



(19) **United States**

(12) **Patent Application Publication**

Eagle et al.

(10) **Pub. No.: US 2006/0242587 A1**

(43) **Pub. Date: Oct. 26, 2006**

(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR DISPLAYING MESSAGES IN COMPUTER SYSTEMS**

Related U.S. Application Data

(63) Continuation of application No. 10/152,204, filed on May 21, 2002, now Pat. No. 7,069,515.

Publication Classification

(51) **Int. Cl.**
G06F 17/00 (2006.01)
(52) **U.S. Cl.** 715/747

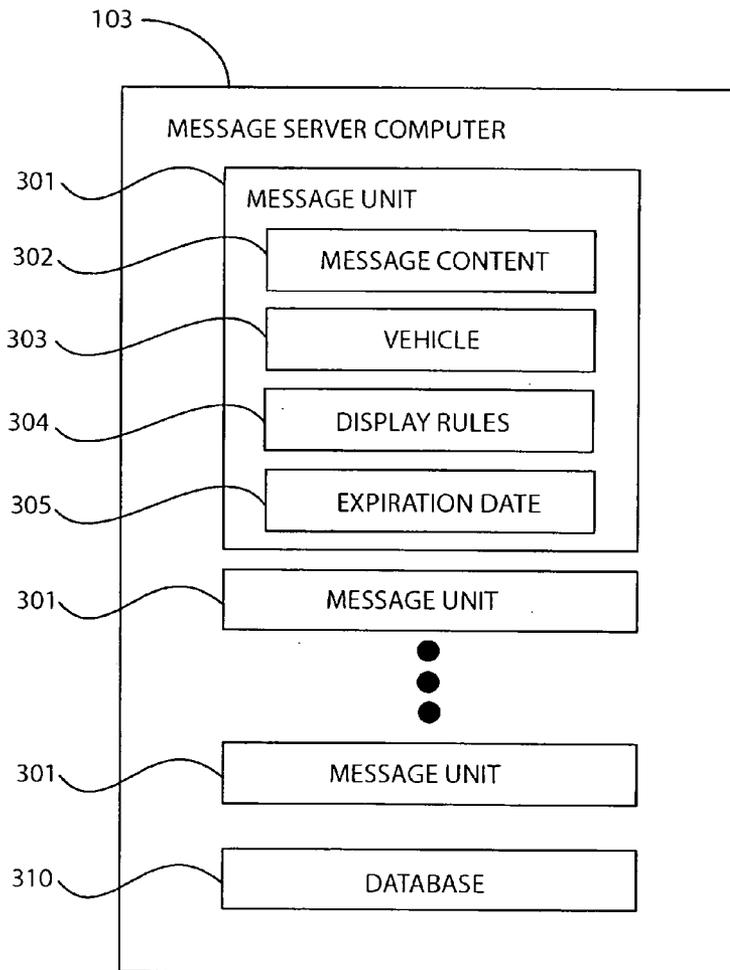
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(57) **ABSTRACT**
In one embodiment, a client computer receives messages from a server computer over a computer network. The messages are displayed in the client computer based on preference settings that may be configured by end-users. This advantageously gives end-users some control over messages provided to them. In one embodiment, end-users configure the preference settings to specify the number of messages they can be shown within a period time, when to display messages relative to the loading of a web page, and/or where to display messages. Embodiments of the present invention may be used in a variety of applications including in the delivery of advertisements over the Internet.

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(21) Appl. No.: **11/444,172**

(22) Filed: **May 30, 2006**



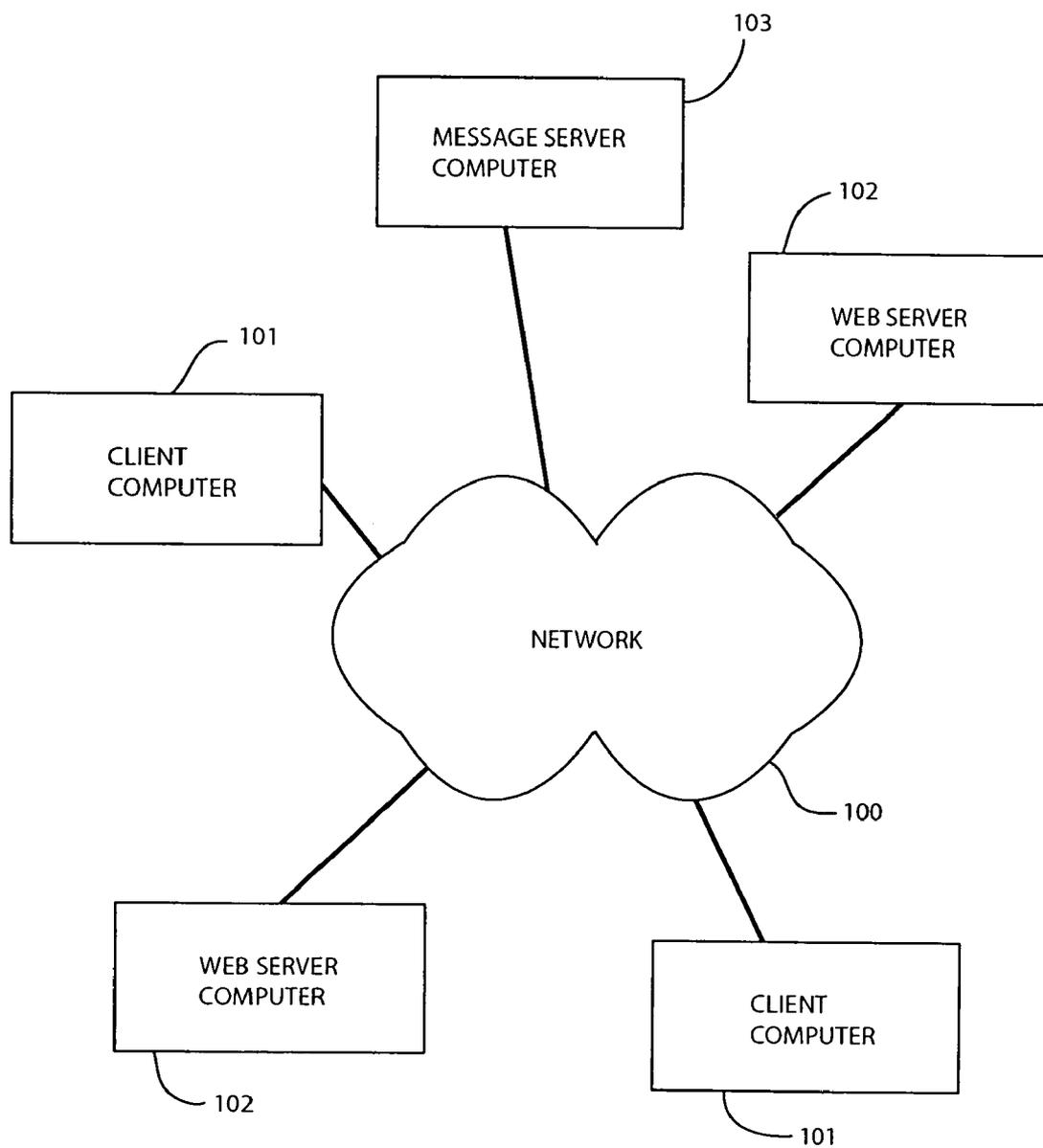


FIG. 1

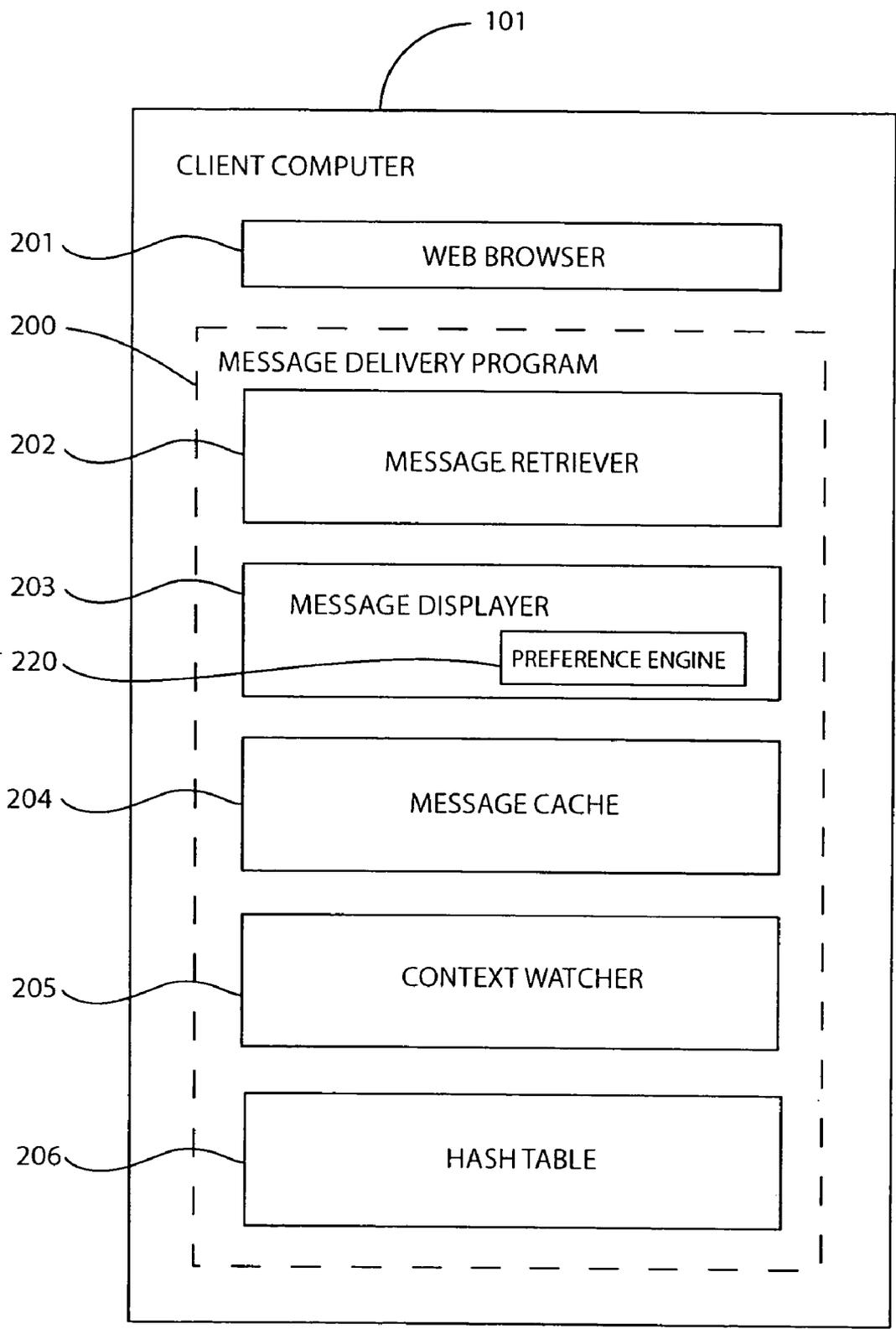


FIG. 2

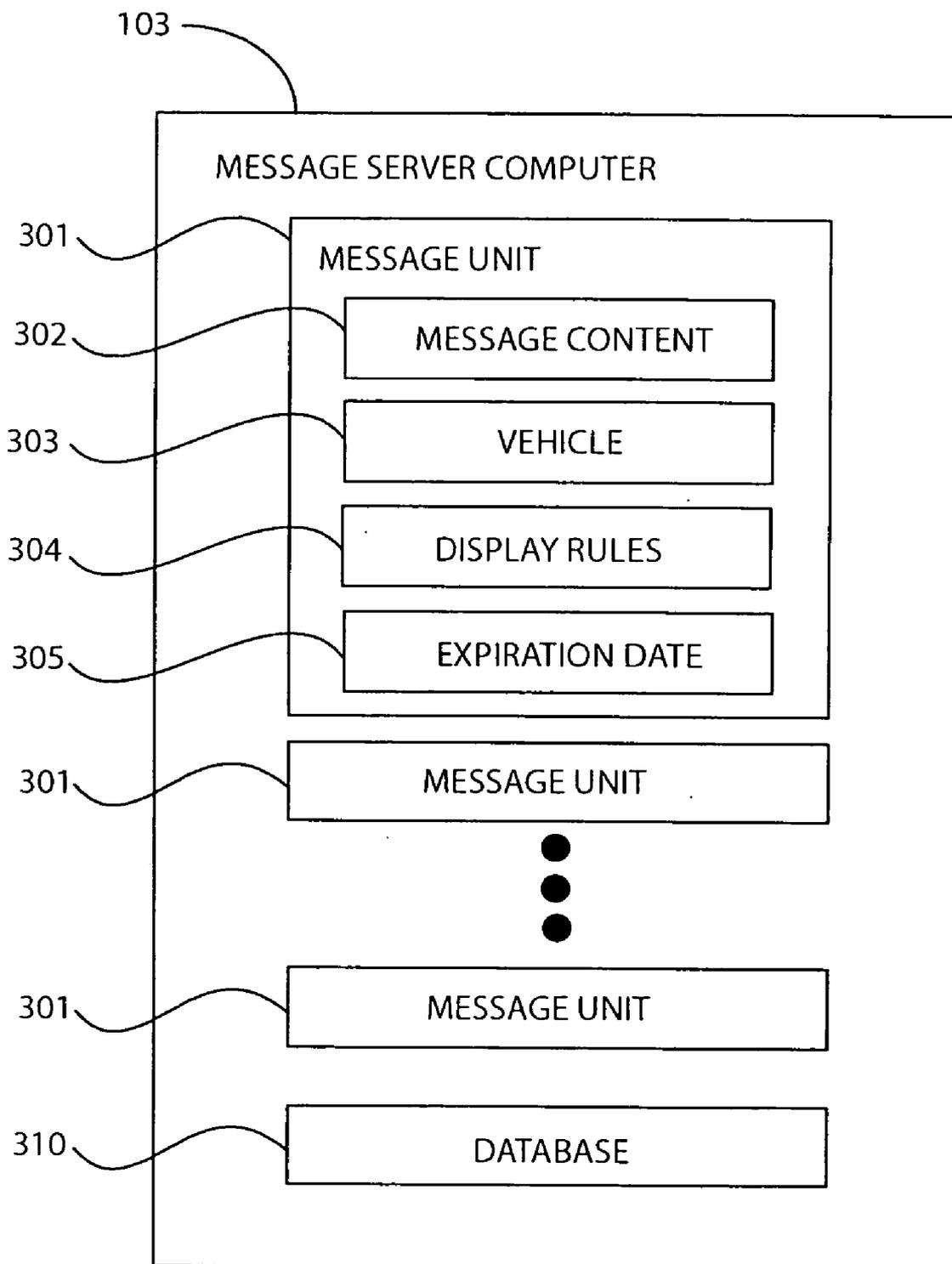


FIG. 3



FIG. 4

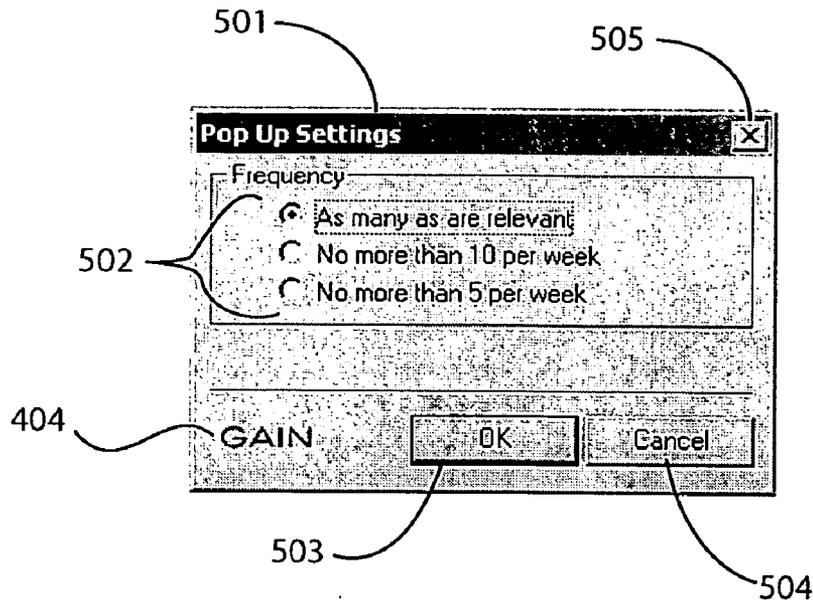


FIG. 5A

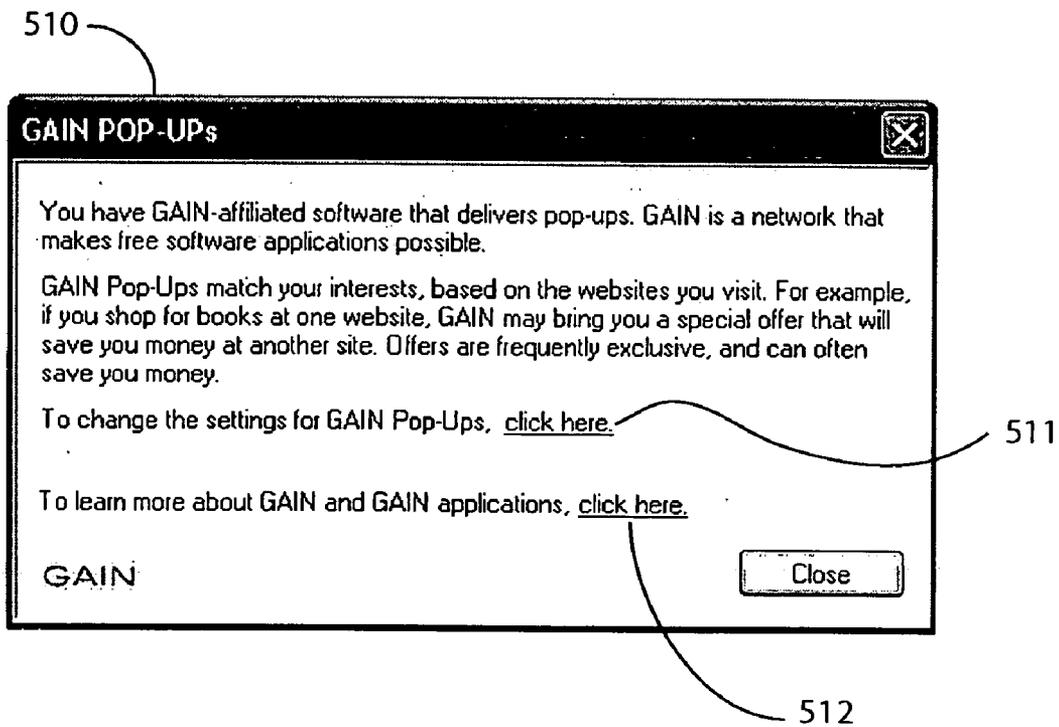


FIG. 5B



FIG. 6A

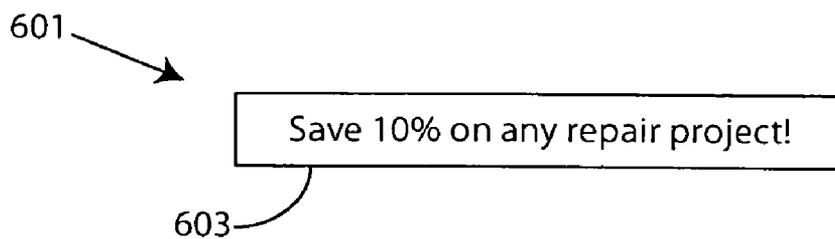


FIG. 6B

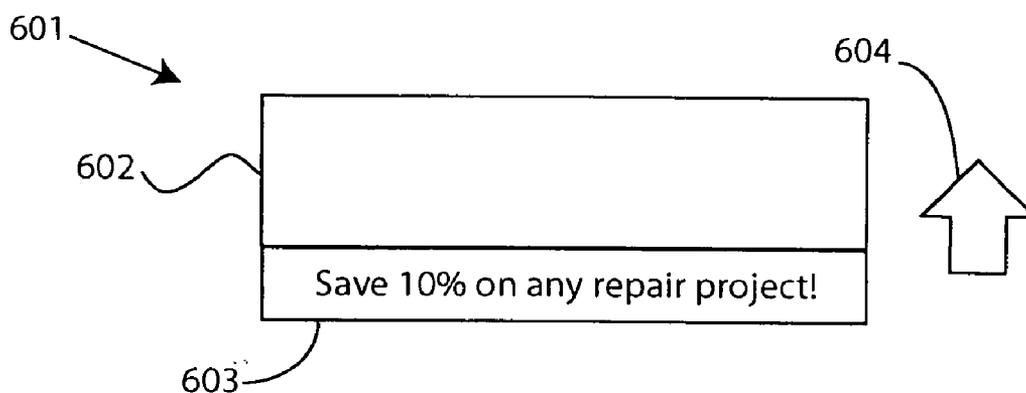


FIG. 6C

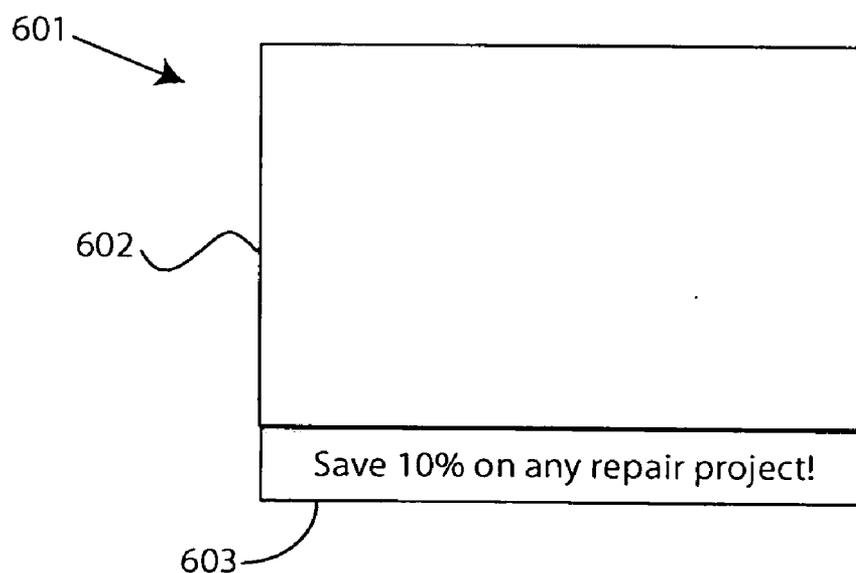


FIG. 6D

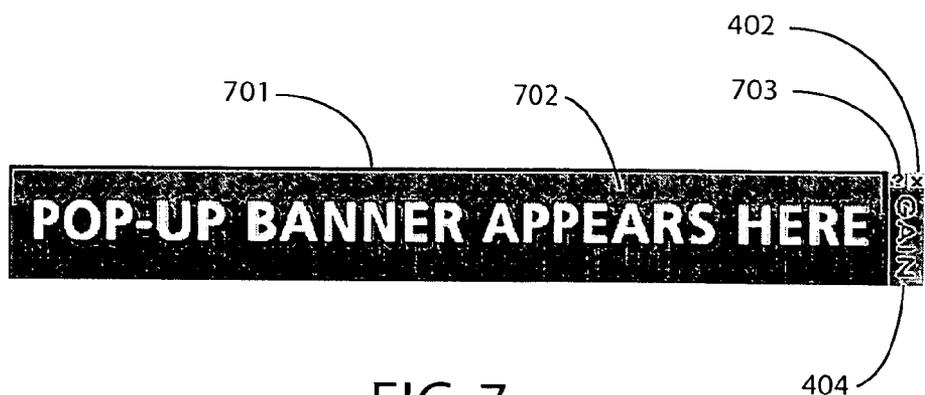


FIG. 7

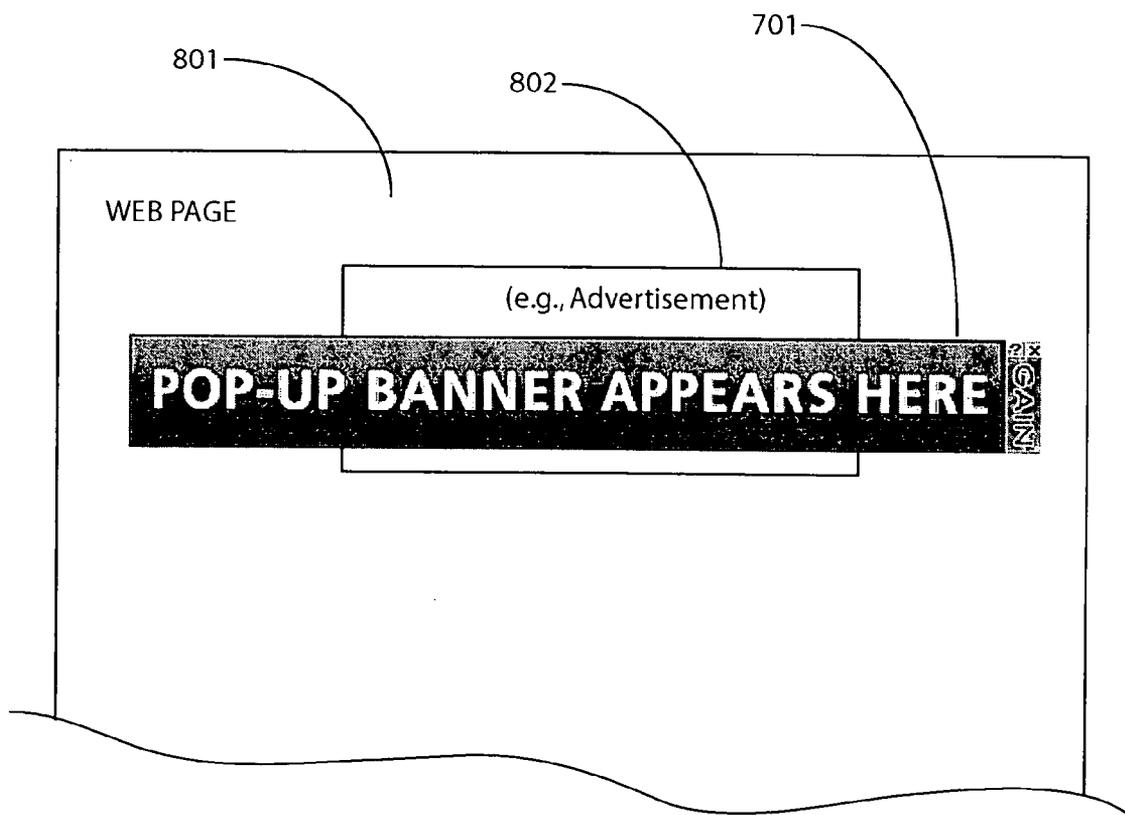


FIG. 8

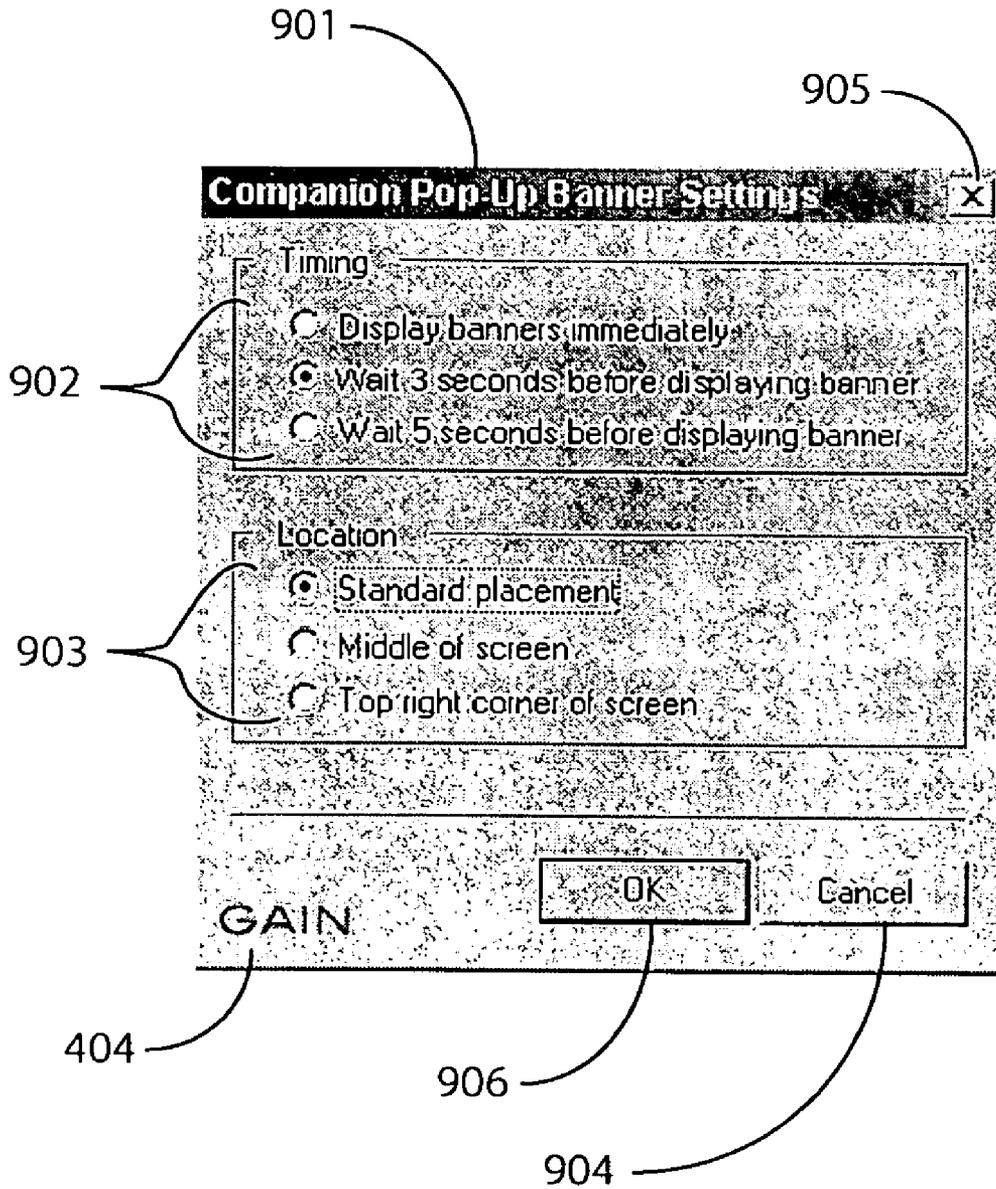


FIG. 9

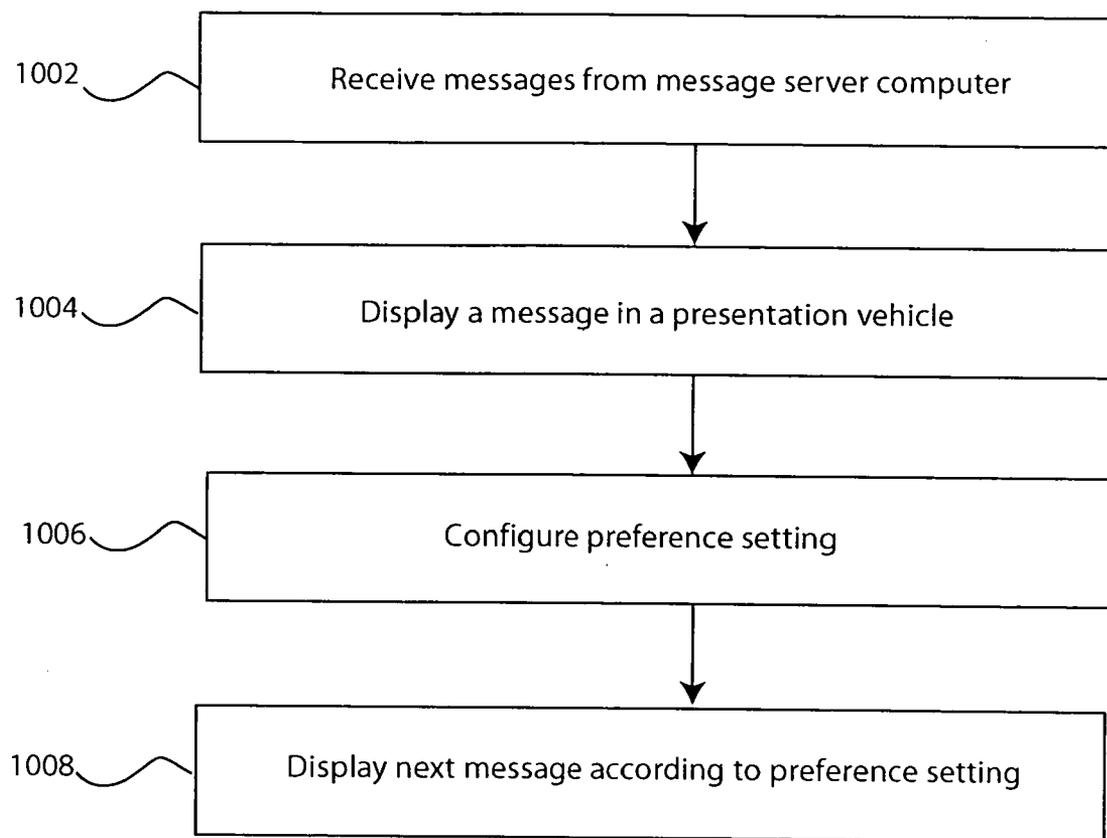


FIG. 10

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR DISPLAYING MESSAGES IN COMPUTER SYSTEMS

REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application is a continuation of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/152,204, filed on May 21, 2002, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] 1. Field Of The Invention

[0003] The present invention relates generally to computer systems, and more particularly to methods and apparatus for displaying messages in computer systems.

[0004] 2. Description Of The Background Art

[0005] The general availability of large computer networks such as the Internet has enabled end-users to readily access vast amounts of information. On the Internet, for example, there are web sites that provide news, educational and scientific materials, maps, on-line shopping, voice-over-IP service, music, etc. In fact, the types of information that are available on the Internet are limited only by the imagination of web site operators.

[0006] Web site operators can generate revenue by displaying advertisements to end-users who visit their web sites. An advertisement may be displayed on a web page, or on a separate window such as a pop-up or a banner. A window containing advertising typically includes an icon for manually removing the window, and a handle for dragging the window to a desired location on the computer screen. However, for the most part, end-users do not have much control over the window. The web site operator dictates how a window (and its advertisement) is displayed to end-users.

SUMMARY

[0007] The present invention relates to methods and apparatus for displaying messages in computer systems. The present invention may be used in a variety of applications including in the delivery of advertisements over the Internet.

[0008] In one embodiment, a client computer receives messages from a server computer over a computer network. The messages are displayed in the client computer based on preference settings that may be configured by end-users. This advantageously gives end-users some control over messages provided to them.

[0009] In one embodiment, end-users configure the preference settings to specify the number of messages they can be shown within a period time, when to display messages relative to the loading of a web page, and/or where to display messages.

[0010] These and other features of the present invention will be readily apparent to persons of ordinary skill in the art upon reading the entirety of this disclosure, which includes the accompanying drawings and claims.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] FIG. 1 shows a schematic diagram of a computer network in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0012] FIG. 2 schematically illustrates the components of a client computer in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0013] FIG. 3 schematically illustrates the components of a message server computer in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0014] FIG. 4 shows a pop-up in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0015] FIG. 5A shows a preference panel in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0016] FIG. 5B shows an intermediate panel in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0017] FIG. 6A shows a slider in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0018] FIGS. 6B, 6C, and 6D schematically illustrate the movement of a sliding panel of the slider of FIG. 6A.

[0019] FIG. 7 shows a banner in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0020] FIG. 8 shows the banner of FIG. 7 being displayed on top of a web page.

[0021] FIG. 9 shows another preference panel in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0022] FIG. 10 shows a flow diagram of a method for displaying messages in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0023] The use of the same reference label in different drawings indicates the same or like components.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0024] In the present disclosure, numerous specific details are provided, such as examples of apparatus, components, and methods to provide a thorough understanding of embodiments of the invention. Persons of ordinary skill in the art will recognize, however, that the invention can be practiced without one or more of the specific details. In other instances, well-known details are not shown or described to avoid obscuring aspects of the invention.

[0025] The invention is described in the context of advertisement delivery over the Internet. It should be understood, however, that the invention is not so limited and may be generally used in other applications where messages are displayed for viewing by end-users. Furthermore, it is to be noted that as used in the present disclosure, "advertising" or "advertisement" includes any type of message provided to end-users for the purpose of getting their attention on something. Typically but not necessarily, an advertisement is with regards to a product. However, an advertisement may also be related to an election campaign, a cause (e.g., "save the planet"), an announcement, etc.

[0026] Referring now to FIG. 1, there is shown a schematic diagram of a computer network 100 in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. Network 100 may include one or more client computers 101, one or more web server computers 102, one or more message server computers 103, and other computers not shown. Intermediate nodes such as gateways, routers, bridges, Internet service provider networks, public-switched telephone networks,

proxy servers, firewalls, etc. are not shown for clarity. In the example of **FIG. 1**, network **100** includes the Internet; however, other types of computer networks may also be used. Computers may be coupled to network **100** using any type of connection without detracting from the merits of the present invention.

[0027] A client computer **101** is typically, but not necessarily, a personal computer such as those running the Microsoft Windows™, Apple Macintosh™, Linux etc. operating systems. An end-user may employ a suitably equipped client computer **101** to get on network **100** and access computers coupled thereto. For example, a client computer **101** may be used to access web pages from a web server computer **102**. It is to be noted that the term “computer” includes any type of information processing device including personal digital assistants, digital telephones, wireless terminals, etc.

[0028] A web server computer **102** may be a web site containing information designed to attract end-users surfing on the Internet. A web server computer **102** may also include advertisements, downloadable computer programs, and products available for online purchase. A web server computer **102** may also be an ad server for delivering advertisements to a client computer **101**.

[0029] A message server computer **103** may include the functionalities of a web server computer **102**. Additionally, in one embodiment, a message server computer **103** may also include message units for delivery to a client computer **101**. The message units may contain advertisements, for example. A message server computer **103** may also include downloadable computer programs and files for supporting, updating, or maintaining components on a client computer **101**.

[0030] Web server computers **102** and message server computers **103** are typically, but not necessarily, server computers such as those available from Sun Microsystems, Hewlett-Packard, International Business Machines, etc. A client computer **101** may communicate with a web server computer **102** or a message server computer **103** using client-server protocol. Client-server computing is well known in the art and will not be further described here.

[0031] **FIG. 2** schematically illustrates the components of a client computer **101** in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. Client computer **101** may include a web browser **201** and a message delivery program **200**. Delivery program **200** may include a message retriever **202**, a message displayer **203**, a message cache **204**, a context watcher **205**, and a hash table **206**. Other components such as operating system components, application programs, and the like are not shown for clarity. In one embodiment, the components of client computer **101** shown in **FIG. 2** are implemented in software. It should be understood, however, that the components of client computer **101** may also be implemented in hardware or a combination of hardware and software (e.g., firmware).

[0032] Client computer **101** may include a web browser **201**. Web browser **201** may be any web browser or web client running on a client computer **101**. For example, the Microsoft Internet Explorer™ web browser may be used as a web browser **201**.

[0033] In one embodiment, delivery program **200** is downloadable from a message server computer **103**. Delivery

program **200** may be downloaded in conjunction with the downloading of another computer program. For example, delivery program **200** may be downloaded to a client computer **101** along with a utility program that is provided free of charge or at a reduced cost. The utility program may be provided to an end-user in exchange for the right to deliver messages to the end-user via message delivery program **200**. In essence, revenue (e.g., advertising fees) from messages delivered to the end-user helps defray the cost of creating and maintaining the utility program.

[0034] Message retriever **202** may include computer-readable program code for requesting message units **301** (see **FIG. 3**) from message server computer **103**. As will be explained later on in connection with **FIG. 3**, a message unit **301** may include a message content **302** for display on the screen of client computer **101**. For example, a message content **302** may be an advertisement.

[0035] Message retriever **202** monitors web browser **201** for the uniform resource locator (URL) of web sites visited by an end-user surfing on the Internet. For each domain visited by an end-user, message retriever **202** may send a request packet to message server computer **103**. In one embodiment, a request packet includes:

[0036] (a) the end-user’s unique identification (ID) number;

[0037] (b) the ID number of client computer **101**;

[0038] (c) the local time;

[0039] (d) the domain name of the web site visited by the end-user; and

[0040] (e) a list of message units **301** stored in message cache **204**.

In one embodiment, personal information such as the actual name of the end-user, credit card information, residence address, etc. is stored solely in client computer **101** to protect the end-user’s privacy.

[0041] Message server computer **103** checks if there is a corresponding message unit **301** for each request packet received from client computer **101**. If so, message server computer **103** sends the corresponding message unit **301** to message retriever **202**. For example, message retriever **202** may send a request packet to message server computer **103** as an end-user navigates from “storekeeper.com” to “cars.com.” If a message unit **301** is available for the domain “cars.com”, message server computer **103** will send that message unit **301** to message retriever **202**.

[0042] Client computer **101** may also include a hash table **206**. Hash table **206** may contain information for determining whether a message unit **301** is available for a particular domain. This allows message retriever **202** to first query hash table **206** before sending a request packet to message server computer **103**. If hash table **206** indicates that there is a message unit **301** for a domain visited by the end-user, message retriever **202** may proceed to send a request packet to message server computer **103**. Otherwise, message retriever **202** may not send a request packet, thereby minimizing the amount of request packets sent to and processed by message server computer **103**.

[0043] Message displayer **203** may include computer-readable program code for displaying the contents of a

message unit **301**. Message displayer **203** may display a message content using a variety of presentation vehicles including pop-ups, banners, message boxes, text boxes, sliders, separate windows, windows embedded in a web page, etc. As will be explained further below, message displayer **203** may also include a preference engine **220** for displaying messages based on end-user configurable settings. This provides end-users some control over messages delivered to them.

[0044] Each message unit **301** may include display rules **304** (see FIG. 3), which dictate when to display the contents of the message unit **301**. As an end-user surfs the Internet, context watcher **205** checks message cache **204** for message units **301** meeting their respective display rules. If context watcher **205** finds such a message unit **301**, context watcher **205** alerts message displayer **203** to display the contents of the message unit **301**.

[0045] FIG. 3 schematically illustrates the components of a message server computer **103** in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. A message server computer **103** may include one or more message units **301** and a database **310**. In one embodiment, the components of message server computer **103** shown in FIG. 3 are implemented in software. However, the components of message server computer **103** may also be implemented in hardware or a combination of hardware and software.

[0046] As mentioned, message server computer **103** receives request packets from a client computer **101**. Each received request packet may include the domain name of the web site visited by an end-user. Message server computer **103** uses the domain name to find all message units **301** available for that web site. For example, a message unit **301** may include an advertisement from a car company that wants to display its advertisement to end-users visiting the "cars.com" web site. When a request packet indicates that an end-user is on "cars.com", the message unit **301** containing the car company's advertisement will be sent to the requesting client computer **101**.

[0047] Message server computer **103** may also include a database **310** for keeping track of available message units **301** and end-user activities. Message server computer **103** may query database **310** for all message units **301** available for a particular web site.

[0048] As mentioned, in one embodiment, no personal information is sent to message server computer **103** to protect the privacy of end-users. Thus, in that embodiment, end-user activities such as the web sites visited by an end-user are tracked using the unique end-user ID included in each request packet. An end-user ID is not tied to any information that can be used to determine the actual identity of an end-user; thus, end-users may remain anonymous. As can be appreciated, end-user activities may be tracked for targeted advertising purposes.

[0049] Still referring to FIG. 3, a message unit **301** may include a message content **302**, a vehicle **303**, display rules **304**, and an expiration date **305**. Message content **302** may be the actual message displayed to end-users. Message content **302** may include hypertext markup language (HTML) code, text, images, etc. A sound file played when the message is displayed may also be included in message content **302**.

[0050] Vehicle **303** indicates the presentation vehicle to be used in displaying message content **302**. For example, vehicle **303** may call for the use of a pop-up, banner, message box, text box, slider, separate window, window embedded in a web page, etc.

[0051] Display rules **304** may include one or more rules for displaying message content **302**. Display rules **304** may specify to display a message content **302** when an end-user navigates to a specific web page or as soon as the message unit **301** is received in a client computer **101**. For example, a car company may contract with the operator of a message server computer **103** to deliver a message unit **301** containing an advertisement for a minivan (hereinafter, "minivan message unit"). The display rules **304** of the minivan message unit specifies that the minivan advertisement is to be displayed to end-users viewing the minivan web page of "cars.com". In this example, the minivan web page of cars.com has the URL "www.cars.com/minivans". When an end-user visits the main page (or any web page) of "cars.com", message retriever **202** (see FIG. 2) will send a request packet to message server computer **103** indicating that the end-user is on "cars.com". In response, message server computer **103** will send the minivan message unit to client computer **101**. When the end-user navigates to the URL "www.cars.com/minivans", context watcher **205** will detect that the minivan message unit has been triggered for display (i.e., display rules **304** of the minivan message unit have been satisfied). Accordingly, context watcher **205** will then inform message displayer **203** that the message content **302** of the minivan message unit may be displayed.

[0052] Display rules **304** may also include: (a) a list of domain names at which the content of a message unit **301** is to be displayed, (b) URL sub-strings that will trigger displaying of the content of the message unit **301**, and (c) time and date information. As can be appreciated, display rules **304** may also be extended to take into account additional information relating to an end-user (as identified by a corresponding end-user ID) such as the end-user's frequent flyer affiliation, club memberships, type of credit card used, hobbies and interests, and basic demographic information. End-user related information may be stored in client computer **101** or database **310** of message server computer **103**. End-user related information may be used for targeted advertising purposes, for example.

[0053] As shown in FIG. 3, a message unit **301** may also include an expiration date **305**. Expiration date **305** indicates the latest date and time the message unit **301** can still be displayed; expired message units **301** are not displayed regardless of whether their respective display rules **304** have been satisfied. Expired message units **301** may be removed from client computer **101**.

[0054] Various presentation vehicles for displaying messages in accordance with embodiments of the present invention are now described beginning with FIG. 4. It is to be noted that as used in the present disclosure, a "presentation vehicle" includes any type of window or display area for displaying a message. Examples of presentation vehicles include pop-ups, banners, message boxes, text boxes, sliders, separate windows, windows embedded in a web page, etc. Furthermore, the term "pop-up" is used in the present disclosure to refer to a window that pops-up on a computer

screen to display a message. The pop-up may be under other windows (sometimes referred to as a “pop-under”) or on top of other windows.

[0055] Referring to FIG. 4, there is shown a pop-up 401 according to an embodiment of the present invention. Pop-up 401 may include a content area 405 where a message content 302 (see FIG. 3) may be displayed. In the example of FIG. 4, content area 405 displays an advertisement from BigTime Airlines. Pop-up 401 may also include a source indicator 404 to identify the source of the message. This allows pop-up 401 to be displayed along with other documents such as a web page without confusing end-users as to who generated pop-up 401. In the example of FIG. 4, source indicator 404 is a logo of the Gator Advertising and Information Network (GAIN)TM service; it informs end-users that the BigTime Airlines advertisement is from The Gator Corporation.

[0056] Pop-up 401 may also include icons 402 and 403, which may be activated by clicking on them with a mouse cursor. In one embodiment, icons 402 and 403 are each assigned a different activation sequence to prevent an end-user from inadvertently clicking on icon 403 when the end-user actually meant to click on icon 402 or vice versa. For example, icon 403 may require two clicks for activation, whereas icon 402 may only require a single click. The two clicks to activate icon 403 may be made one immediately after the other, be separated by any amount of time, be separated by a message or warning telling the end-user that icon 403 requires two clicks, or combinations thereof.

[0057] Icon 402 is a remove button, which in this case removes pop-up 401 off the computer screen. Icon 403 is a button for initiating the invocation of a preference setting panel (also referred to as “configuration panel”). Activating icon 403 may directly invoke a preference setting panel like panel 501 shown in FIG. 5A or one or more intermediate panels like panel 510 shown in FIG. 5B. In the present disclosure, the term “panel” includes any type of interface for entering a selection choice. A panel may be a pull down menu, a left-click menu, a window with hyperlinks, etc.

[0058] As shown in FIG. 5A, panel 501 may include radio buttons 502 for setting the frequency at which messages are displayed. That is, panel 501 may allow end-users to specify the amount of messages displayed to them. In the example of FIG. 5A, an end-user may specify to see all relevant pop-ups, up to ten pop-ups a week, or up to five pop-ups a week. As can be appreciated, this provides end-users some control over messages delivered to them. Instead of giving total control of message delivery to the message provider, end-users can choose to see as many or as few messages as they want.

[0059] Referring to FIG. 5B, one or more intermediate panels 510 may be displayed before displaying panel 501. For example, activating icon 403 (see FIG. 4) may invoke panel 510. Selecting choice 511 of panel 510, which is a hyperlink in this example, may then invoke panel 501. Selecting choice 512, which is also a hyperlink in this example, may invoke another panel providing additional information or functionality.

[0060] As can be appreciated, the capability to set the frequency at which messages are displayed is particularly desirable with presentation vehicles that go in and out of

view. Examples of such presentation vehicles include pop-ups, sliders, and banners. For example, a pop-up may be displayed while an end-user is surfing on the Internet. The pop-up may be manually removed by the end-user, or may be automatically removed by message displayer 203 when the pop-up is no longer relevant (e.g., when the end-user leaves the domain that triggered the displaying of the pop-up). Some end-users may find it annoying to continually see pop-ups go in and out of view, while others may not be bothered by them. For those end-users who want to minimize the number of pop-ups that appear, they can simply invoke panel 501 and set a desired frequency using radio buttons 502.

[0061] In one embodiment, preference engine 220 (see FIG. 2) receives the settings entered in panel 501 shown in FIG. 5A. Preference engine 220, which keeps track of the number of messages displayed in client computer 101, uses the settings in informing message displayer 203 whether or not to display a message. For example, if radio buttons 502 indicate that an end-user wishes to receive all relevant messages, all message units 301 that have been triggered are displayed by message displayer 203. If radio buttons 502 indicate that an end-user does not want to receive more than 10 messages a week and more than 10 messages have already been displayed in a given week, triggered message units 301 are not displayed, and so on. Triggered message units 301 that are not displayed may be retained in message cache 204 until they expire.

[0062] As shown in FIG. 5A, panel 501 may also include a push-button 503 for setting the selection entered in radio buttons 502 and a push-button 504 for removing panel 501 without changing any setting. An icon 505 may be activated to remove panel 501 off the computer screen. Source indicator 404 identifies the source of panel 501.

[0063] Turning now to FIG. 6A, there is shown a slider 601 in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. Slider 601 may include a fixed panel 603 where a portion of a message content 302 (see FIG. 3) is displayed. Other portions of the message content 302 may be displayed in a sliding panel 602. In the example of FIG. 6A, sliding panel 602 contains an advertisement from ACME; source indicator 404 indicates that the ACME advertisement is from the GAINTM service of The Gator Corporation.

[0064] Slider 601 may include an icon 403 for invoking a preference setting panel such as panel 501 shown in FIG. 5A. Intermediate panels (e.g., panel 510 shown in FIG. 5B) may also be displayed prior to displaying a panel 501. Icon 403 thus allows end-users the option to specify the number of messages displayed to them within a period of time. In this particular example, end-users may specify the number of sliding panels 602 that can be displayed per week.

[0065] Slider 601 may also include an icon 402 for removing slider 601 off the computer screen.

[0066] Slider 601 is so named because sliding panel 602 slides in and out of fixed panel 603. FIGS. 6B-6D schematically illustrate the movement of sliding panel 602. FIG. 6B shows slider 601 with sliding panel 602 fully retracted. FIG. 6C shows sliding panel 602 sliding in the direction indicated by arrow 604. FIG. 6D shows sliding panel 602 fully extended. Sliding panel 602 may also be retracted from a fully extended position. As can be appreciated, slider 601

only requires a full display area while sliding panel 602 is fully extended. Sliding panel 602 may be smoothly retracted and extended so as not to startle end-users.

[0067] In one embodiment, slider 601 is a polite slider. That is, sliding panel 602 automatically retracts out of the way when the message contained in it is no longer relevant. For example, sliding panel 602 may automatically retract when the end-user is no longer on the domain that triggered the displaying of the message. Sliding panel 602 may also automatically retract when the end-user has not placed a cursor on slider 601 for a period of time after sliding panel 602 has been fully extended into view. A polite slider 601 advantageously eliminates the need for end-users to manually remove irrelevant messages out of the way. This makes slider 601 more acceptable to end-users.

[0068] FIG. 7 shows a banner 701 in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. Banner 701 may include a content area 702 where a message content 302 (see FIG. 3) is displayed, an icon 402 for removing banner 701 off the computer screen, and a source indicator 404 for identifying the source of banner 701. Banner 701 may also include an icon 703 for invoking a preference setting panel such as panel 901, which is later discussed in connection with FIG. 9. Alternatively or in addition, icon 703 may be used to invoke a preference setting panel such as panel 501 shown in FIG. 5A. Intermediate panels (e.g., panel 510 shown in FIG. 5B) may also be displayed prior to displaying a panel 501 or a panel 901.

[0069] As shown in FIG. 8, banner 701 may be displayed on top of a web page 801. Specifically, banner 701 may be displayed over a presentation vehicle 802 embedded in web page 801.

[0070] FIG. 9 shows a preference panel 901 that may be invoked when icon 703 is activated. Panel 901 may include radio buttons 902 for specifying when to display subsequent banners 701 relative to the loading of a web page. In the example of FIG. 9, a banner 701 may be displayed as soon as it is available, three seconds after a web page is loaded, or five seconds after a web page is loaded. Delaying the displaying of a banner 701 gives end-users the chance to see what is under banner 701. For example, setting radio buttons 902 to 3 seconds gives an end-user 3 seconds to view the contents of presentation vehicle 802 (see FIG. 8) before displaying banner 701 on top of it.

[0071] Panel 901 also includes radio buttons 903 for specifying where to display subsequent banners 701. In the example of FIG. 9, a banner 701 may be displayed in a default location, in the middle of the computer screen, or in the top right corner of the computer screen. Of course, the example selection choices shown in FIG. 9 and in other figures of the present disclosure are provided for illustration purposes only; selection choices may vary depending on the application.

[0072] In one embodiment, preference engine 220 (see FIG. 2) receives all settings entered in panel 901. Preference engine 220 waits for the loading of a web page, then waits for an amount of time specified in radio buttons 902, and then informs message displayer 203 that any triggered message unit 301 may be displayed. For example, preference engine 220 may wait for an event notification from web browser 201 indicating that a web page has been completely

loaded. After the specified delay time has elapsed, preference engine 220 may then inform message displayer 203 that triggered message units 301 may be displayed.

[0073] Based on the setting of radio buttons 903, preference engine 220 also informs message displayer 203 where to display a banner 701.

[0074] Panel 901 may also include a push-button 906 for setting the selections entered in radio buttons 902 and 903, and a push-button 904 for removing panel 901 without changing any setting. An icon 905 may be a button for removing panel 901 off the computer screen. Source indicator 404 identifies the source of panel 901.

[0075] As can be appreciated, the selections provided in panel 901 give end-users some control over the messages delivered to them. Instead of giving total control of message delivery to the message provider, end-users can specify when and where to display messages. By giving end-users control over the message delivery process, they are less likely to remove or uninstall the associated message delivery program. This is particularly advantageous in applications where the message delivery program generates revenue by, for example, displaying advertisements.

[0076] FIG. 10 shows a flow diagram of a method for displaying messages in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. In action 1002, a client computer receives messages from a message server computer. In action 1004, one of the messages is displayed in a presentation vehicle. The presentation vehicle includes an option for entering preference settings. In one embodiment, preference settings for specifying the number of messages that can be displayed within a period of time, the timing of the appearance of messages, and/or the location where messages are to be displayed may be entered. In action 1006, preference settings are configured by an end-user. In action 1008, the next message is displayed according to the preference settings.

[0077] While specific embodiments of the present invention have been provided, it is to be understood that these embodiments are for illustration purposes and not limiting. Many additional embodiments will be apparent to persons of ordinary skill in the art reading this disclosure. Thus, the present invention is limited only by the following claims.

1-31. (canceled)

32. A method of displaying messages in a computer, the method comprising:

delivering a first message content to a computer over a computer network, the message content being delivered to the computer based on web sites visited by an end-user;

displaying the first message content in a first presentation vehicle in the computer, the first presentation vehicle being configured to allow invocation of a configuration panel for allowing the end-user to control how message contents are presented in the computer by entering a preference setting; and

using the preference setting to determine how to display a second message content received in the computer.

33. The method of claim 32 wherein the preference setting allows the end-user to specify a certain limit on a maximum

number of message contents that can be displayed in the computer within a period of time.

34. The method of claim 32 wherein the first message content is displayed in a first location on a screen of the computer and the preference setting specifies a second location on the screen where the second message content is displayed.

35. The method of claim 32 wherein the preference setting specifies a particular time setting on when to display the second message content in a second presentation vehicle after loading of a web page.

36. The method of claim 32 wherein the first presentation vehicle comprises a pop-up displayed on top of a web browser in response to the end-user viewing a particular web page.

37. The method of claim 32 wherein the first presentation vehicle is a slider, the slider comprising a sliding panel that displays the first message content and automatically retracts when the end-user is no longer on a domain that triggered the displaying of the first message content.

38. A method of displaying messages in a computer, the method comprising:

delivering a first message content to a computer over a computer network, the message content being delivered to the computer based on web sites visited by an end-user;

displaying the message content in a first presentation vehicle in the computer;

providing a configuration panel to allow the end-user to enter a preference setting that controls how message contents are presented in the computer;

providing a second message content to the computer, the second message content being provided based on the preference setting and on web sites visited by the end-user; and

displaying the second message content in a second presentation vehicle.

39. The method of claim 38 wherein the preference setting allows the end-user to specify a certain limit on a maximum number of message contents that can be displayed in the computer within a period of time.

40. The method of claim 38 wherein the preference setting specifies a particular time setting on when to display the second message content after loading of a web page.

41. The method of claim 38 wherein the first presentation vehicle comprises a pop-up displayed on top of a web browser in response to the end-user viewing a particular web page.

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