaying information to a computer user. An input device **614**, including alphanumeric and other keys, is coupled to bus **602** for communicating information and command selections to processor **604**. Another type of user input device is cursor control **616**, such as a mouse, a trackball, or cursor direction keys for communicating direction information and command selections to processor **604** and for controlling cursor movement on display **612**. This input device typically has two degrees of freedom in two axes, a first axis (e.g., x) and a second axis (e.g., y), that allows the device to specify positions in a plane.

[0151] The invention is related to the use of computer system **600** for implementing the techniques described herein. According to one embodiment of the invention, those techniques are performed by computer system **600** in response to processor **604** executing one or more sequences of one or more instructions contained in main memory **606**. Such instructions may be read into main memory **606** from another machine-readable medium, such as storage device **610**. Execution of the sequences of instructions contained in main memory **606** causes processor **604** to perform the process steps described herein. In alternative embodiments, hard-wired circuitry may be used in place of or in combination with software instructions to implement the invention. Thus, embodiments of the invention are not limited to any specific combination of hardware circuitry and software.

[0152] The term "machine-readable medium" as used herein refers to any medium that participates in providing data that causes a machine to operation in a specific fashion. In an embodiment implemented using computer system **600**, various machine-readable media are involved, for example, in providing instructions to processor **604** for execution. Such a medium may take many forms, including but not limited to, non-volatile media, volatile media, and transmission media. Non-volatile media includes, for example, optical or magnetic disks, such as storage device **610**. Volatile media includes dynamic memory, such as main memory **606**. Transmission media includes coaxial cables, copper wire and fiber optics, including the wires that comprise bus **602**. Transmission media can also take the form of acoustic or light waves, such as those generated during radio-wave and infra-red data communications.

[0153] Common forms of machine-readable media include, for example, a floppy disk, a flexible disk, hard disk, magnetic tape, or any other magnetic medium, a CD-ROM, any other optical medium, punchcards, papertape, any other physical medium with patterns of holes, a RAM, a PROM, and EPROM, a FLASH-EPROM, any other memory chip or cartridge, a carrier wave as described hereinafter, or any other medium from which a computer can read.

[0154] Various forms of machine-readable media may be involved in carrying one or more sequences of one or more instructions to processor **604** for execution. For example, the instructions may initially be carried on a magnetic disk of a remote computer. The remote computer can load the instructions into its dynamic memory and send the instructions over a telephone line using a modem. A modem local to computer system **600** can receive the data on the telephone line and use an infra-red transmitter to convert the data to an infra-red signal. An infra-red detector can receive the data carried in the infra-red signal and appropriate circuitry can place the data on bus **602**. Bus **602** carries the data to main memory **606**, from which processor **604** retrieves and executes the instructions. The instructions received by main memory **606** may optionally be stored on storage device **610** either before or after execution by processor **604**.

[0155] Computer system **600** also includes a communication interface **618** coupled to bus **602**. Communication interface **618** provides a two-way data communication coupling to a network link **620** that is connected to a local network **622**. For example, communication interface **618** may be an integrated services digital network (ISDN) card or a modem to provide a data communication connection to a corresponding type of telephone line. As another example, communication interface **618** may be a local area network (LAN) card to provide a data communication connection to a compatible LAN. Wireless links may also be implemented. In any such

implementation, communication interface **618** sends and receives electrical, electromagnetic or optical signals that carry digital data streams representing various types of information.

[0156] Network link **620** typically provides data communication through one or more networks to other data devices. For example, network link **620** may provide a connection through local network **622** to a host computer **624** or to data equipment operated by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) **626**. ISP **626** in turn provides data communication services through the world wide packet data communication network now commonly referred to as the "Internet" **628**. Local network **622** and Internet **628** both use electrical, electromagnetic or optical signals that carry digital data streams. The signals through the various networks and the signals on network link **620** and through communication interface **618**, which carry the digital data to and from computer system **600**, are exemplary forms of carrier waves transporting the information.

[0157] Computer system **600** can send messages and receive data, including program code, through the network (s), network link **620** and communication interface **618**. In the Internet example, a server **630** might transmit a requested code for an application program through Internet **628**, ISP **626**, local network **622** and communication interface **618**.

[0158] The received code may be executed by processor **604** as it is received, and/or stored in storage device **610**, or other non-volatile storage for later execution. In this manner, computer system **600** may obtain application code in the form of a carrier wave.

[0159] In the foregoing specification, embodiments of the invention have been described with reference to numerous specific details that may vary from implementation to implementation. Thus, the sole and exclusive indicator of what is the invention, and is intended by the applicants to be the invention, is the set of claims that issue from this application, in the specific form in which such claims issue, including any subsequent correction. Any definitions expressly set forth herein for terms contained in such claims shall govern the meaning of such terms as used in the claims. Hence, no limitation, element, property, feature, advantage or attribute that is not expressly recited in a claim should limit the scope of such claim in any way. The specification and drawings are, accordingly, to be regarded in an illustrative rather than a restrictive sense.

1. A method comprising the computer-implemented steps of:

a system, operated by a third party, receiving an indication that a first party desires to purchase a first item from a second party using, at least partially, a value-ascertainable item for payment;

in response to the request, the system performing the steps of:

determining a value of the value-ascertainable item, and

based on the value, providing an offer for the value-ascertainable item;

in response to acceptance of the offer, the system causing the value to be applied to the purchase of the first item;

wherein the method is performed by one or more computing devices.

2. The method of claim **1**, wherein the value-ascertainable item is a closed-loop stored-value instrument.

3. The method of claim **2**, wherein:

receiving the indication comprises receiving, over a network, card data associated with the closed-loop stored-value instrument;

the closed-loop stored value instrument is issued by a fourth party that is different than the first, second, and third parties;

the second party is incapable of deducting balance from the closed-loop stored-value instrument;

determining a value of the value-ascertainable item comprises:

determining a balance of the closed-loop stored-value instrument, and

determining the value based on the balance; and

providing an offer for the value-ascertainable item comprises sending, over the network, to the second party, offer data that indicates the value, wherein the second party applies the value to the purchase of the first item.

4. The method of claim **3**, wherein the value is different than the balance of the stored-value instrument.

5. The method of claim **5**, wherein the value is in a virtual currency.

6. The method of claim **3**, further comprising, after receiving the card data, the system performing the steps of:

retrieving new card data that includes data that corresponds to an account that is recognized by the second party, wherein the account is associated with a second closed-loop stored-value instrument that is different than said closed-loop stored-value instrument;

sending a request to load an amount of monetary value onto the account, wherein the amount of monetary value includes at least a portion of the balance of said closed-loop stored-value instrument.

7. The method of claim **3**, further comprising, after receiving the card data, the system performing the steps of:

generating a token that is associated with the card data;

sending the token to the second party without sending the card data; and

after sending the token to the second party, receiving, from the second party, the token in association with the purchase of the first item.

8. The method of claim **3**, wherein determining the balance of the closed-loop stored-value instrument includes:

sending, to the fourth party, a balance request to receive the balance of the closed-loop stored-value instrument; and

receiving, from the fourth party and in response to the balance request, balance data that indicates the balance.

9. The method of claim **3**, wherein determining the balance of the closed-loop stored-value instrument includes:

the system sending, to a publicly available website of the fourth party, a request for a first webpage;

in response to receiving the first webpage from the website of the fourth party, the system parsing the first webpage to automatically identify one or more fields within the web page;

the system entering the card data into the one or more fields contained within the first webpage and submitting the filled-in webpage to the website of the fourth party;

after causing the card data to be submitted to the website of the fourth party, receiving, from the website of the fourth party, a second webpage that includes balance data that indicates the balance; and

in response to receiving the second webpage, the system parsing the second webpage to automatically extract the balance data from the second webpage.

10. The method of claim **3**, further comprising, after receiving the card data, the system performing the steps of sending, to the fourth party:

(a) a lock request to lock the closed-loop stored-value instrument in order to prevent further deductions of the balance of the closed-loop stored-value instrument and receiving, from the fourth party and in response to the lock request, a response that indicates that the closed-loop stored-value instrument is locked; or

(b) a zero balance request to zero the balance of the closed-loop stored-value instrument and receiving, from the fourth party and in response to the zero balance request, a response that indicates that the balance of the closed-loop stored-value instrument is zero.

11. The method of claim **3**, further comprising, after acceptance of the offer, the system performing the steps of:

sending, to the fourth party, a redemption request to redeem the closed-loop stored-value instrument by withdrawing the monetary value represented by the balance of the closed-loop stored-value instrument; and

receiving, from the fourth party and in response to the redemption request, a response that indicates that monetary value is withdrawn and is owned by the third party.

12. The method of claim **1**, wherein the offer is based on one or more of the following factors: whether the first party has registered with the third party, whether the first party has provided credit card information to the third party, the credit score of the first party, or whether the first party is known to be in possession of the value-ascertainable item.

13. The method of claim **1**, wherein the offer for the value-ascertainable item is non-monetary.

14. The method of claim **1**, wherein providing an offer for the value-ascertainable item comprises providing a plurality of offers for the value-ascertainable item, the method further comprising receiving selection data that indicates that the first party selected one of the plurality of offers.

15. The method of claim **14**, wherein each offer of the plurality of offers is associated with (a) a different value and (b) a different condition that must be satisfied in order to accept said each offer.

16. The method of claim **14**, wherein providing a plurality of offers comprises:

providing a first offer for the value-ascertainable item;

after providing the first offer, receiving additional information about the first party;

in response to receiving the additional information about the first party, providing a second offer for the value-ascertainable item, wherein the value associated with the second offer is greater than the value associated with the first offer.

17. A method performed by a first party, the method comprising the computer-implemented steps of:

receiving, from a customer, card data associated with a closed-loop stored-value instrument that is issued by a second party that is different than the first party;

wherein the closed-loop stored-value instrument is being used by the customer to complete a purchase of one or more items from the first party;

in response to receiving the card data:

sending the card data over a network to a third party that is different than the first party and the second party;

wherein the first party is incapable of deducting balance from the closed-loop stored-value instrument;

receiving, from the third party, value data that indicates a value;

decreasing, based on the value, the amount required of the customer to complete the purchase of the one or more items;

wherein the method is performed by one or more computing devices.

18. The method of claim **17**, wherein:

the value data is part of an offer, by the third party, for the stored-value represented by the closed-loop stored-value instrument;

the method further comprising, after receiving the value data:

causing the offer to be presented to the customer, and

after causing the offer to be presented to the customer, receiving, from the customer, acceptance data that indicates whether the customer accepted the offer.

19. The method of claim **17**, further comprising:

after receiving the value data, receiving, from the third party, new card data associated with the first party;

wherein the new card data includes data that corresponds to an account that is recognized by the first party;

wherein the account is associated with a second closed-loop stored-value instrument and is associated with a balance;

wherein decreasing the amount required to complete the purchase of the one or more items includes decreasing, based on the value, the balance of the account.

20. The method of claim **19**, wherein:

the balance of the account is a first balance;

after the balance of the account is decreased, the account is associated with a second balance that is less than the first balance; and

the method further comprising sending, to the customer, at least a portion of the new card data.

21. The method of claim **17**, wherein:

receiving the value data further comprises receiving, from the third party, a token that is associated with the card data; and

a plurality of subsequent communications with the third party regarding the purchase include the token in place of the card data.

22. A method performed by a third party, the method comprising the computer-implemented steps of:

receiving, from a user, first data that indicates a first closed-loop stored-value instrument that is issued by a first party that is different than the third party;

determining, based on the first data, a first monetary value associated with the first closed-loop stored-value instrument;

sending, toward the user, data that indicates (a) at least a second closed-loop stored-value instrument that is issued by a second party that is different than the first and third parties and (b) a balance of the second closed-loop stored-value instrument;

wherein second party is incapable of deducting balance from the first closed-loop stored-value instrument;

wherein first party is incapable of deducting balance from the second closed-loop stored-value instrument;

receiving, from the user, purchase data that indicates the user's intention to exchange the first closed-loop stored-value instrument for the second closed-loop stored-value instrument;

wherein the method is performed by one or more computing devices.

23. The method of claim **22**, further comprising:

prior to receiving the first data, sending, toward the user, merchant data that identifies a plurality of merchants;

wherein receiving the first data comprises receiving selection data that indicates a selection of a particular merchant of the plurality of merchants;

wherein the first party is the particular merchant.

24. The method of claim **22**, further comprising:

sending, toward the user, merchant data that identifies a plurality of merchants;

receiving, from the user, selection data that indicates a selection of a particular merchant of the plurality of merchants;

wherein the second party is the particular merchant.

25. The method of claim **22**, further comprising, prior to receiving the purchase data:

sending, toward the user, exchange data that identifies a plurality of merchants an, for each of the plurality of merchants, a balance associated with said each merchant;

receiving, from the user, selection data that indicates a selection of a particular instrument of the plurality of closed-loop stored-value instruments.

wherein the particular closed-loop stored-value instrument is the second closed-loop stored-value instrument.

26. A method comprising the computer-implemented steps of:

receiving, from a first party, card data that identifies a closed-loop stored-value instrument that is issued by a second party that is different than the first party;

requesting and receiving a first webpage from a web server associated with the second party;

entering the card data into one or more text entry fields of the first webpage;

causing the card data to be submitted to the web server;

after causing the card data to be submitted to the web server, receiving, from the web server, a second webpage that includes balance data that indicates a current balance associated with the closed-loop stored-value instrument;

identifying the balance data on the second webpage;

determining, based on the balance data, an offer for the closed-loop stored-value instrument;

sending the offer to the first party;

wherein the method is performed by one or more computing devices.

27. The method of claim **26**, wherein the first party is one of a person who owns the closed-loop stored-value instrument, a pawn shop, an ATM, a kiosk, or a merchant that is unaffiliated with the first party.

28. The method of claim **26**, further comprising, prior to receiving the second webpage:

analyzing the first webpage to identify a CAPTCHA challenge on the first webpage;

copying the CAPTCHA challenge and sending the CAPTCHA challenge to the first party;

receiving, from the first party, a response to the CAPTCHA challenge;

causing the response to be submitted to the web server.

29. The method of claim **26**, wherein the offer is for a particular amount, wherein the first party is a person that owns the closed-loop stored-value instrument, the method further comprising:

receiving an indication that the person accepted the offer;

identifying an account of the first party that existed prior to receiving the card data, wherein the account has a particular balance;

increasing the particular balance of the account by the particular amount.

30. The method of claim **26**, wherein the offer is for a particular amount, the method further comprising:

receiving acceptance data that indicates that the first party accepted the offer;

in response to receiving the acceptance data, determining a particular value and associating the particular value with the closed-loop stored-value instrument;

presenting, to the first party, information that indicates the particular value;

after providing the particular value to the first party, receiving purchase data that indicates that the first party is attempting to purchase one or more items from a third party that is different than the first and second parties, wherein the purchase data includes the particular value;

in response to receiving the purchase data, using the particular value to identify the particular amount; and

causing the particular amount to be applied to the purchase of the one or more items.

31. A method performed by a first party, comprising the computer-implemented steps of:

determining that a webpage is about a particular merchant and is being displayed to a user, wherein the particular merchant is different than the first party;

to make an online purchase of one or more items from a second party that is different than the first party, wherein the online purchase is for a first amount;

in response to determining that the webpage is about the particular merchant and is being displayed to the user, identifying a closed-loop stored-value instrument that is issued by the particular merchant, wherein the closed-loop stored-value instrument has a current balance that is positive;

causing a message to be displayed to the user, wherein the message indicates a discount opportunity if the user makes an purchase from the particular merchant;

receiving checkout data that indicates a particular amount that must be paid in order to purchase one or more items from the particular merchant;

providing an offer message to be displayed to the user, where in the offer message includes an offer that indicates that the particular amount can be reduced if the user accepts the offer;

receiving input that indicates that the user accepted the offer;

in response to receiving the input, applying the current balance of the closed-loop stored-value instrument to the particular amount; and

receiving payment from the user as part of acceptance of the offer;

wherein the method is performed by one or more computing devices.

32. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **1**.

33. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **2**.

34. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **3**.

35. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **4**.

36. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **5**.

37. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **6**.

38. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **7**.

39. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **8**.

40. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **9**.

41. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **10**.

42. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **11**.

43. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **12**.

44. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **13**.

45. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **14**.

46. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **15**.

47. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **16**.

48. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **17**.

49. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **18**.

50. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **19**.

51. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **20**.

52. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **21**.

53. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **22**.

54. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **23**.

55. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **24**.

56. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **25**.

57. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **26**.

58. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **27**.

59. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **28**.

60. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **29**.

61. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **30**.

62. One or more storage media storing instructions which, when executed by one or more processors, cause the performance of the method recited in claim **31**.

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