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Chaudhri et al.

(54) UNIFIED INTEREST LAYER FOR USER INTERFACE

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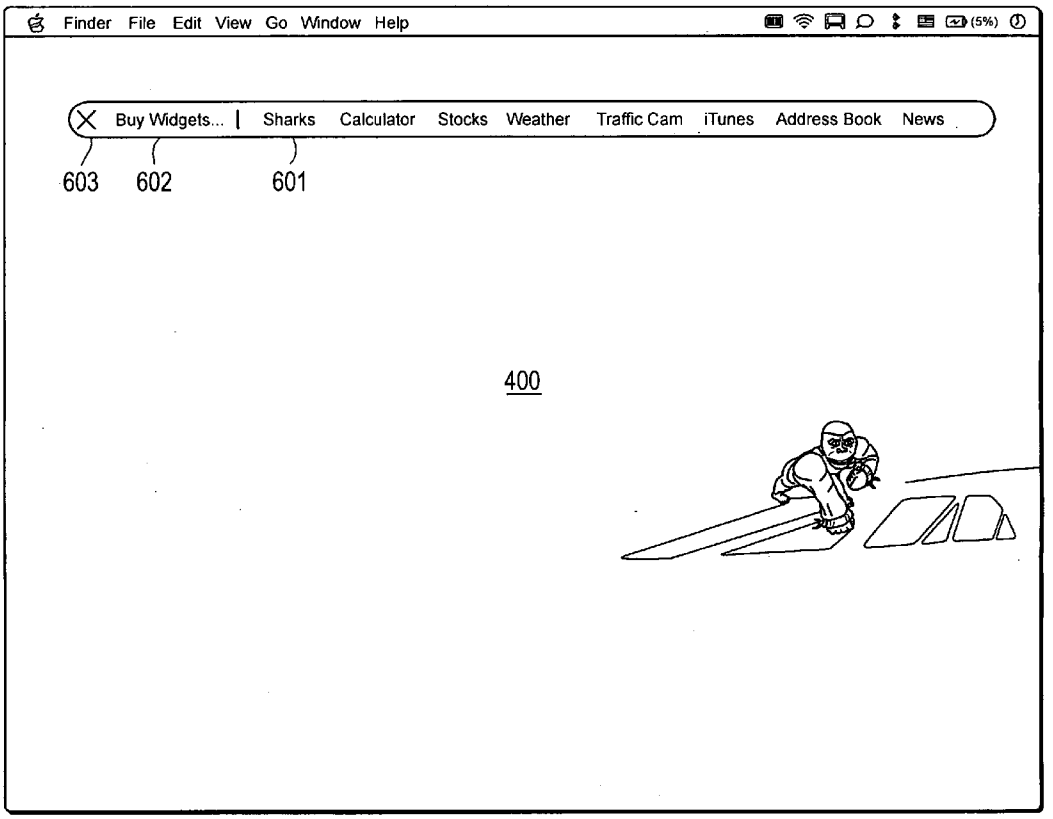
G06F 3/00 (2006.01)

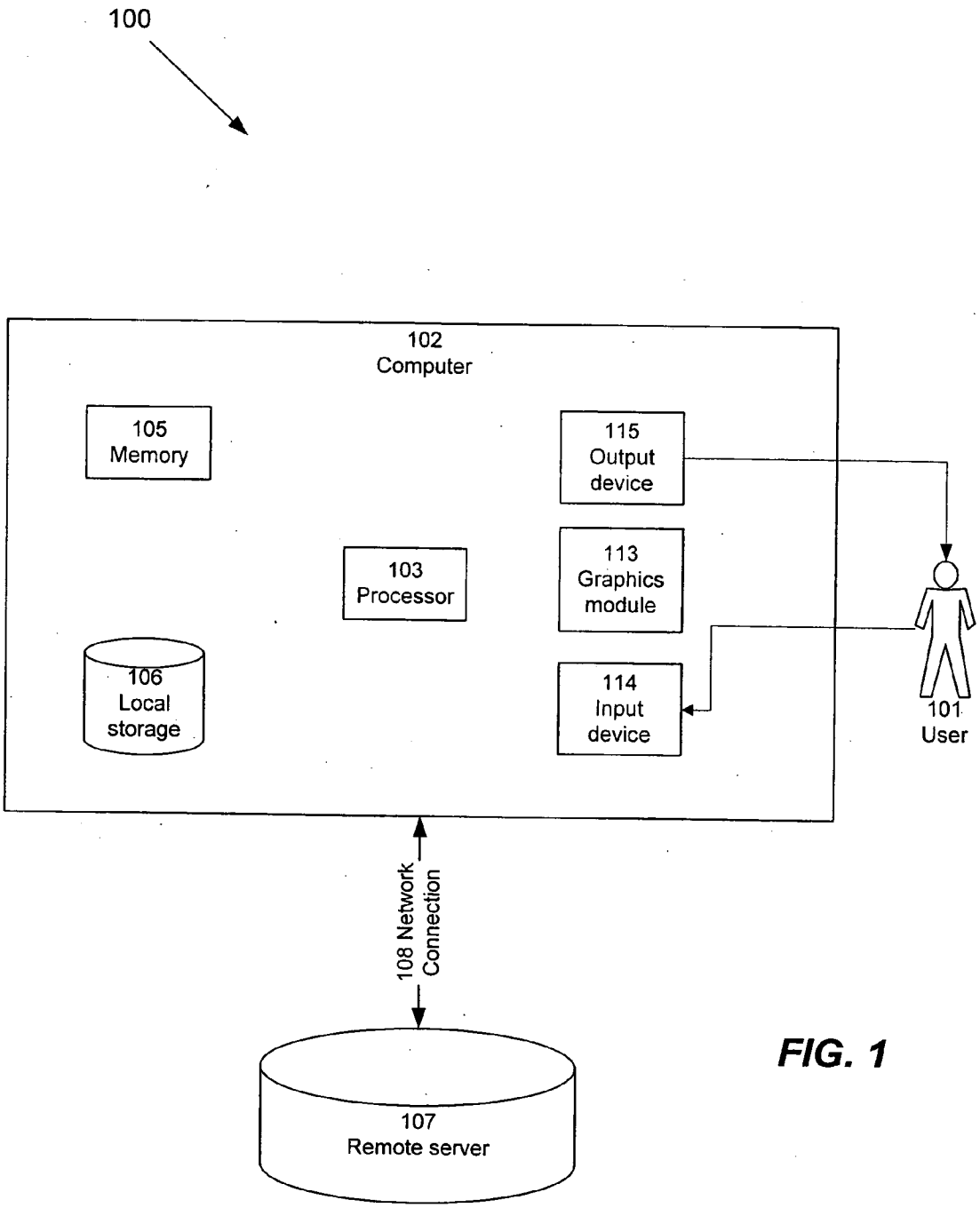
(52) U.S. Cl. 715/779; 715/768

(57) ABSTRACT

A user-activatable dashboard (also referred to as a unified interest layer) contains any number of user interface elements, referred to herein as "widgets," for quick access by a user. In response to a command from a user, the dashboard is invoked and the widgets are shown on the screen. The user can activate the dashboard at any time, causing the dashboard to temporarily replace the existing user interface display on the user's screen. Once the dashboard has been activated, the user can interact with any or all of the widgets, and can configure the dashboard by adding, deleting, moving, or configuring individual widgets as desired. When the user wishes to return to the normal user interface he or she was working with, the user issues a command causing the dashboard to be dismissed. Once the dashboard has been dismissed, the previous user interface state is restored, allowing the user to resume normal interactions with the operating system.



APPLE 1007


100
102
Computer
105
Memory
115
Output
device
103
Processor
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Graphics
module
106
Local
storage
114
Input
device
101
User
108 Network
Connection
107
Remote server

FIG. 1

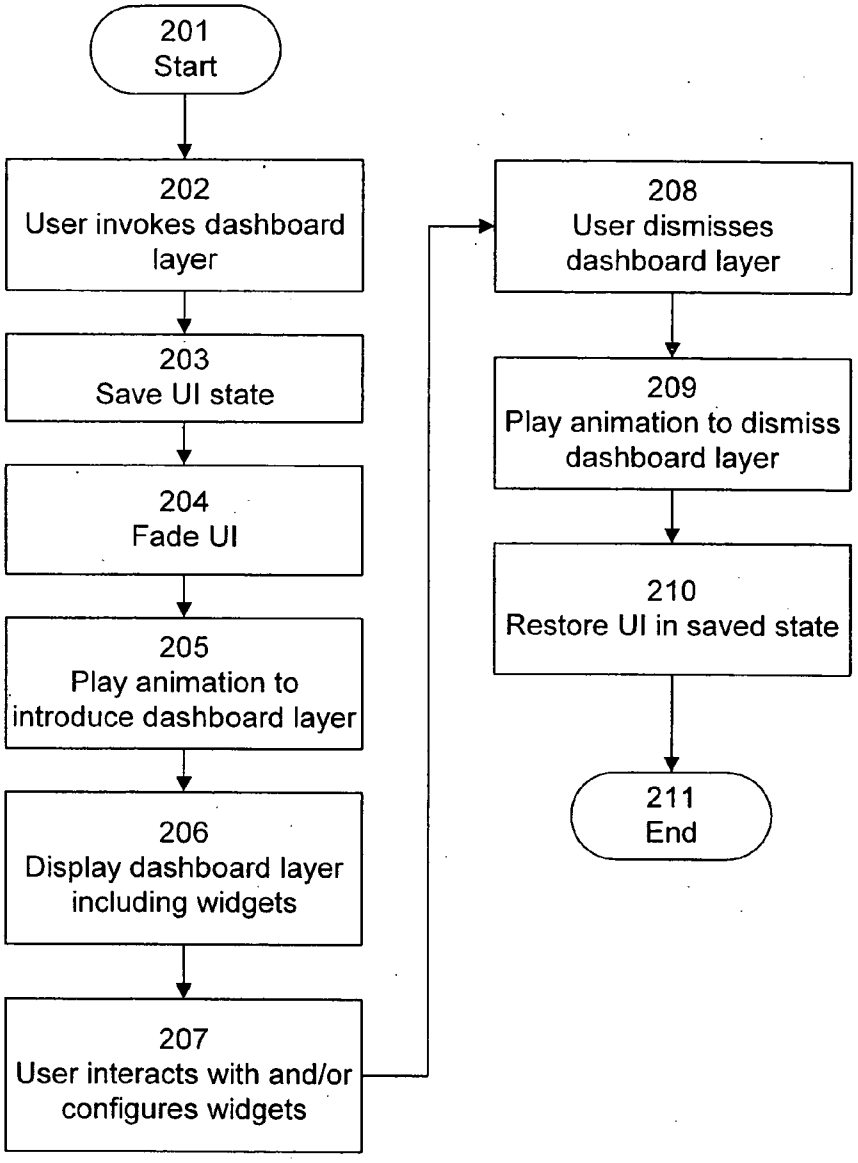
201
Start
202
User invokes dashboard layer
203
Save UI state
204
Fade UI
205
Play animation to introduce dashboard layer
206
Display dashboard layer including widgets
207
User interacts with and/or configures widgets
208
User dismisses dashboard layer
209
Play animation to dismiss dashboard layer
210
Restore UI in saved state
211
End

FIG. 2

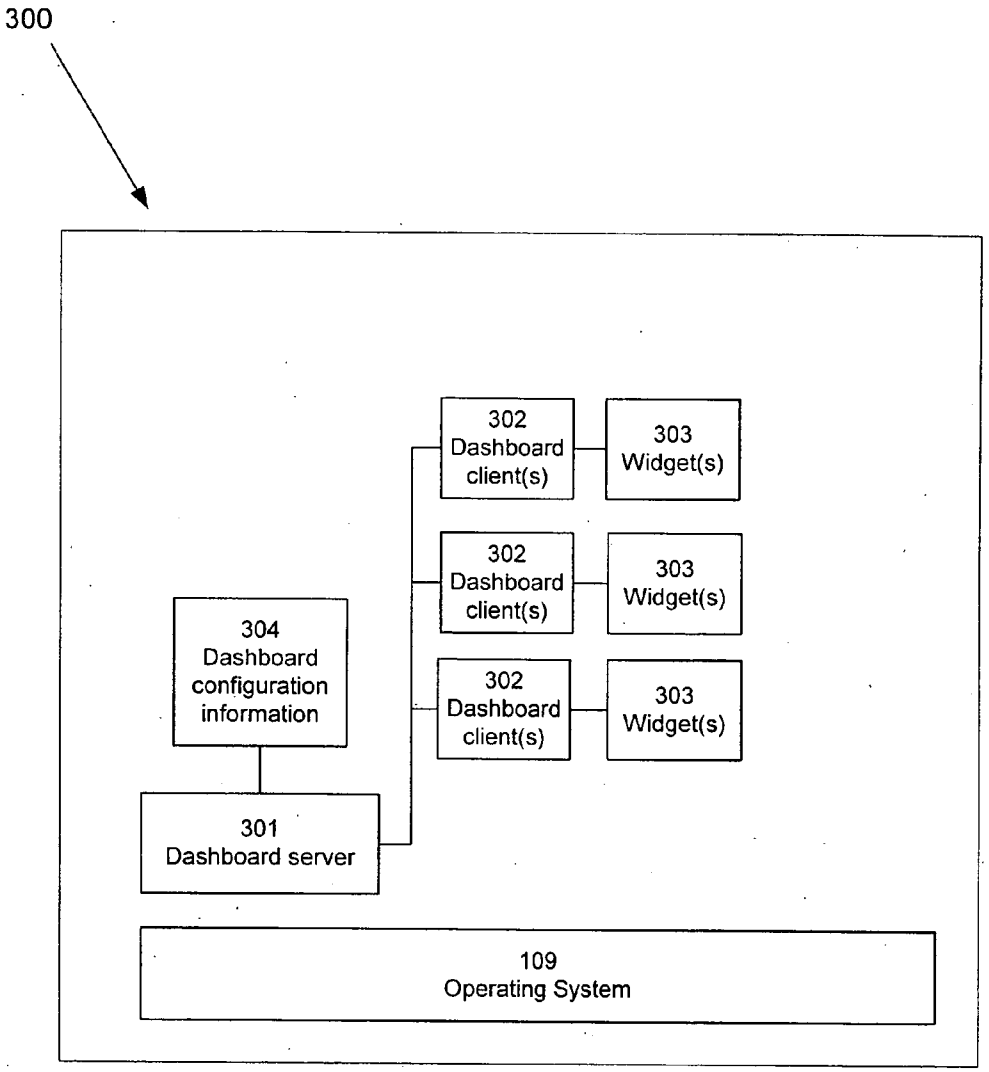
300
302
Dashboard
client(s)
303
Widget(s)
302
Dashboard
client(s)
303
Widget(s)
304
Dashboard
configuration
information
302
Dashboard
client(s)
303
Widget(s)
301
Dashboard server
109
Operating System

FIG. 3

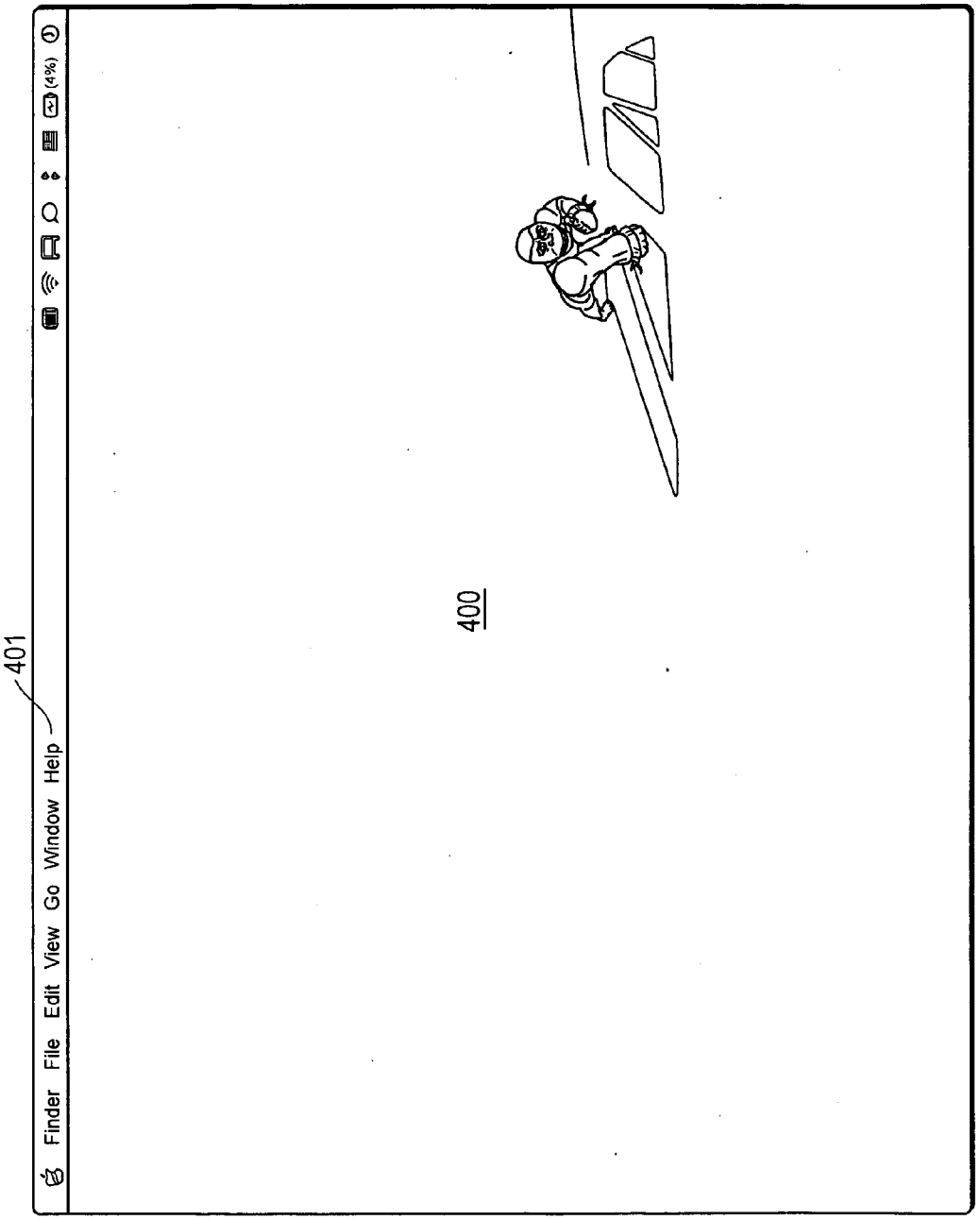

FIG. 4

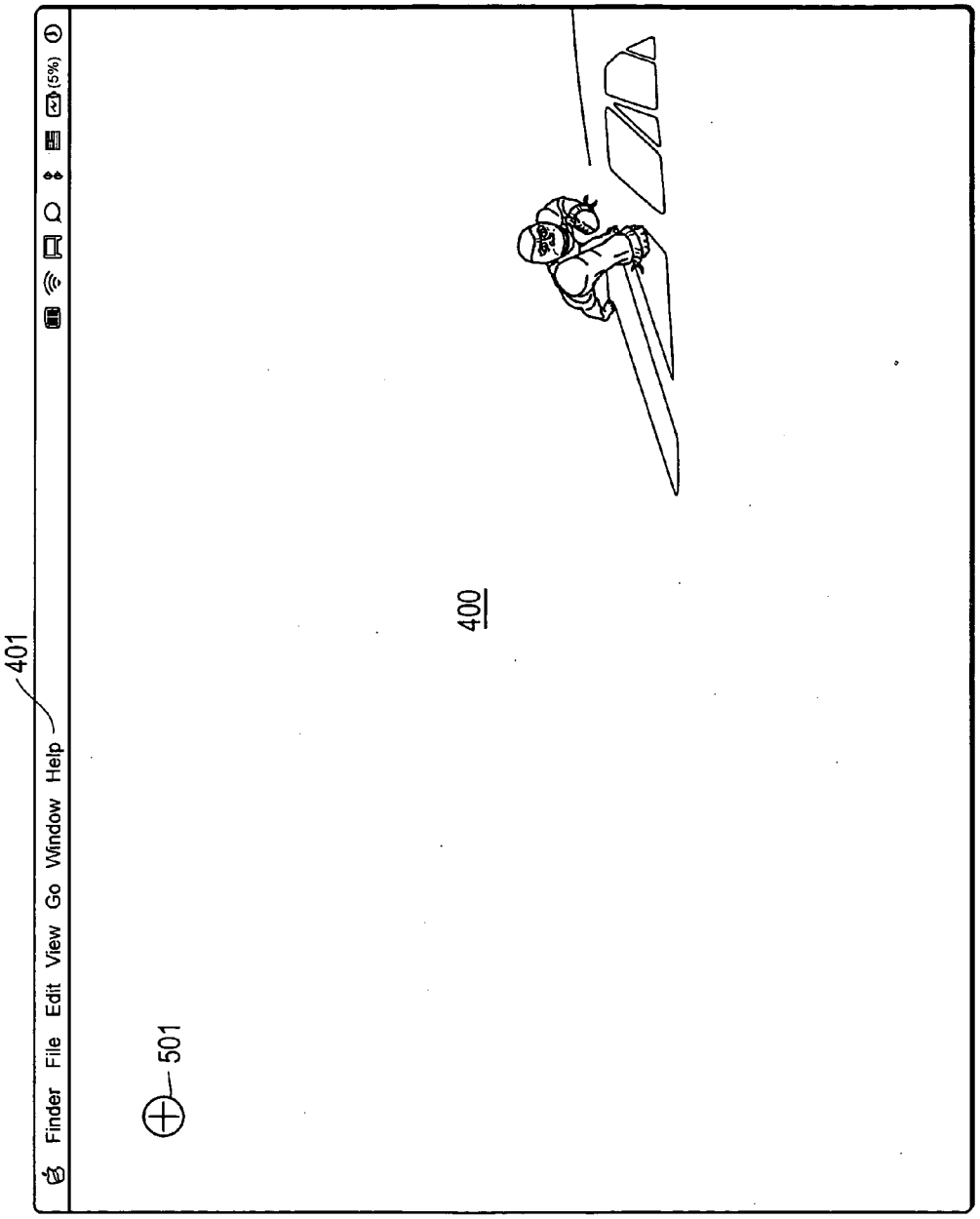

FIG. 5

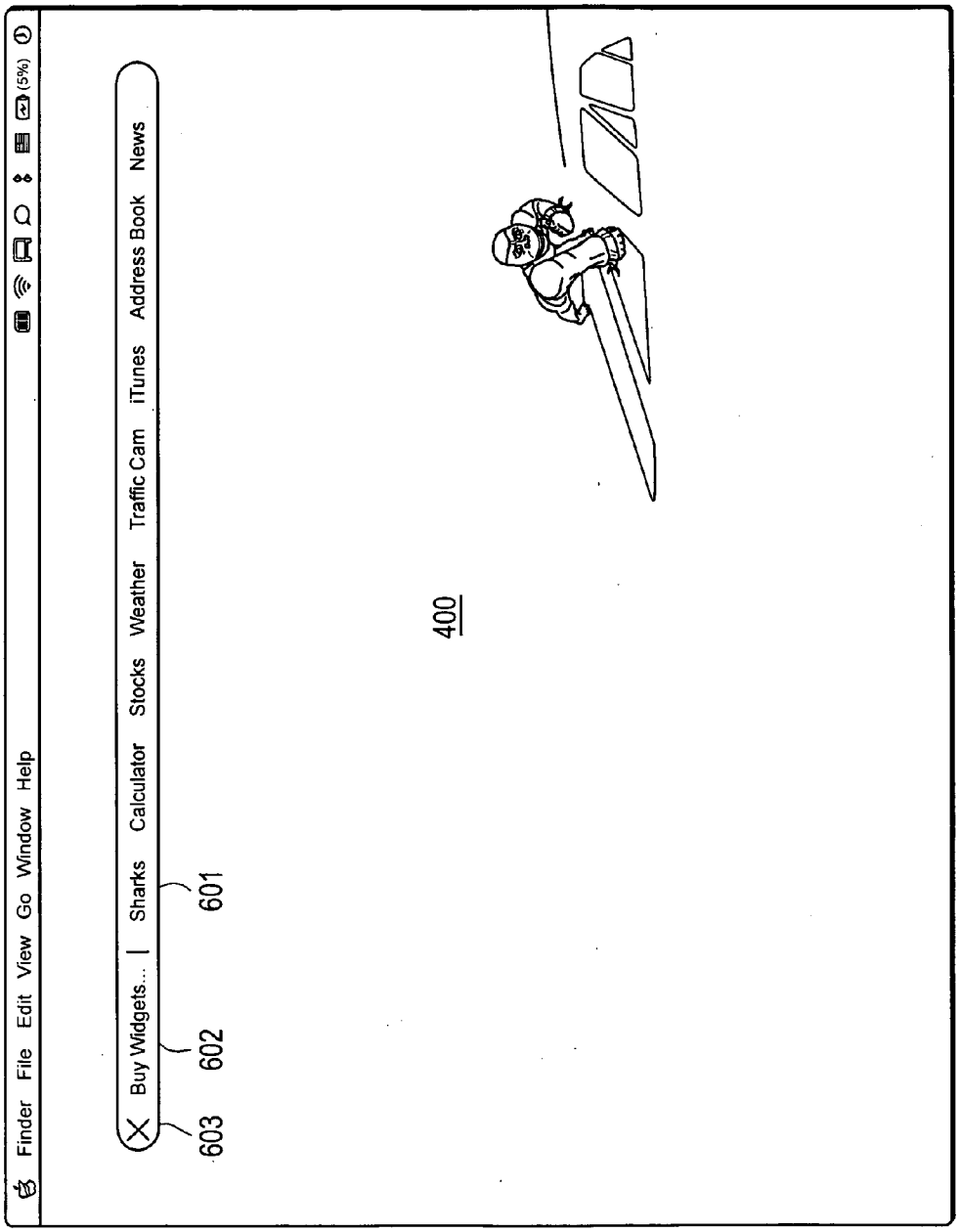
Finder File Edit View Go Window Help
(5%)
Buy Widgets... | Sharks Calculator Stocks Weather Traffic Cam iTunes Address Book News
603
602
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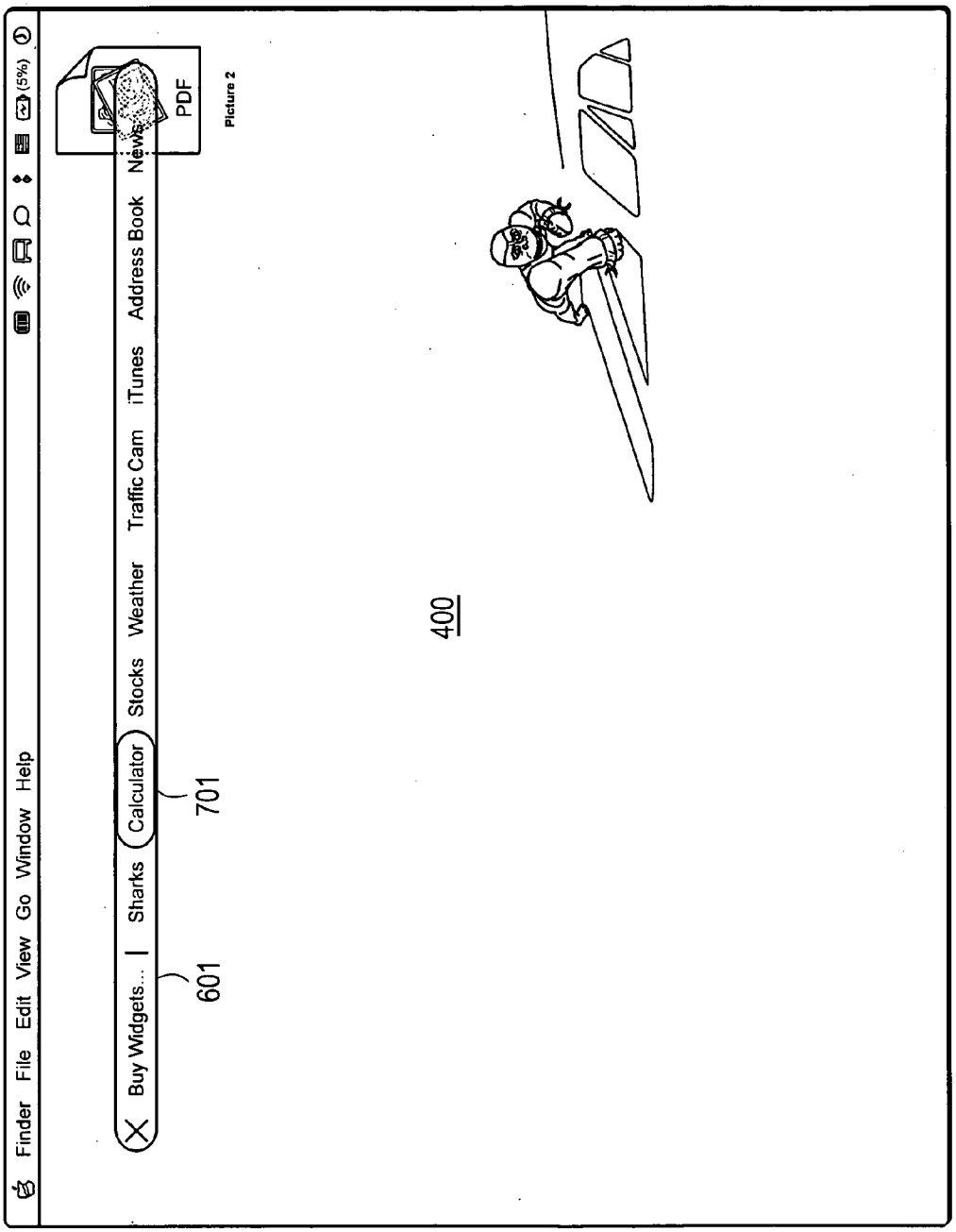
FIG. 6


Finder File Edit View Go Window Help
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Picture 2
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FIG. 7

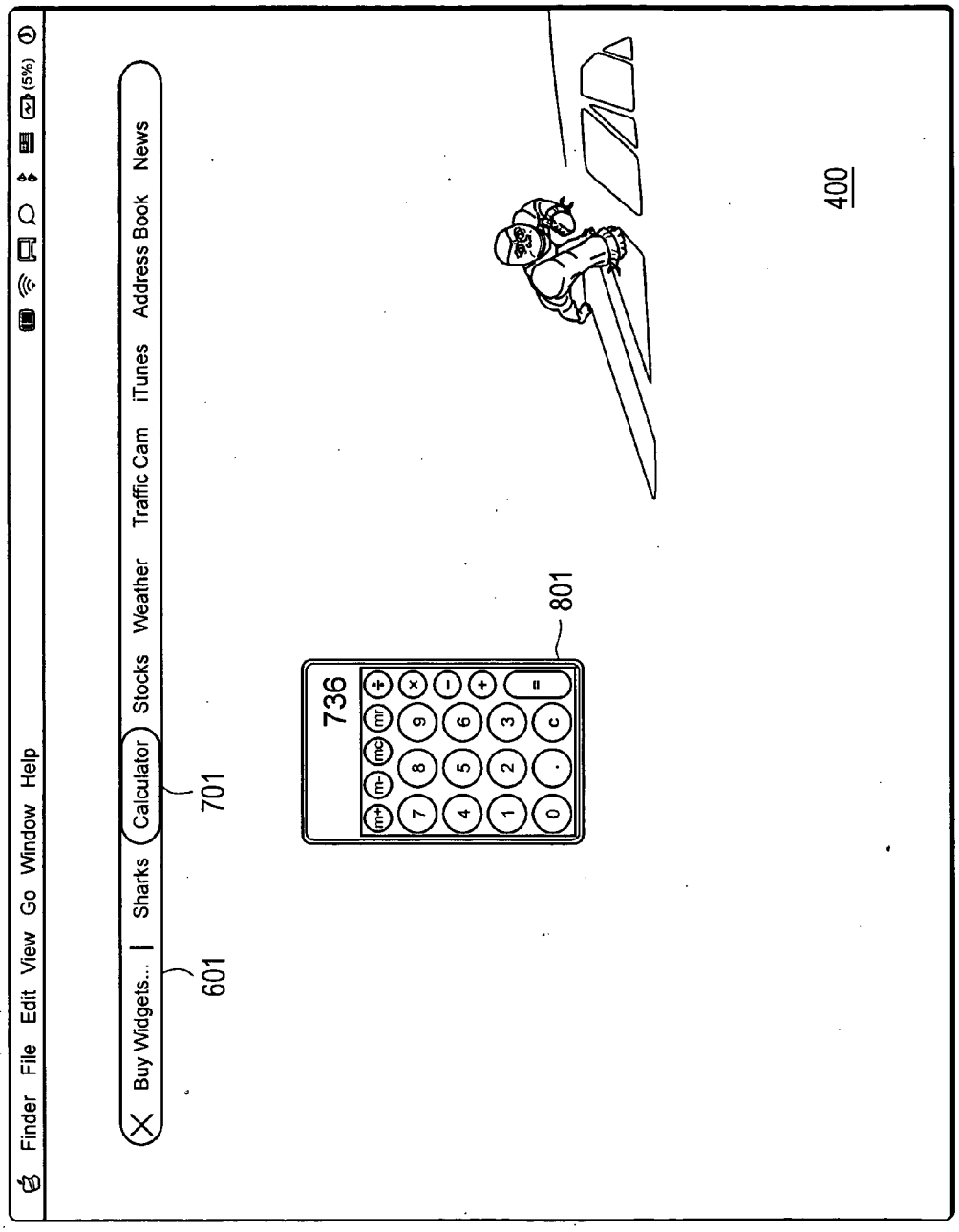
Finder File Edit View Go Window Help
Buy Widgets... | Sharks Calculator Stocks Weather Traffic Cam iTunes Address Book News
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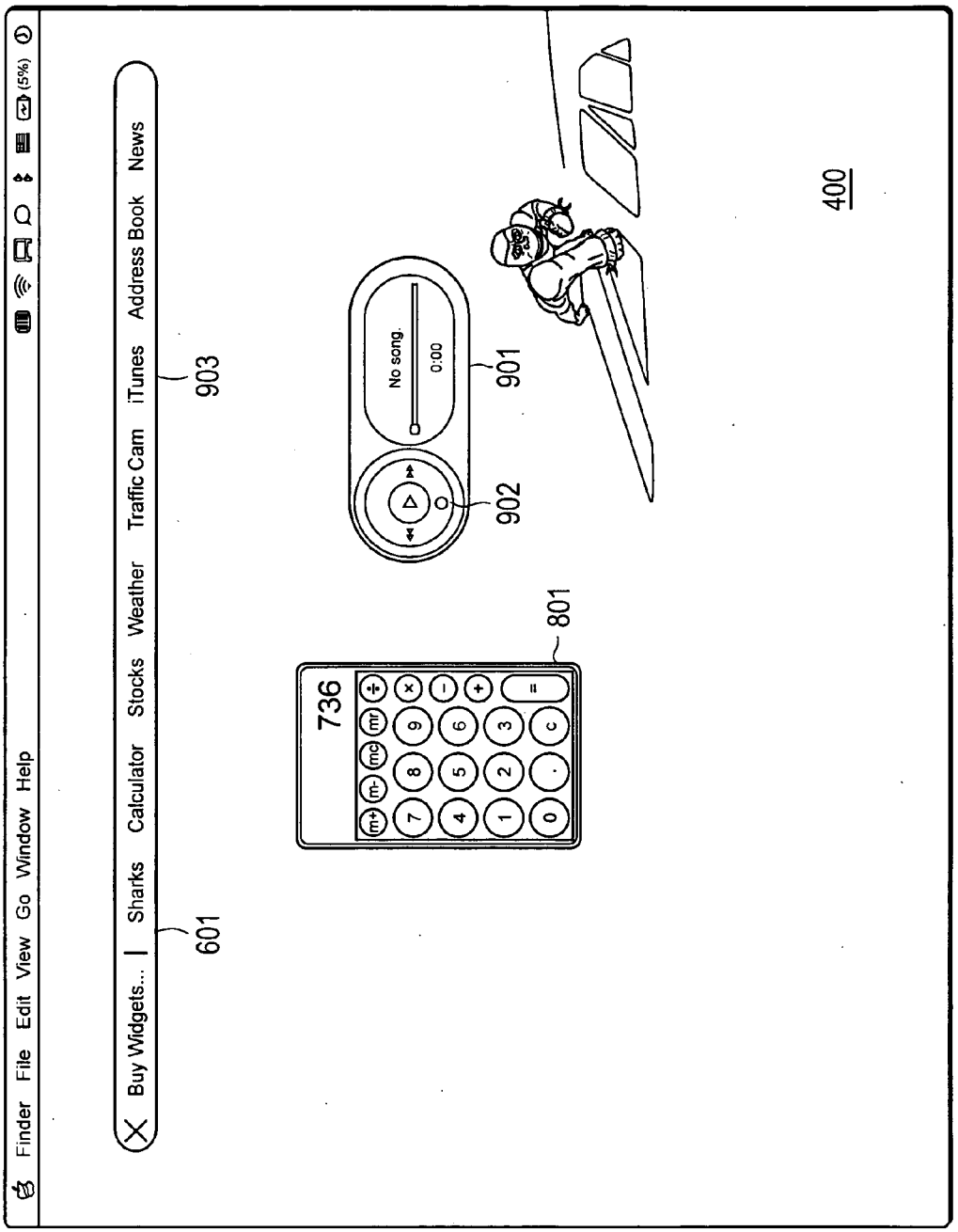
FIG. 8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601
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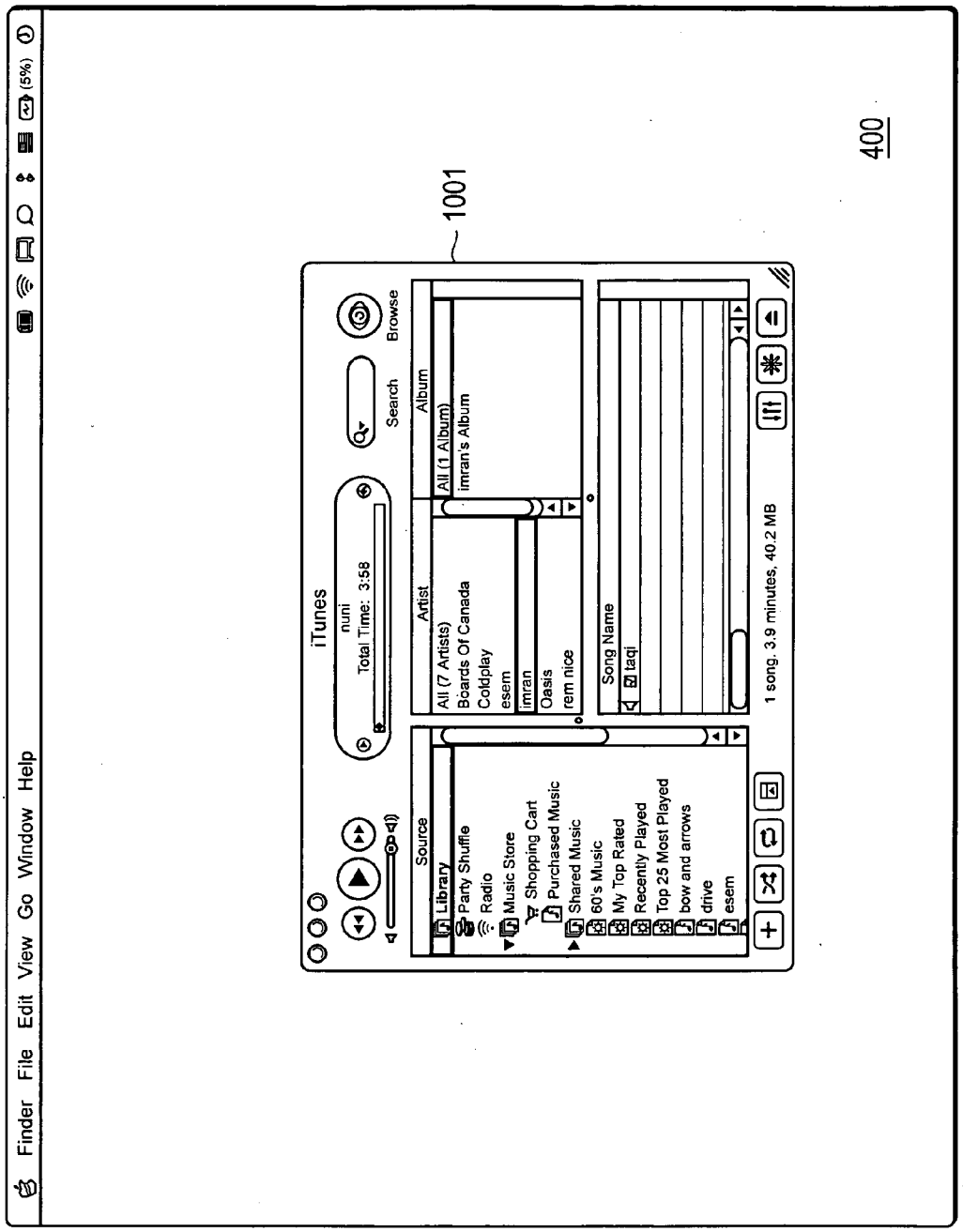
FIG. 9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drive
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FIG. 10

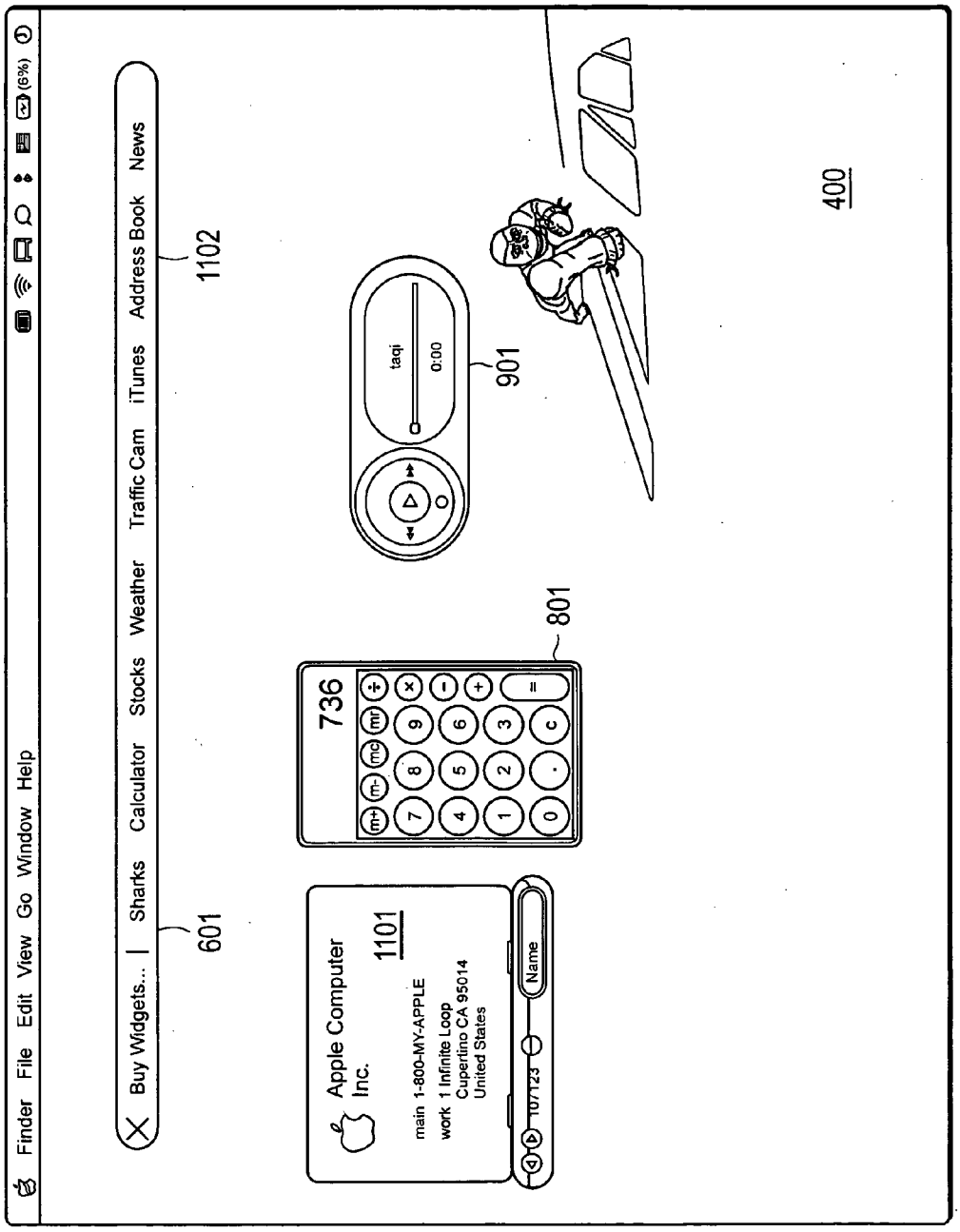
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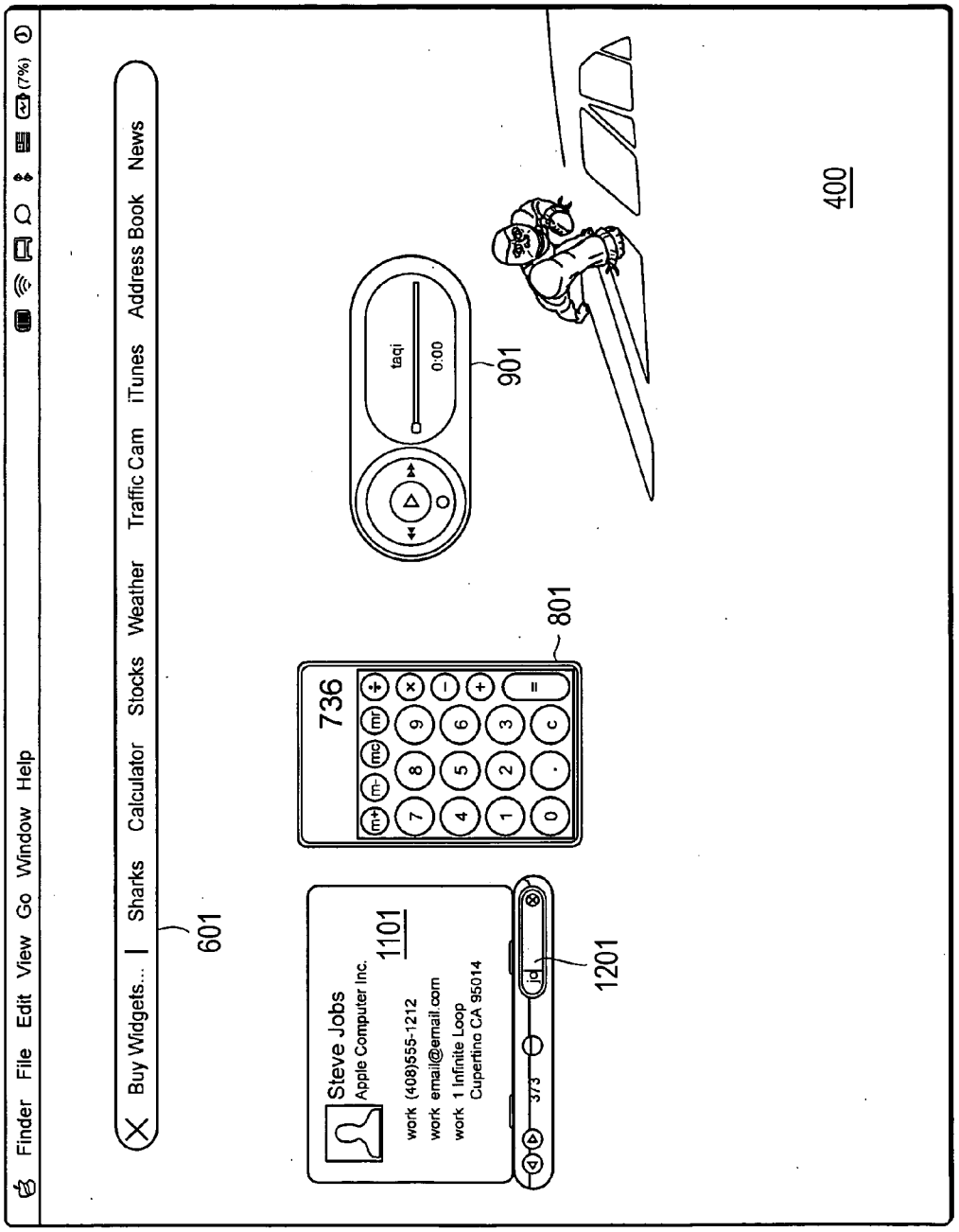
FIG. 11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work (408)555-1212
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Cupertino CA 95014
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FIG. 12

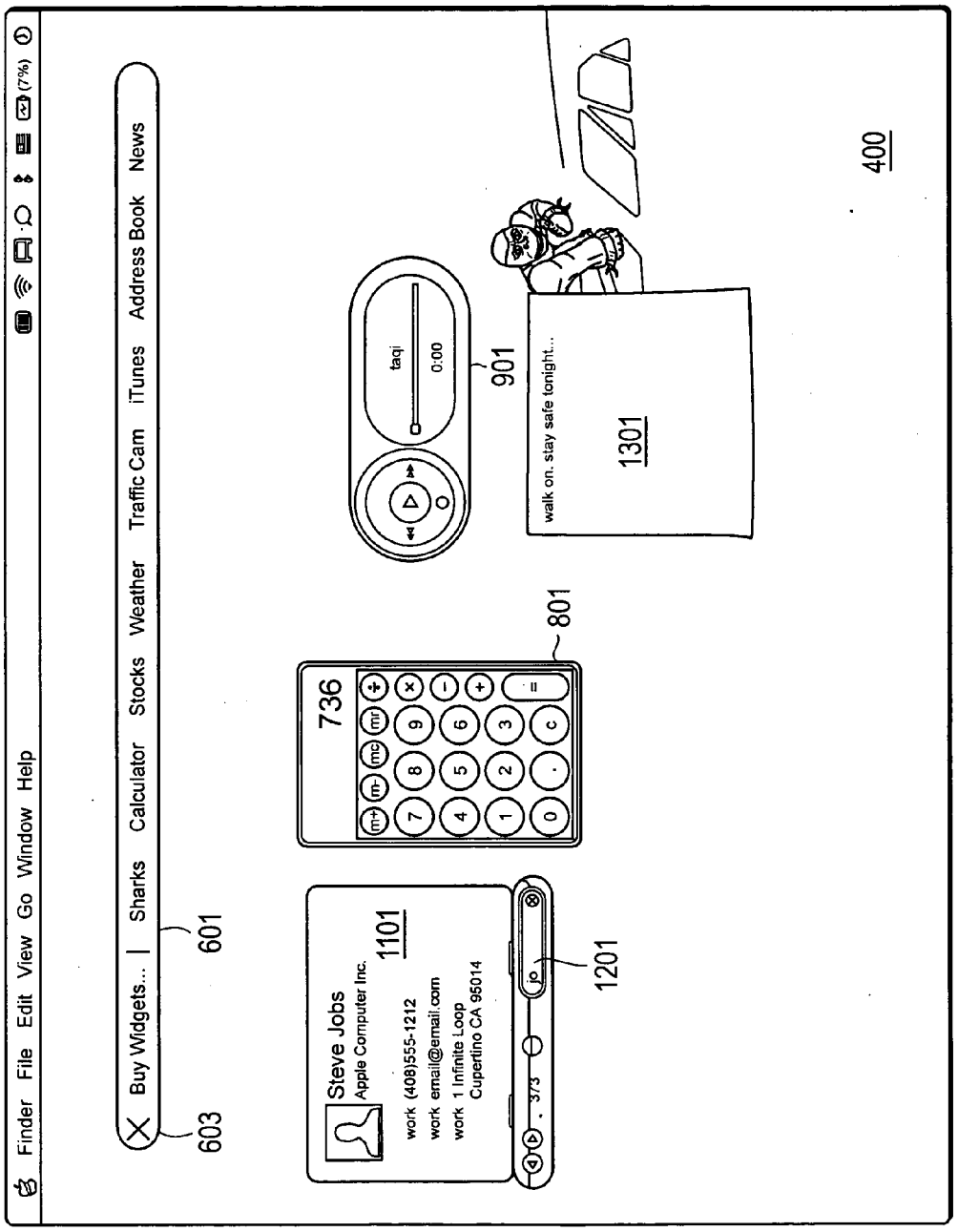
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FIG. 13

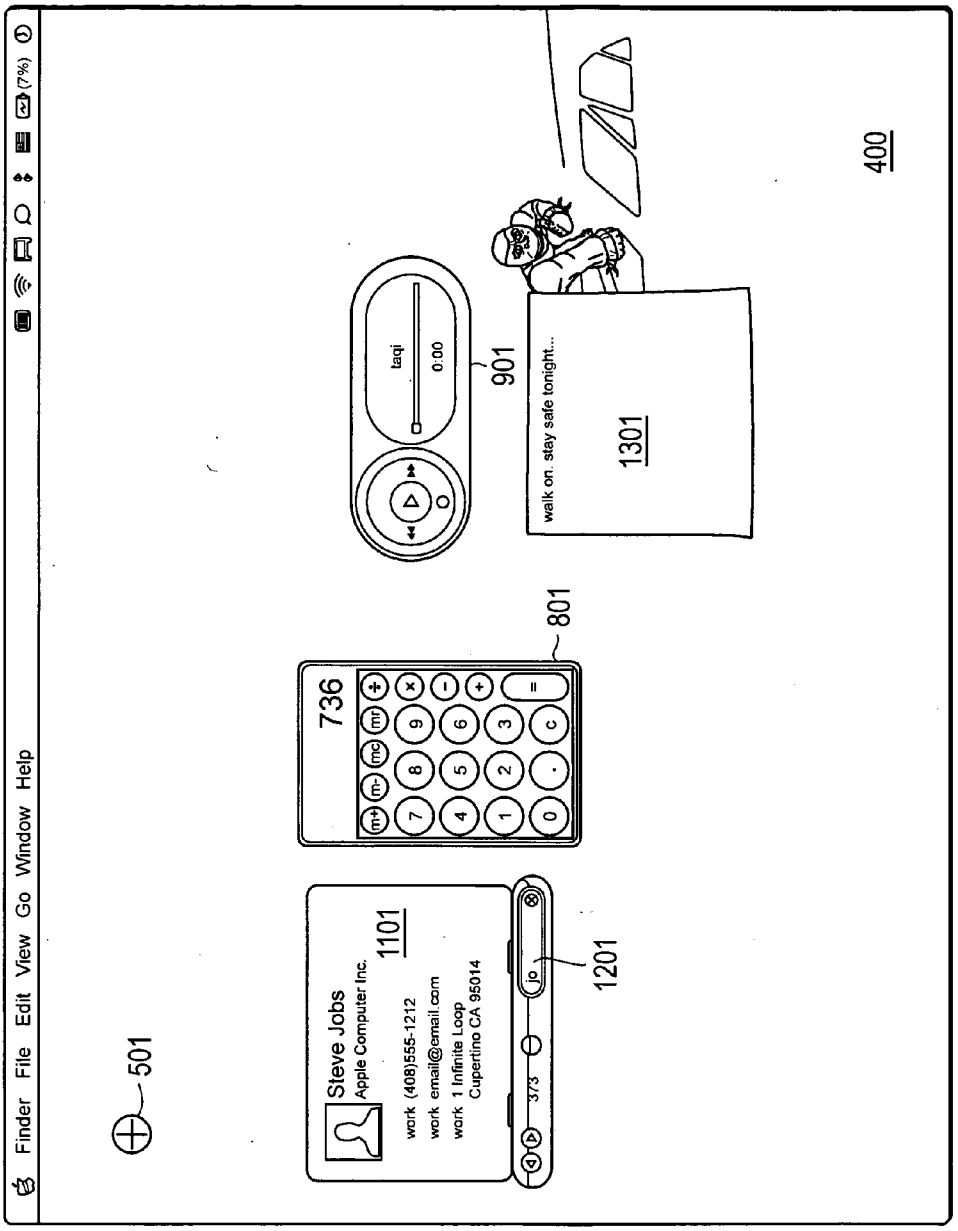
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FIG. 14

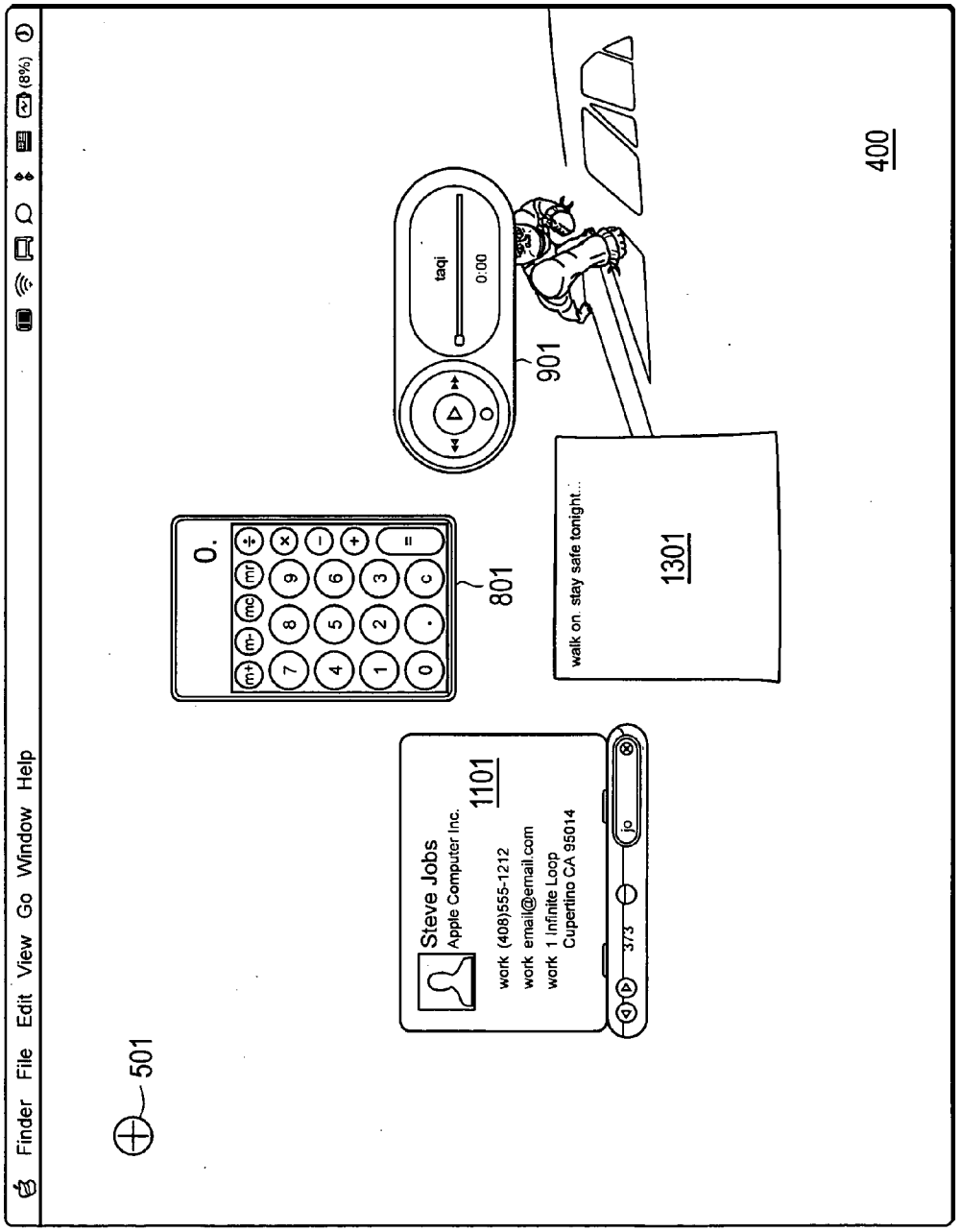
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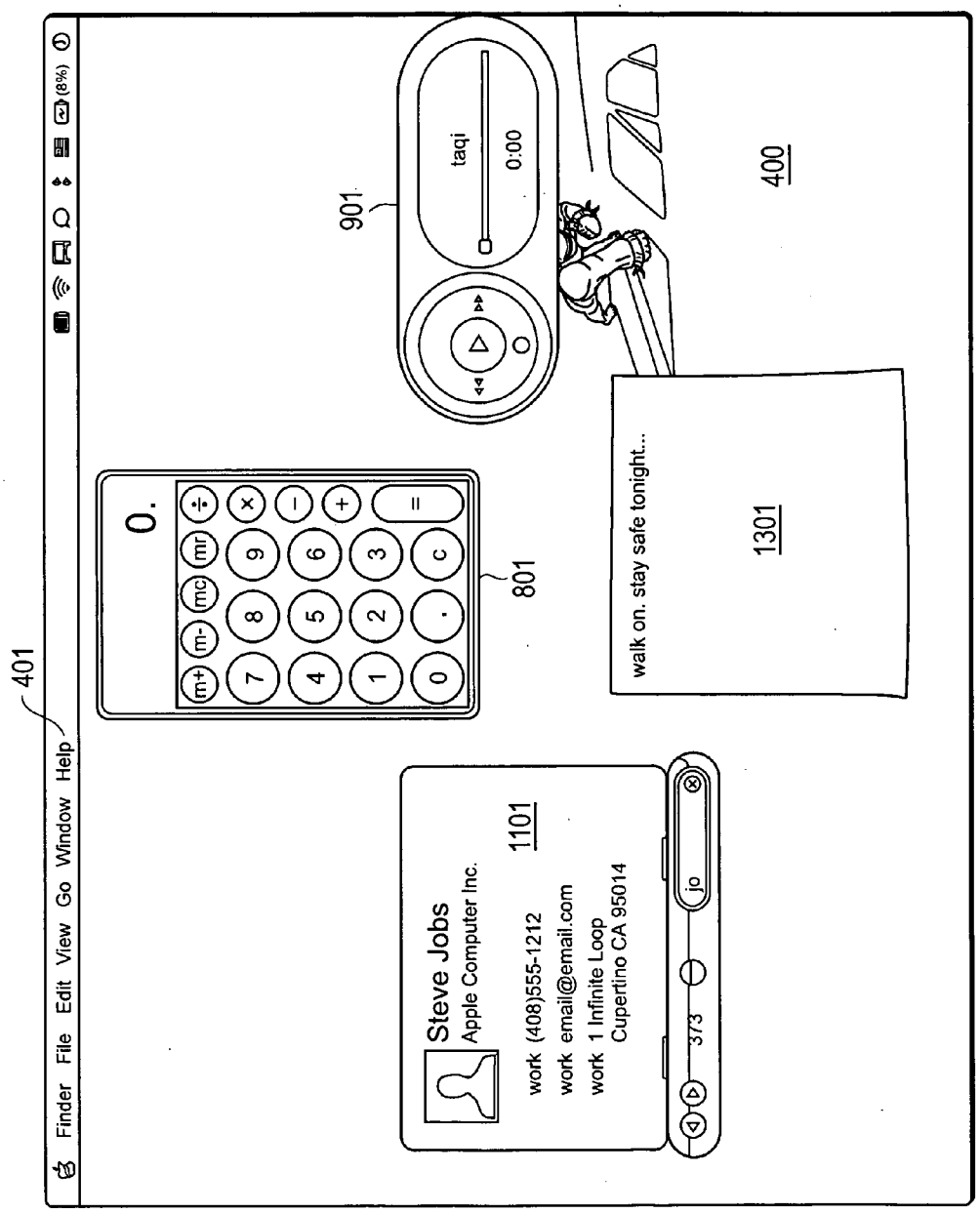
FIG. 15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Apple Computer Inc.
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work email@email.com
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3/3

FIG. 16A

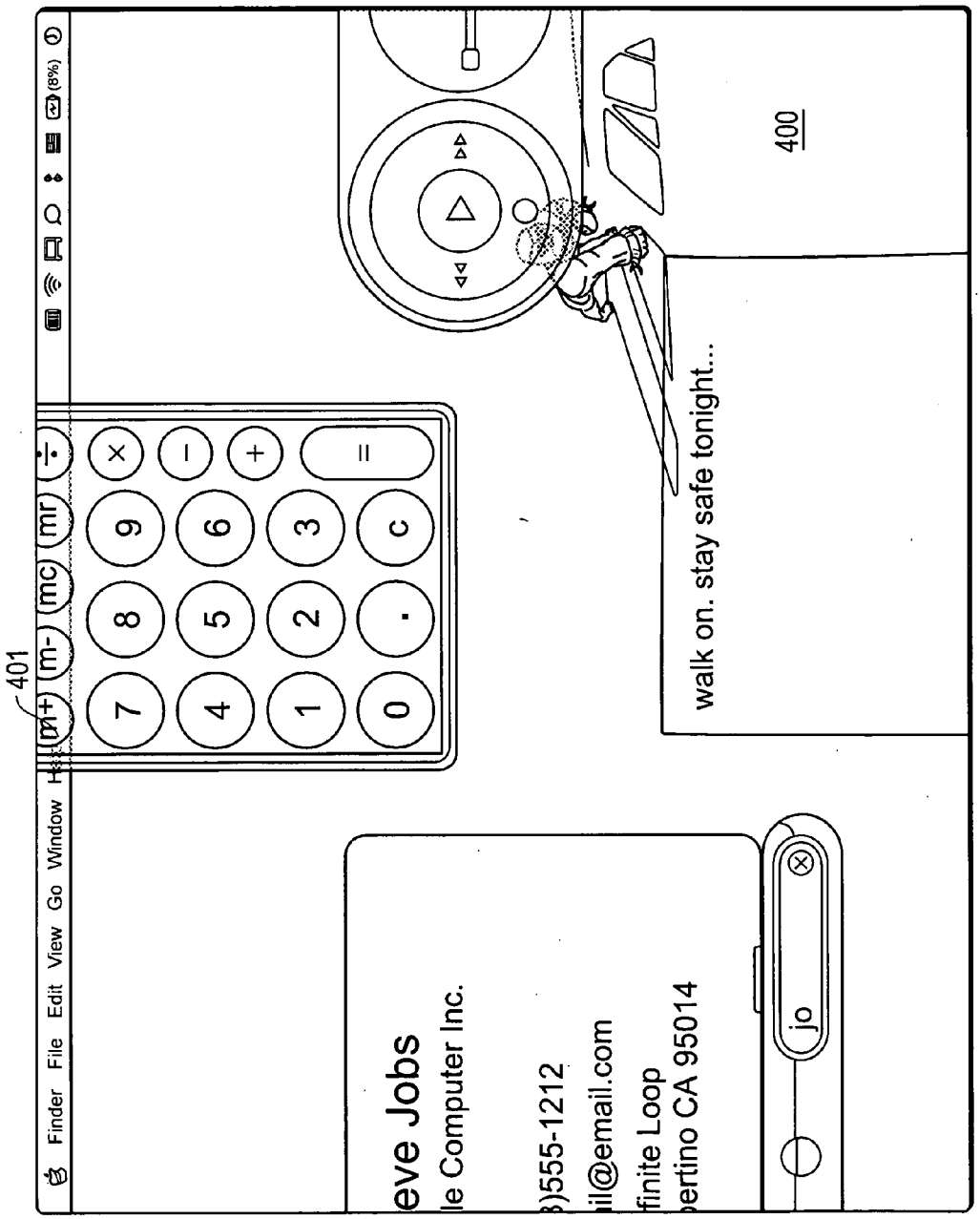
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FIG. 16B

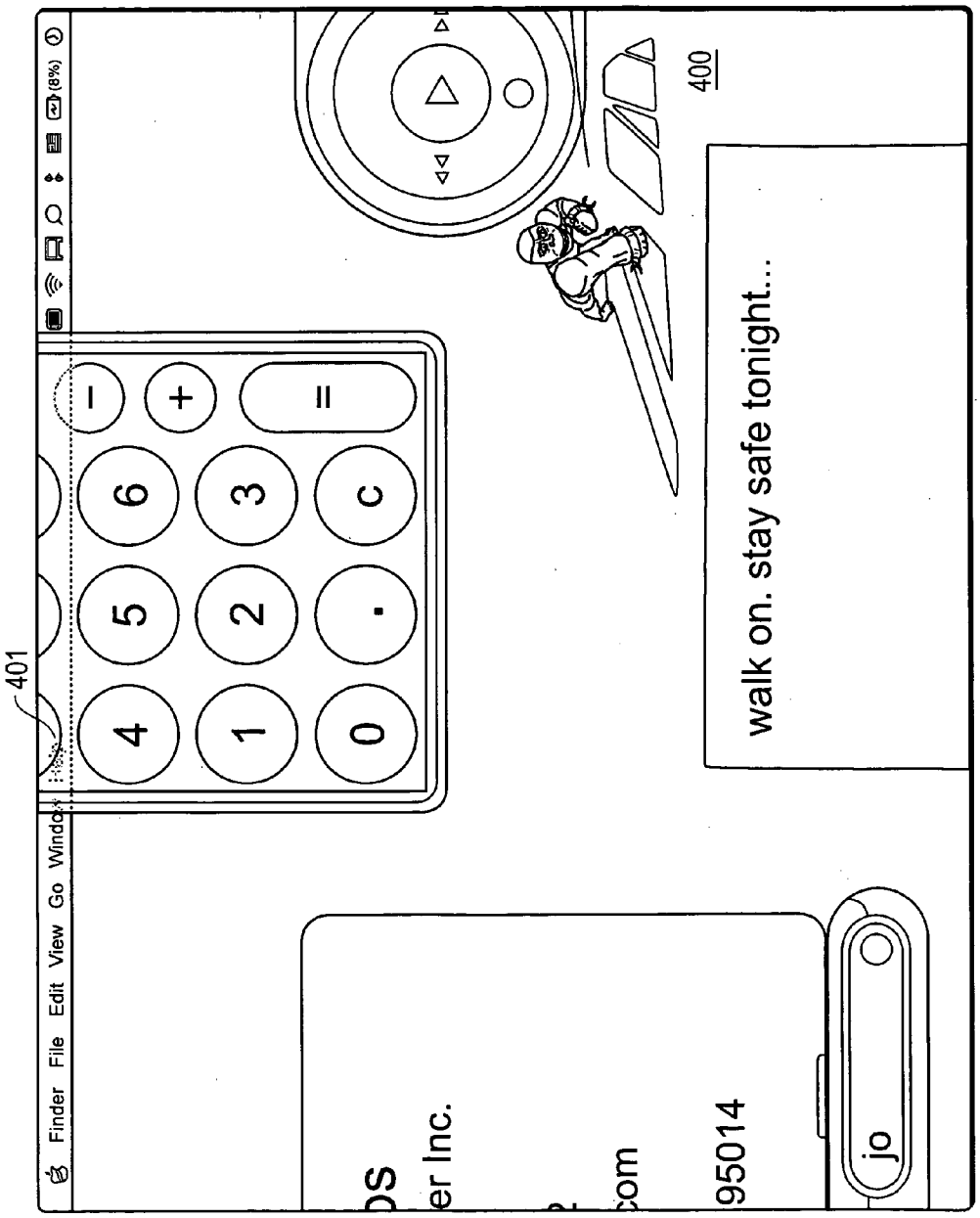
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FIG. 16C

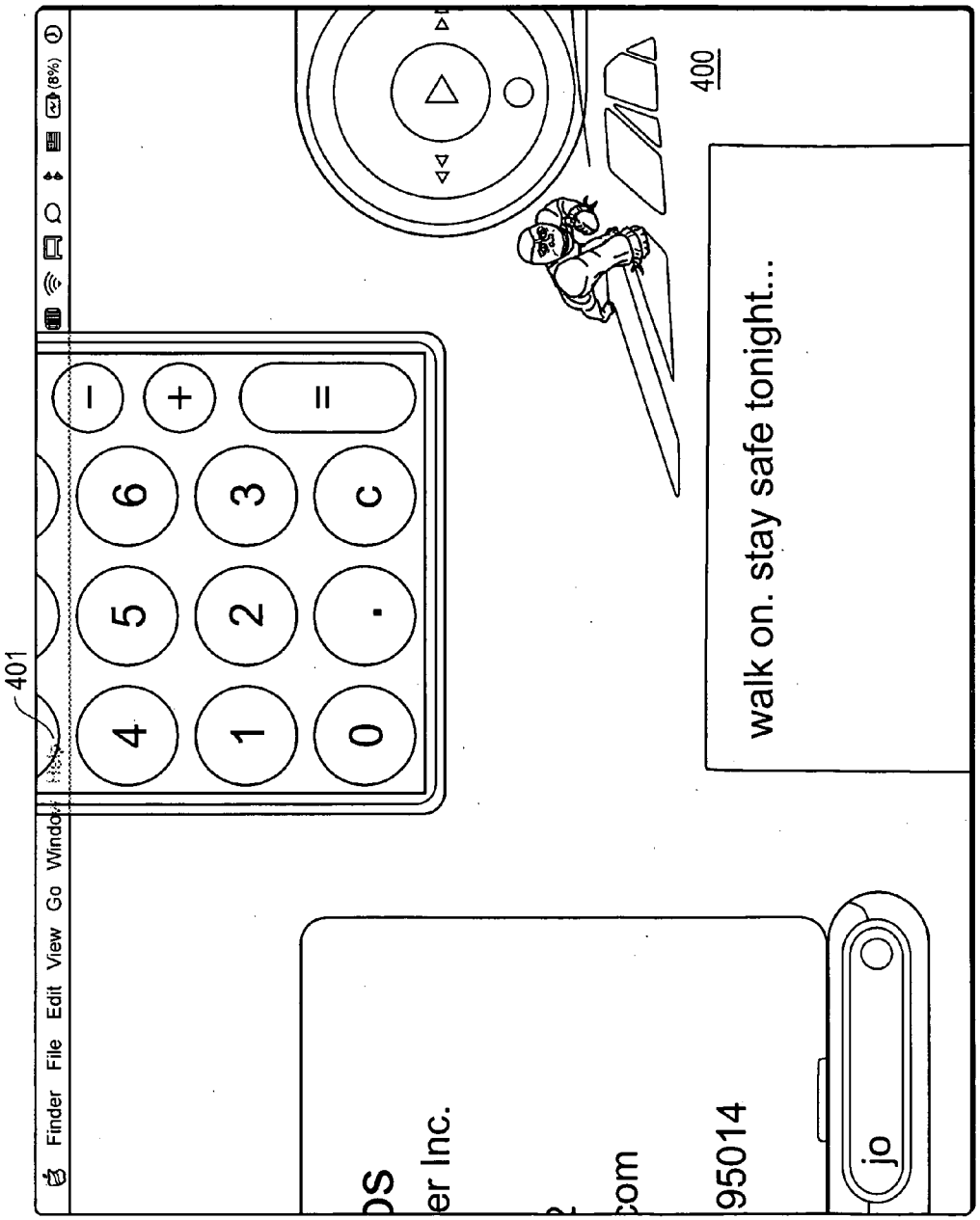
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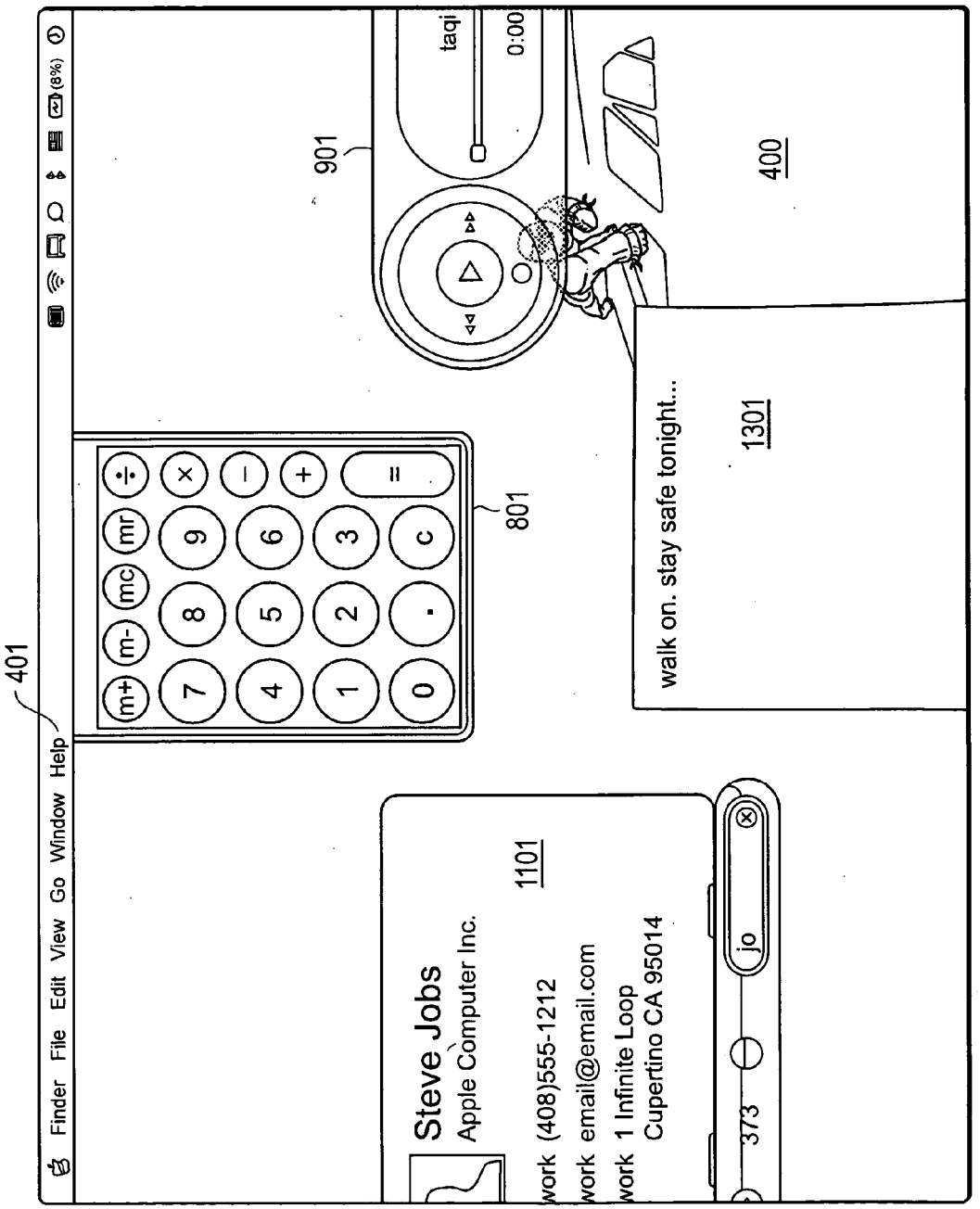
FIG. 17A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Steve Jobs
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work (408)555-1212
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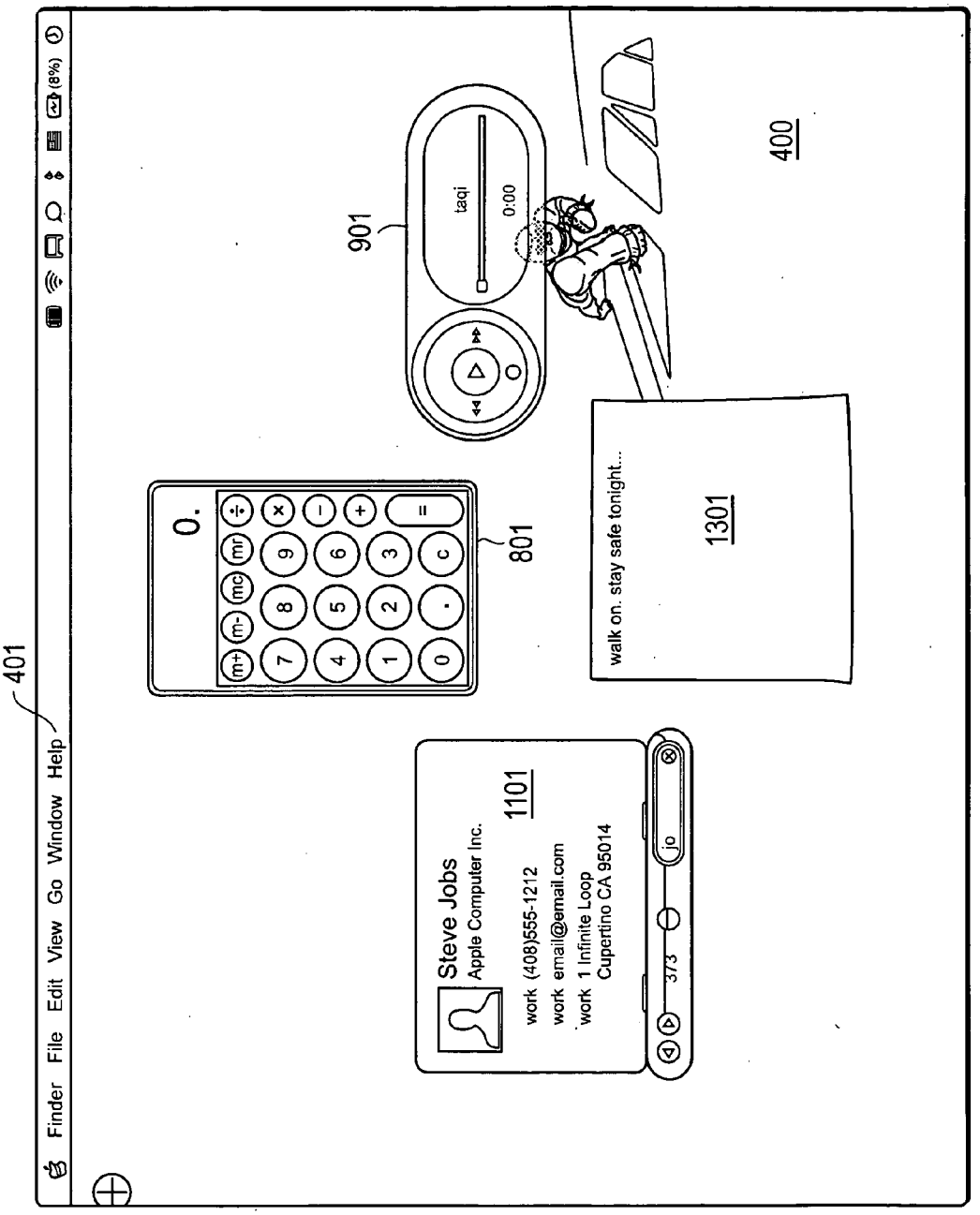
FIG. 17B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work email@email.com
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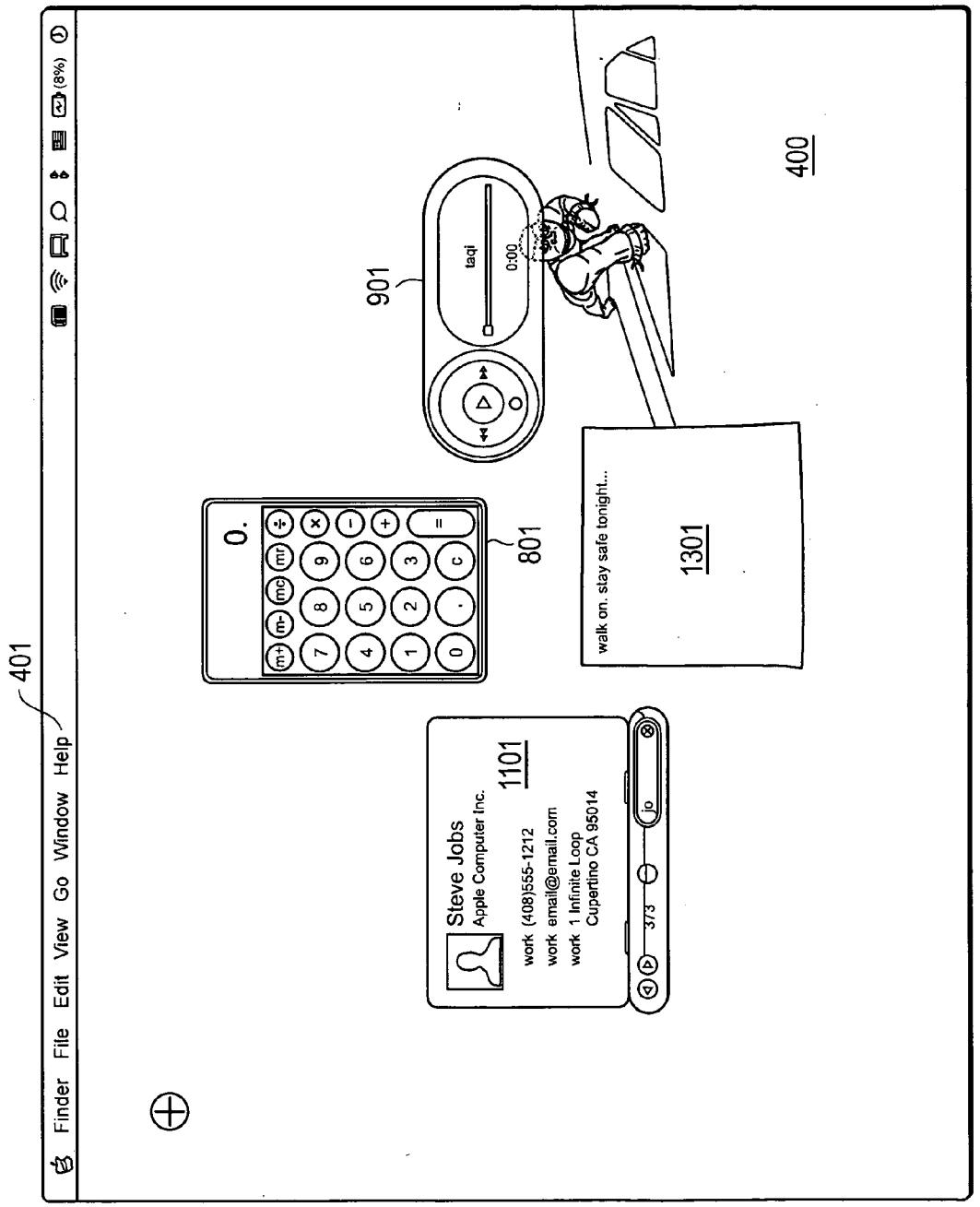
Cupertino CA 95014
373
jo

FIG. 17C


401
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Steve Jobs
Apple Computer Inc.
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work (408)555-1212
work email@email.com
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Cupertino CA 95014
3/3
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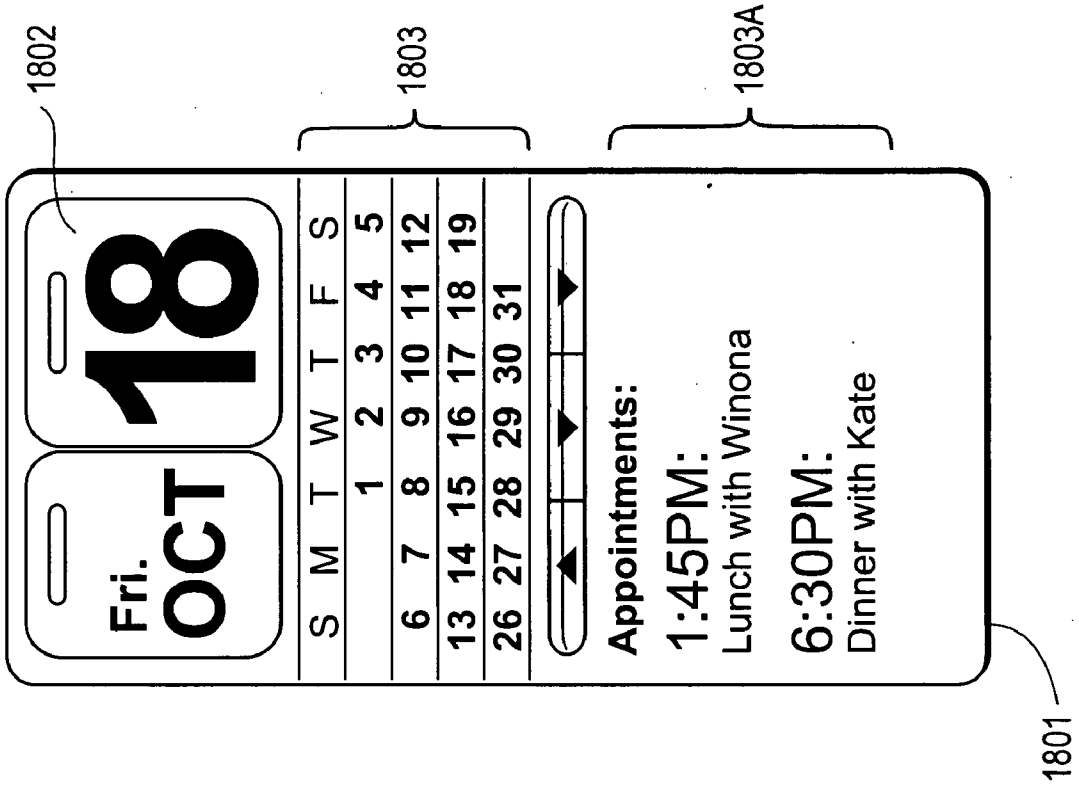
FIG. 17D


1802
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S M T W T F S
1 2 3 4 5
6 7 8 9 10 11 12
13 14 15 16 17 18 19
26 27 28 29 30 31
1803A
Appointments:
1:45PM:
Lunch with Winona
6:30PM:
Dinner with Kate
1801

FIG. 18

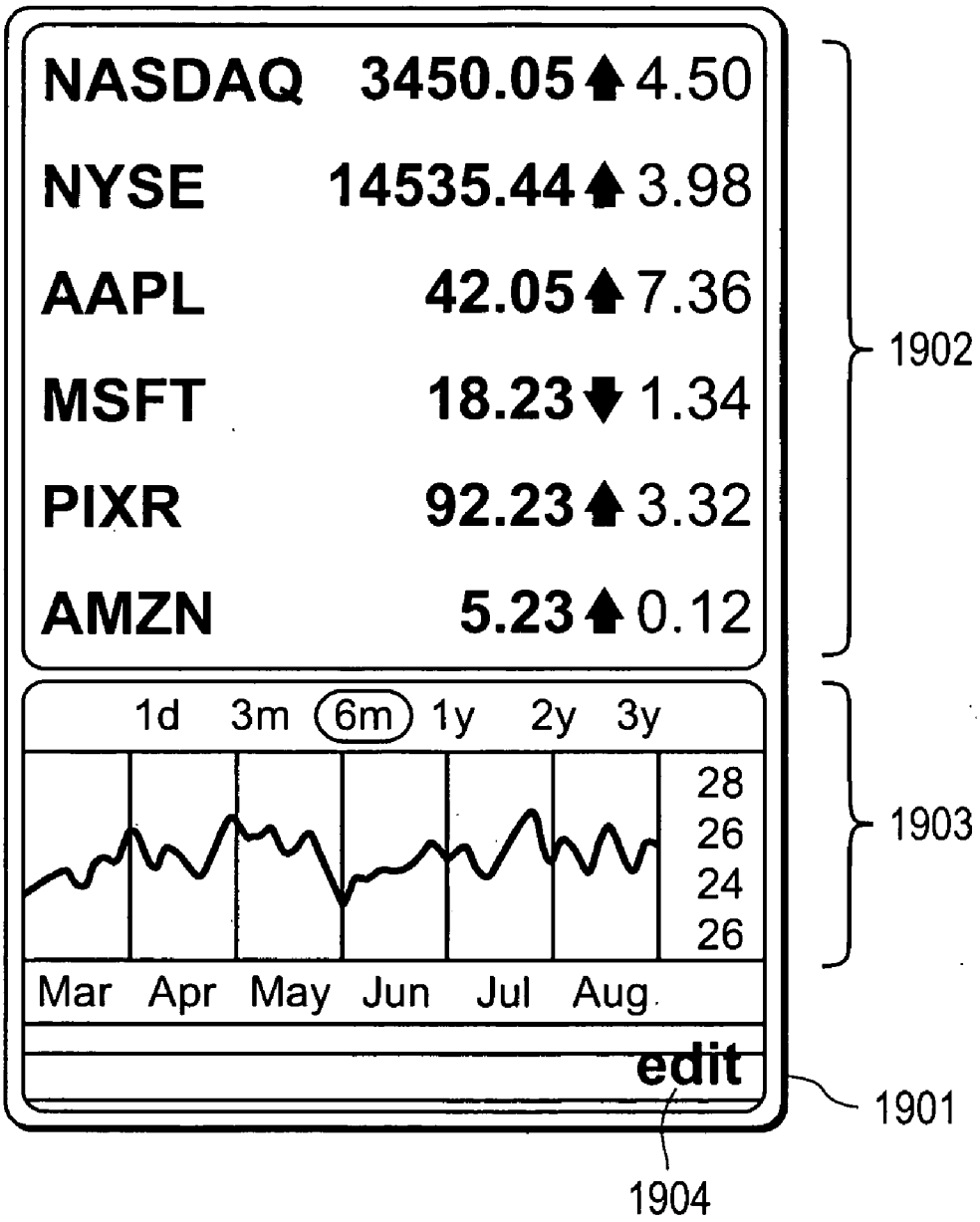
NASDAQ 3450.05 ▲ 4.50
NYSE 14535.44 ▲ 3.98
AAPL 42.05 ▲ 7.36
MSFT 18.23 ▼ 1.34
PIXR 92.23 ▲ 3.32
AMZN 5.23 ▲ 0.12
1902
1d 3m 6m 1y 2y 3y
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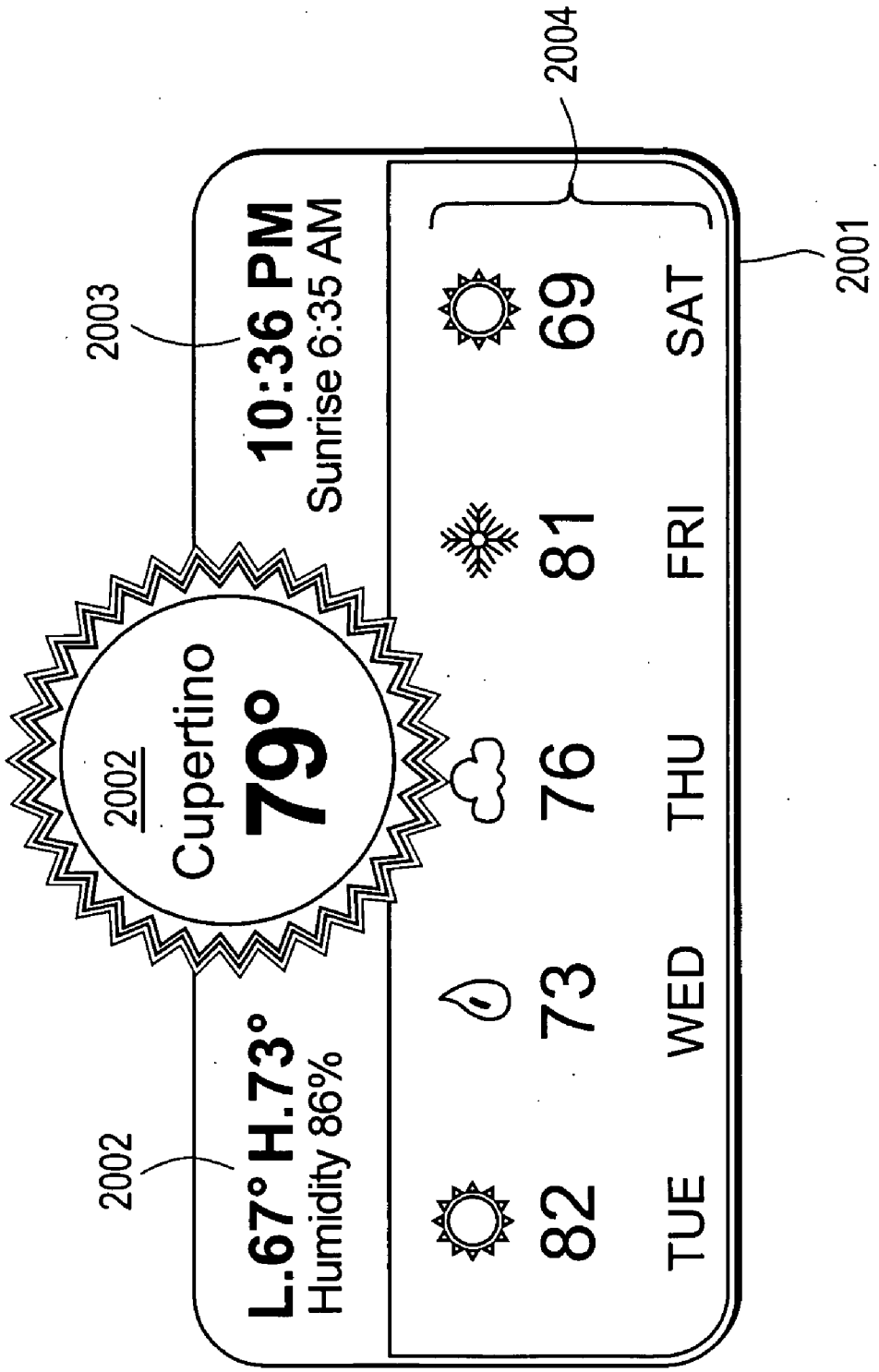
FIG. 19


2004
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2001
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2002
10:36 PM
Sunrise 6:35 AM
Cupertino
79°
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82
TUE
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FIG. 20

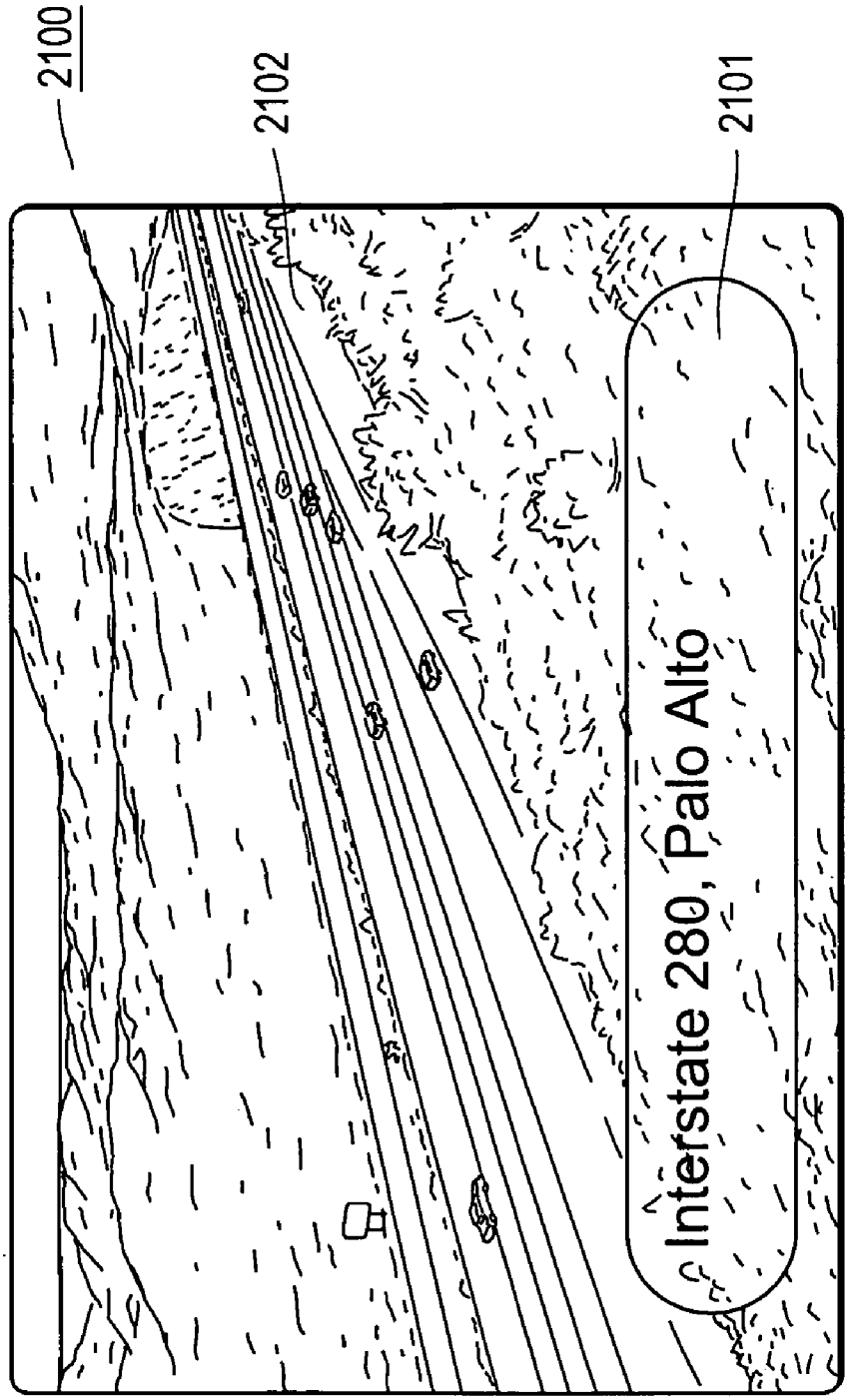


FIG. 21

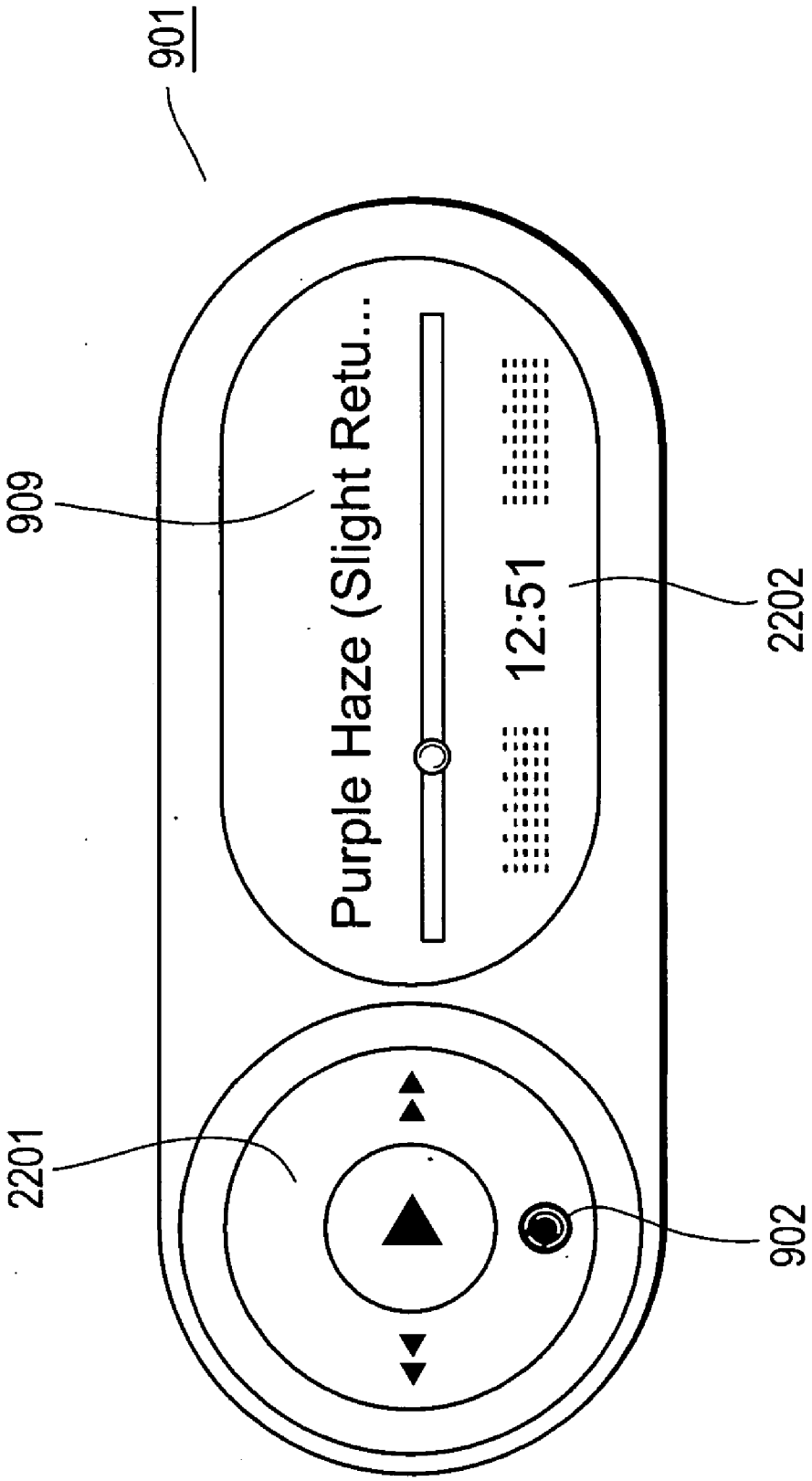
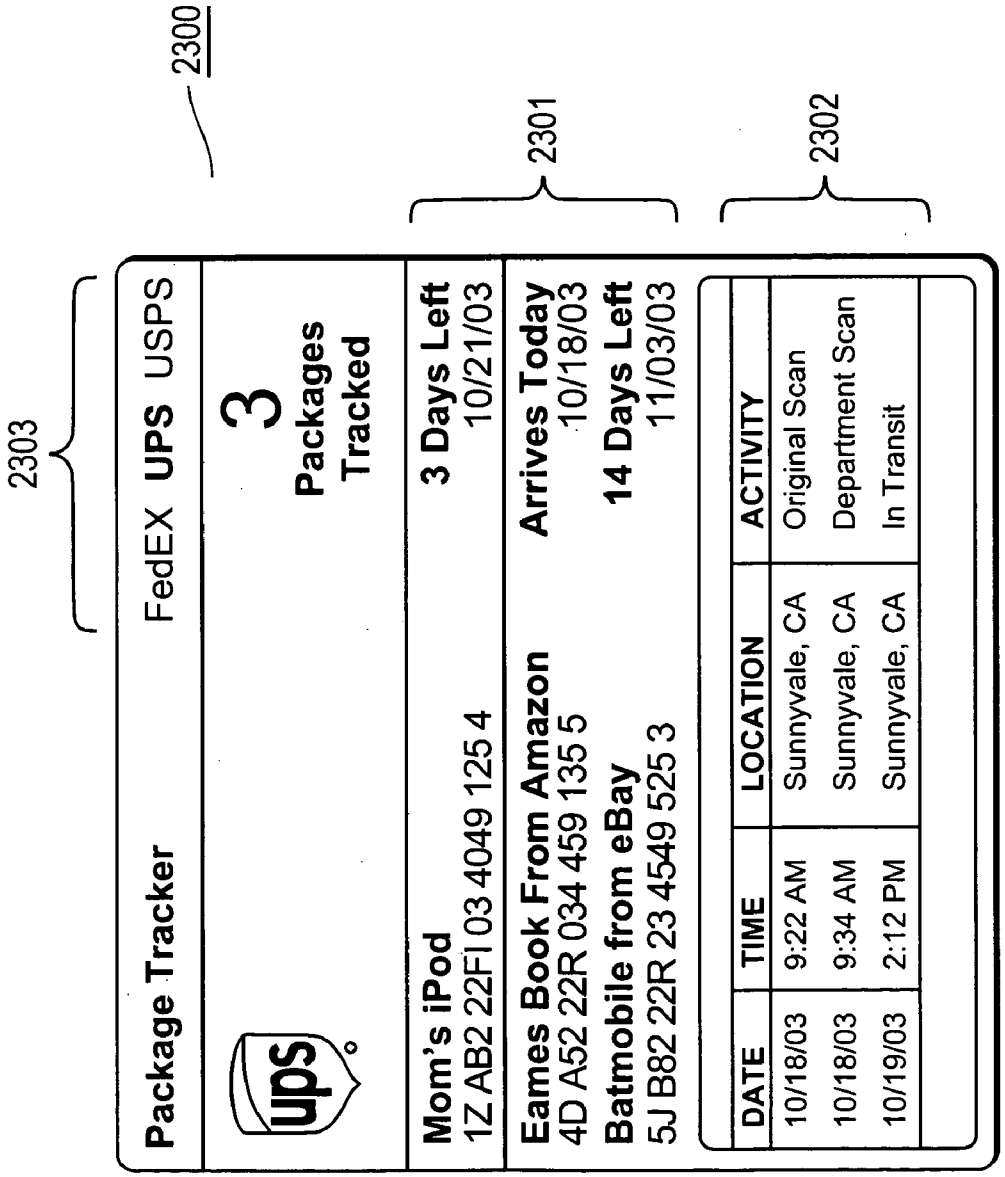


FIG. 22


2300
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FedEX UPS USPS
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Packages
Tracked
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4D A52 22R 034 459 135 5
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Batmobile from eBay
5J B82 22R 23 4549 525 3
14 Days Left
11/03/03
DATE
TIME
LOCATION
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10/18/03
9:22 AM
Sunnyvale, CA
Original Scan
10/18/03
9:34 AM
Sunnyvale, CA
Department Scan
10/19/03
2:12 PM
Sunnyvale, CA
In Transit

FIG. 23

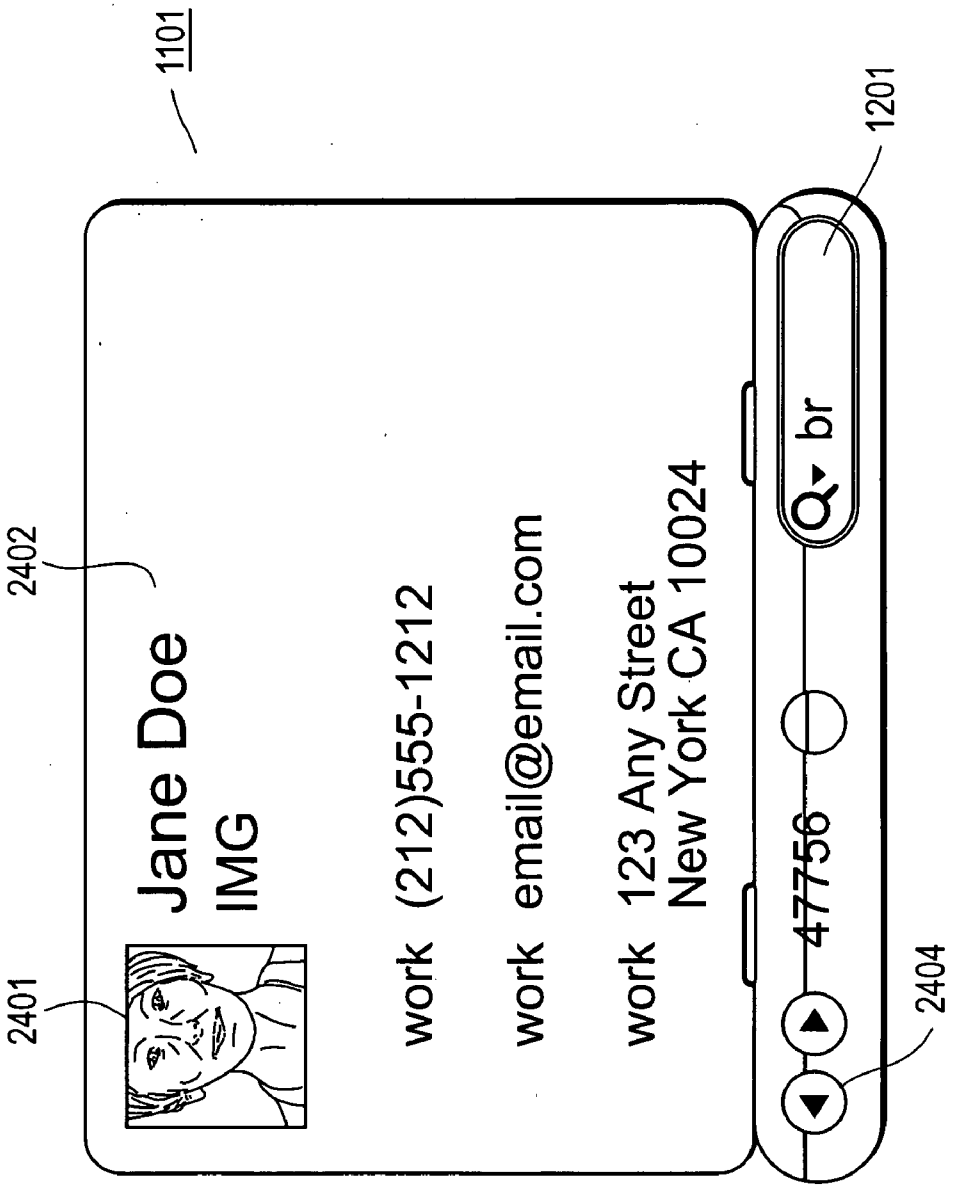

1101
2402
2401
Jane Doe
IMG
work (212)555-1212
work email@email.com
work 123 Any Street
New York CA 10024
47756
br
1201
2404

FIG. 24

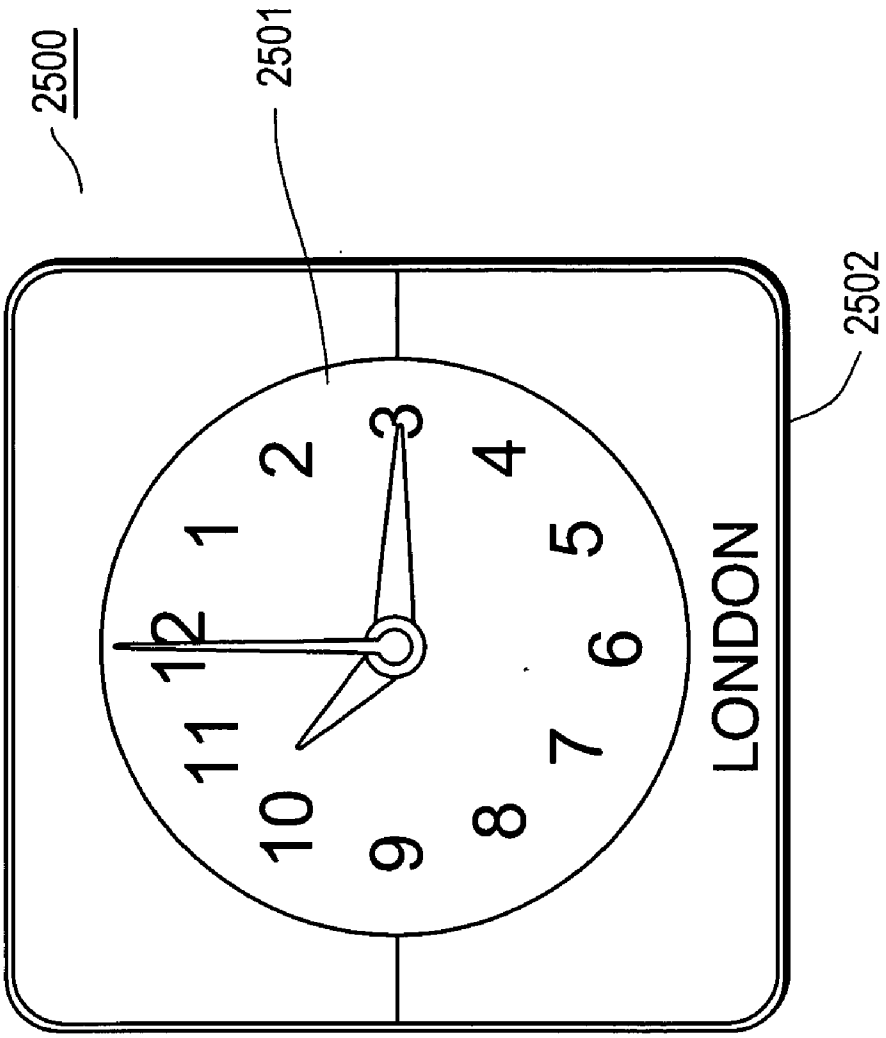
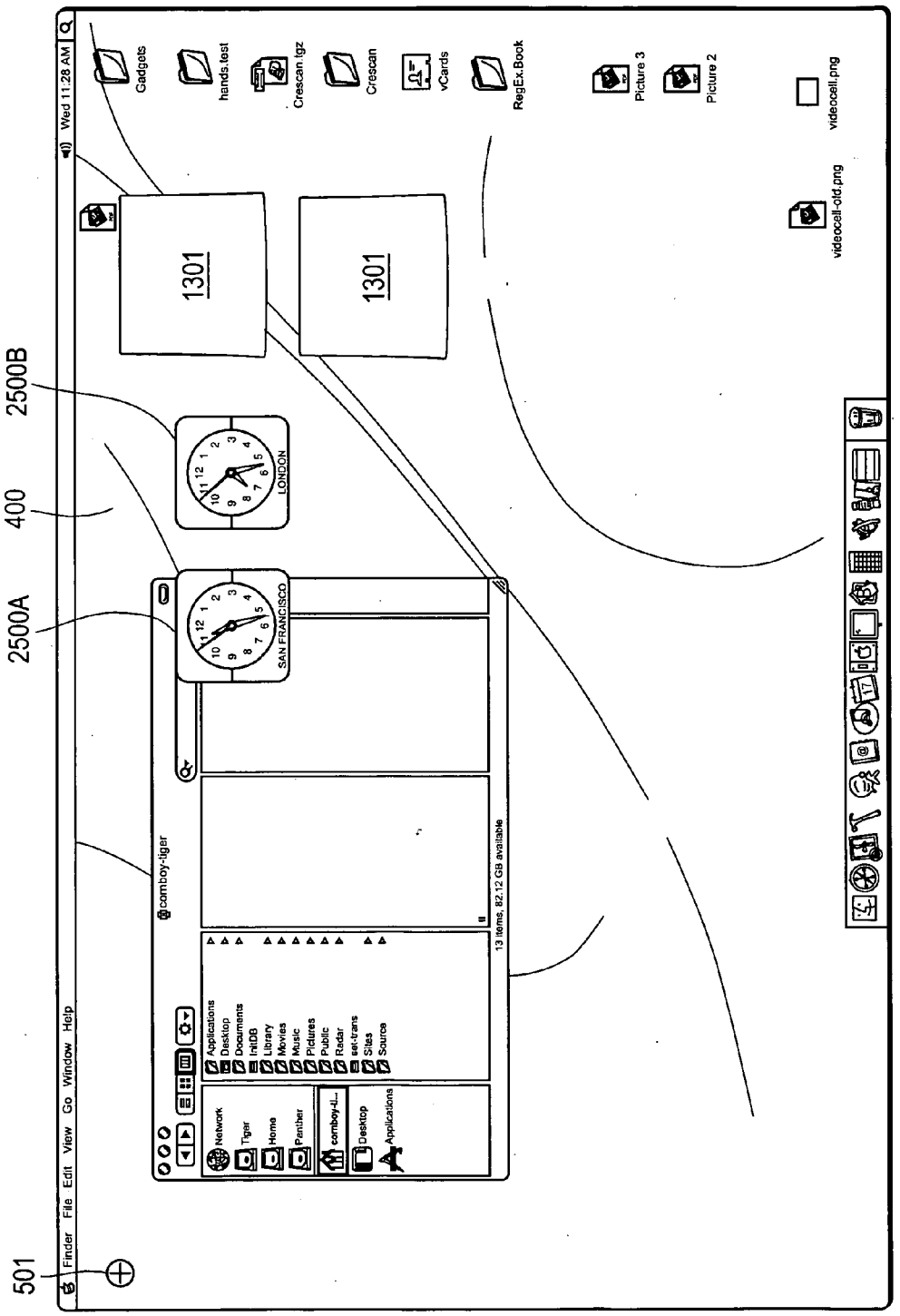


FIG. 25


501
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Picture 3
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videocell.png
videocell-old.png
LONDON
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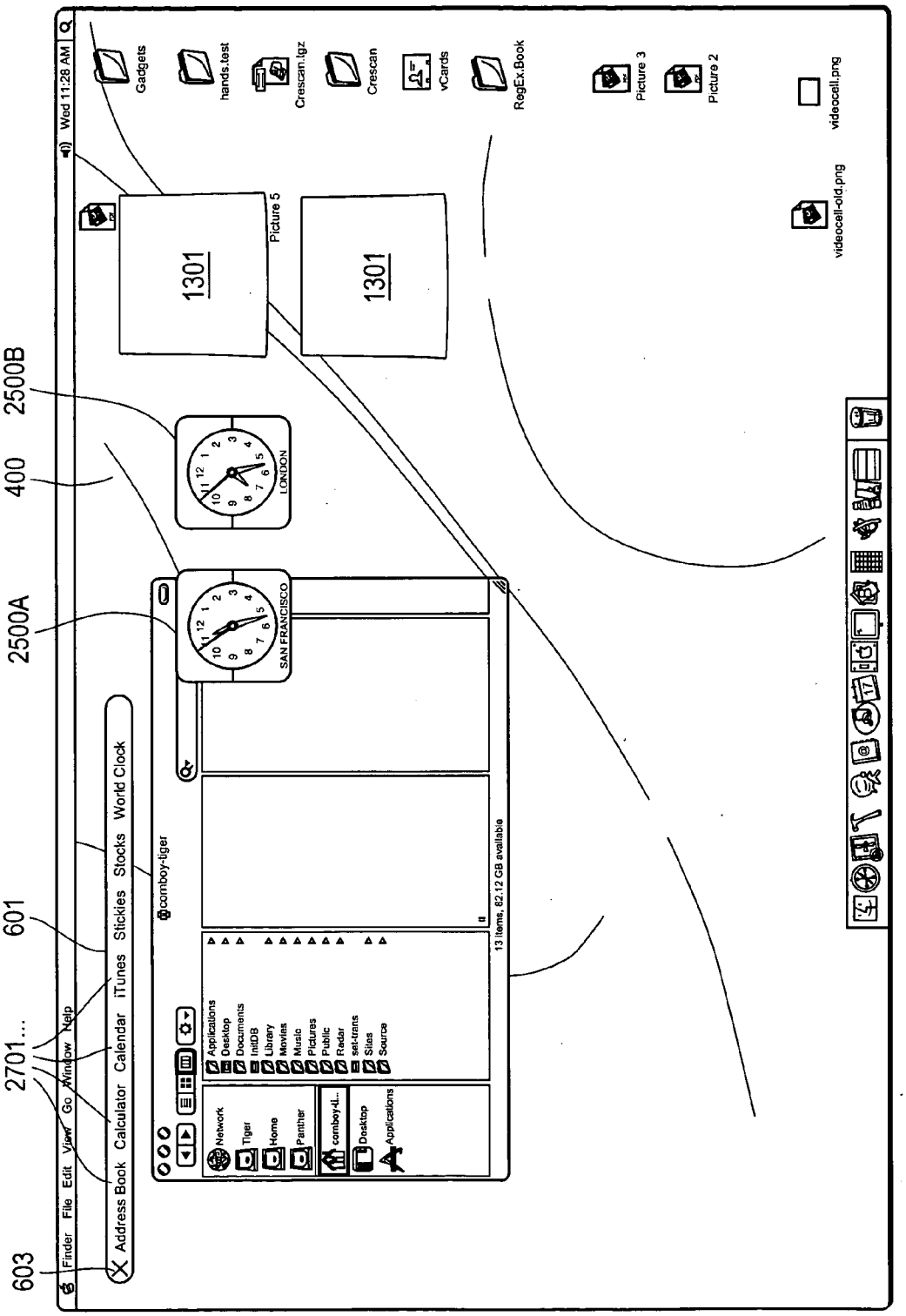
comboy-tiger
Network
Tiger
Home
Panther
comboy-tl...
Desktop
Applications
Applications
Desktop
Documents
InitDB
Library
Movies
Music
Pictures
Public
Radar
set-trans
Sites
Source
13 items, 82.12 GB available

FIG. 26


603
Finder File Edit View Go Window Help
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601
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comboy-tl...
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Desktop
Documents
InitDB
Library
Movies
Music
Pictures
Public
Radar
set-trans
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Source
13 items, 82.12 GB available
SAN FRANCISCO
LONDON
1301
1301
Picture 5
Gadgets
hands.test
Crescan.tgz
Crescan
vCards
RegEx.Book
Picture 3
Picture 2
videocell.png
videocell-old.png

FIG. 27

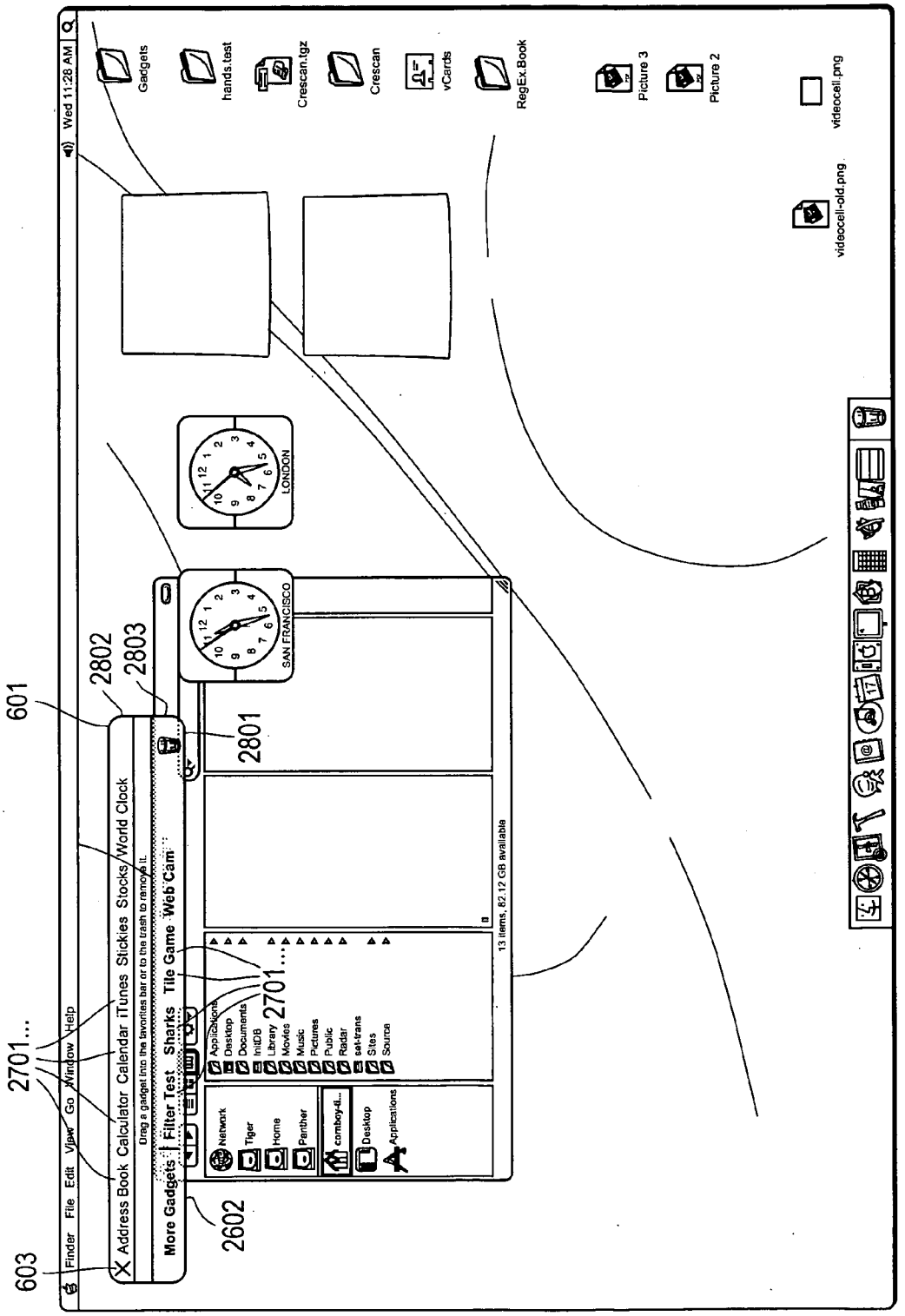
601
603
2701...
2802
2803
2801
2602
2701...
Finder File Edit View Go Window Help
Address Book Calculator Calendar iTunes Stickies Stocks World Clock
Drag a gadget into the favorites bar or to the trash to remove it.
More Gadgets Filter Test Sharks Tile Game Web Cam
Applications
Desktop
Documents
InitDB
Library
Movies
Music
Pictures
Public
Radar
set-trans
Sites
Source
Network
Tiger
Home
Panther
comboy-ti...
Desktop
Applications
13 items, 82.12 GB available
SAN FRANCISCO
LONDON
Gadgets
hands.test
Crescan.tgz
Crescan
vCards
RegEx.Book
Picture 3
Picture 2
videocell.png
videocell-old.png
Wed 11:28 AM

FIG. 28

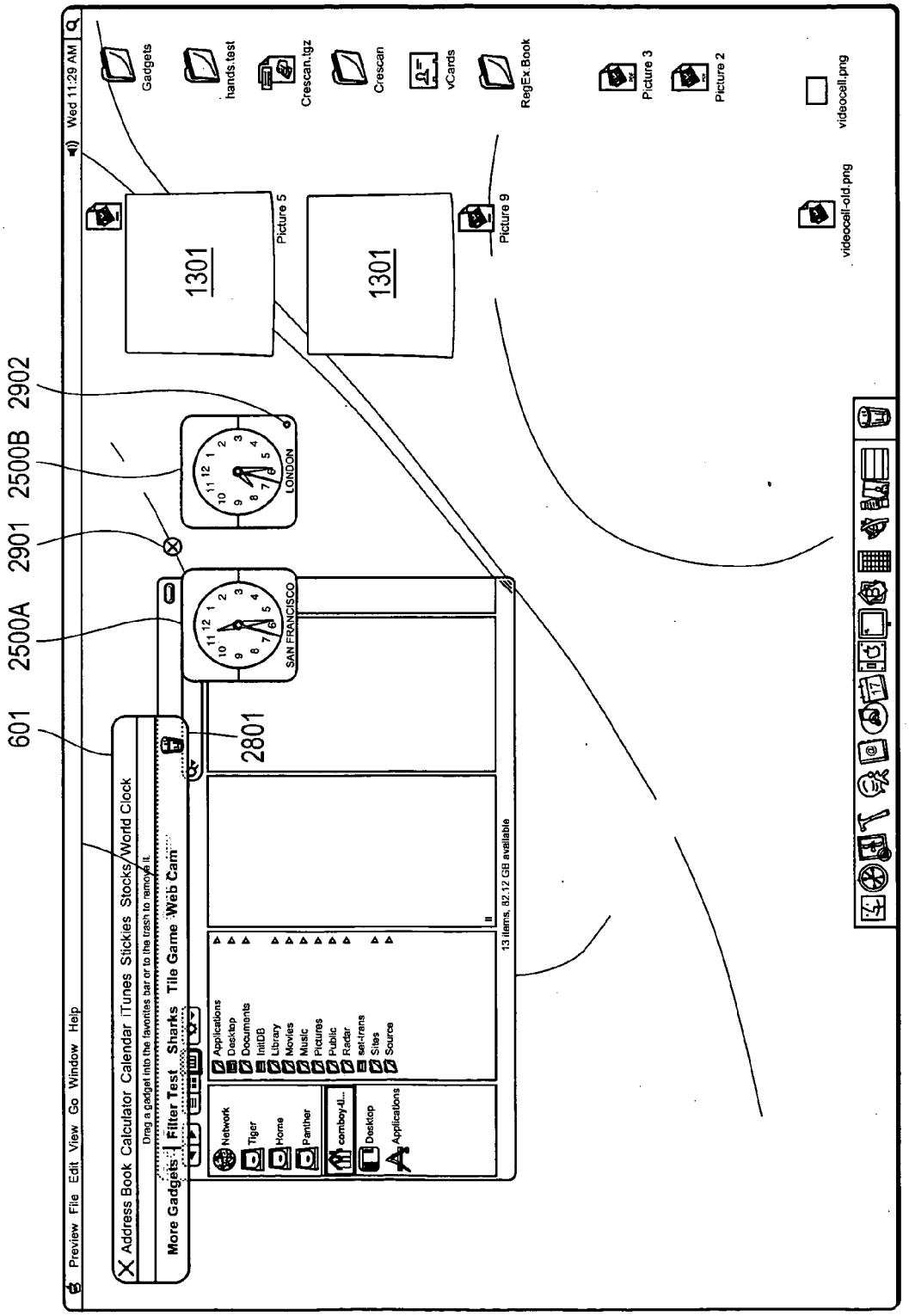
601
2500A
2901
2500B
2902
2801
1301
1301
Preview File Edit View Go Window Help
Wed 11:29 AM
Address Book Calculator Calendar iTunes Stickies Stocks World Clock
Drag a gadget into the favorites bar or to the trash to remove it.
More Gadgets Filter Test Sharks Tile Game Web Cam
Network
Tiger
Home
Panther
comboy-ti...
Desktop
Applications
Applications
Desktop
Documents
InitDB
Library
Movies
Music
Pictures
Public
Radar
set-trans
Sites
Source
13 items, 82.12 GB available
SAN FRANCISCO
LONDON
Picture 5
Picture 9
Gadgets
hands.test
Crescan.tgz
Crescan
vCards
RegEx.Book
Picture 3
Picture 2
videocell.png
videocell-old.png

FIG. 29

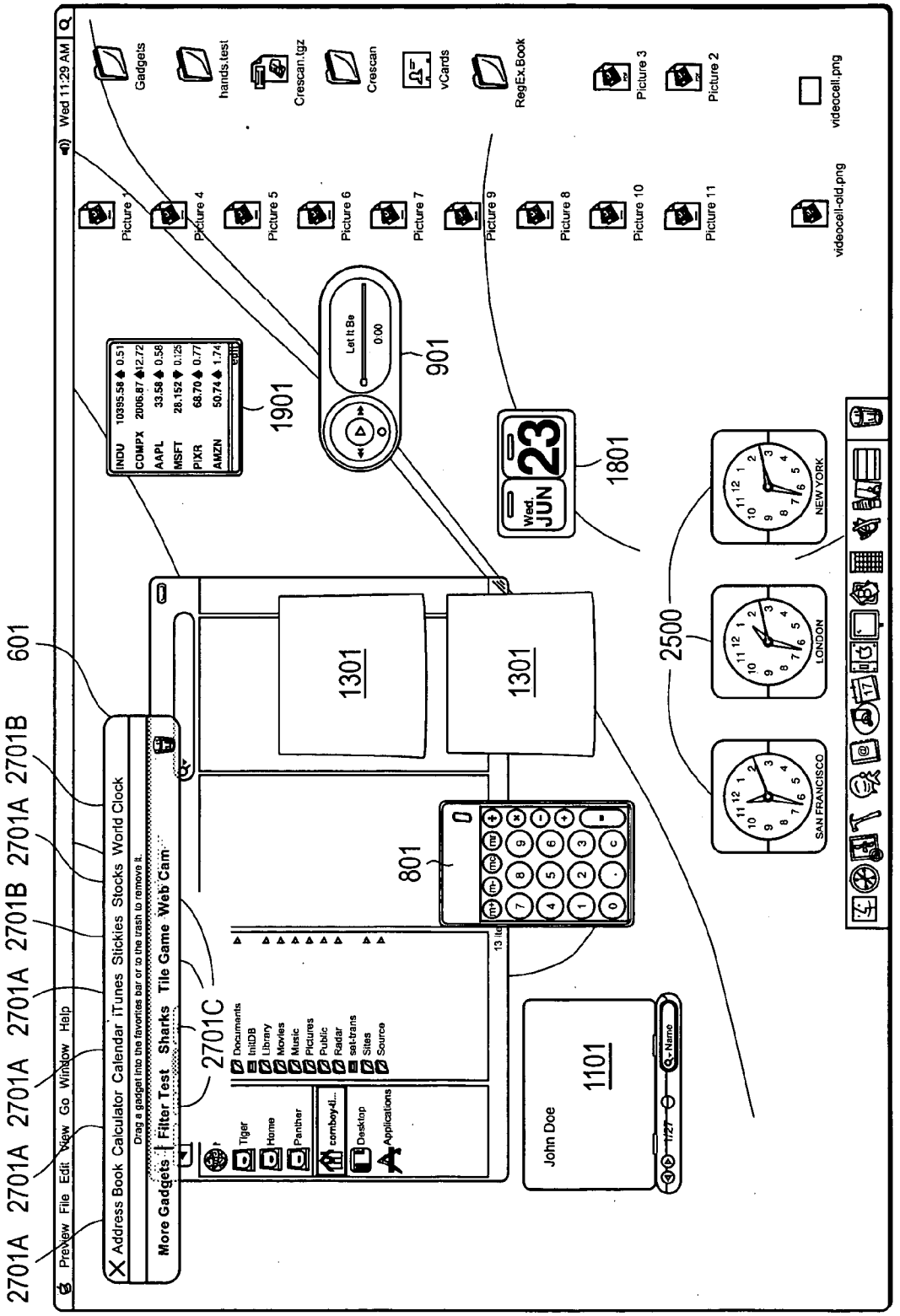
2701A
2701A
2701A
2701A
2701B
2701A
2701B
601
2701C
Preview File Edit View Go Window Help
Wed 11:29 AM
Address Book Calculator Calendar iTunes Stickies Stocks World Clock
Drag a gadget into the favorites bar or to the trash to remove it.
More Gadgets Filter Test Sharks Tile Game Web Cam
Tiger
Home
Panther
Desktop
Applications
Documents
InitDB
Library
Movies
Music
Pictures
Public
Radar
sat-trans
Sites
Source
John Doe
1101
801
1301
1301
1901
901
1801
2500
Let It Be
0:00
Wed. JUN 23
INDU 10395.58 0.51
COMPX 2006.87 12.72
AAPL 33.58 0.58
MSFT 28.152 0.125
PIXR 68.70 0.77
AMZN 50.74 1.74
Picture 1
Picture 4
Picture 5
Picture 6
Picture 7
Picture 9
Picture 8
Picture 10
Picture 11
Gadgets
hands.test
Crescan.tgz
Crescan
vCards
RegEx.Book
Picture 3
Picture 2
videocell.png
videocell-old.png
NEW YORK
LONDON
SAN FRANCISCO

FIG. 30

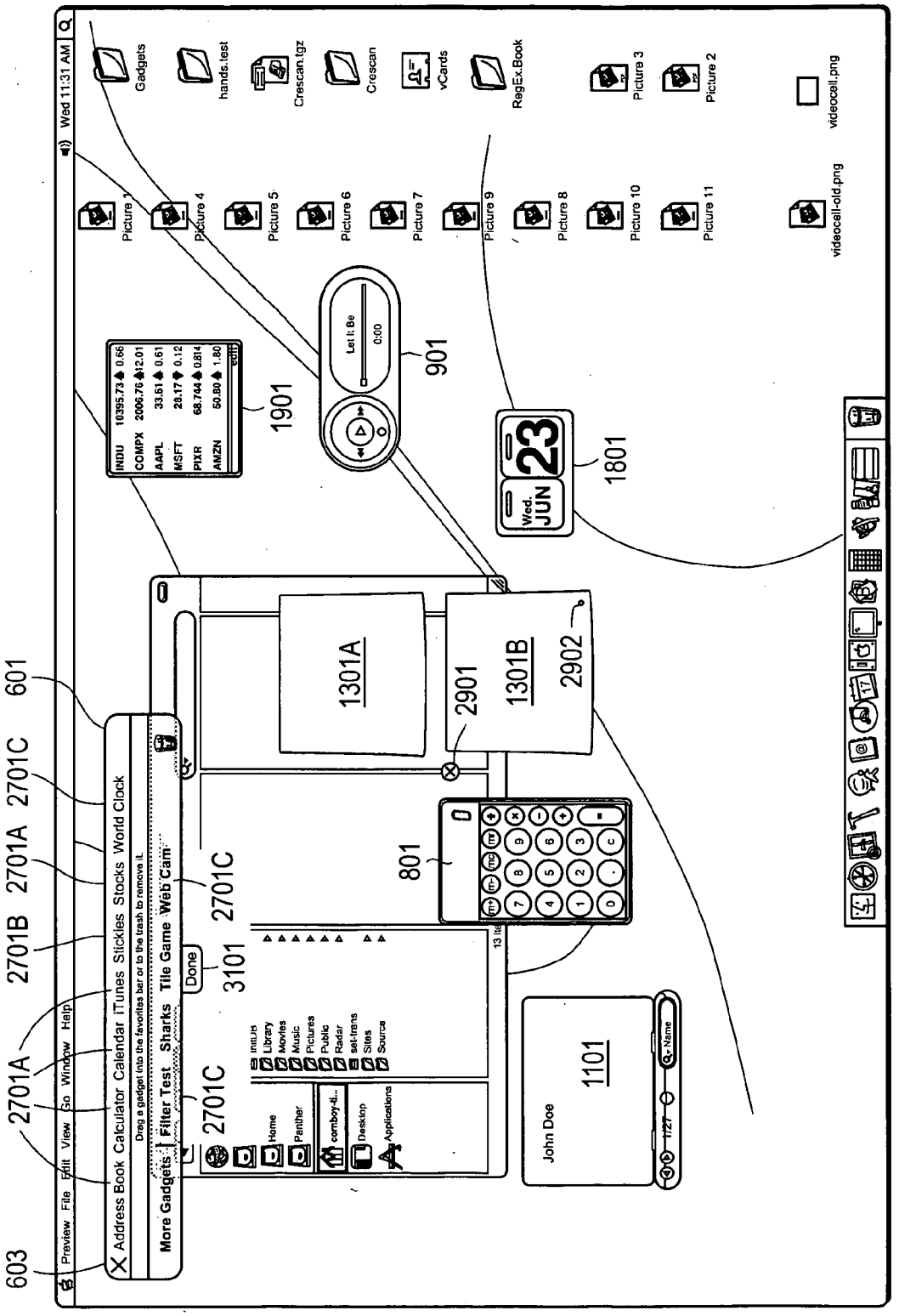
603
601
2701A
2701B
2701A
2701C
2701C
2701C
3101
801
1301A
1301B
2901
2902
1101
901
1901
1801
Wed. JUN 23
Let It Be
0:00
Address Book Calculator Calendar iTunes Stickies Stocks World Clock
Drag a gadget into the favorites bar or to the trash to remove it.
More Gadgets Filter Test Sharks Tile Game Web Cam
Done
Preview File Edit View Go Window Help
Wed 11:31 AM
Gadgets
hands.test
Crescan.tgz
Crescan
vCards
RegEx.Book
Picture 1
Picture 4
Picture 5
Picture 6
Picture 7
Picture 9
Picture 8
Picture 10
Picture 11
Picture 3
Picture 2
videocell.png
videocell-old.png
John Doe
Name

FIG. 31

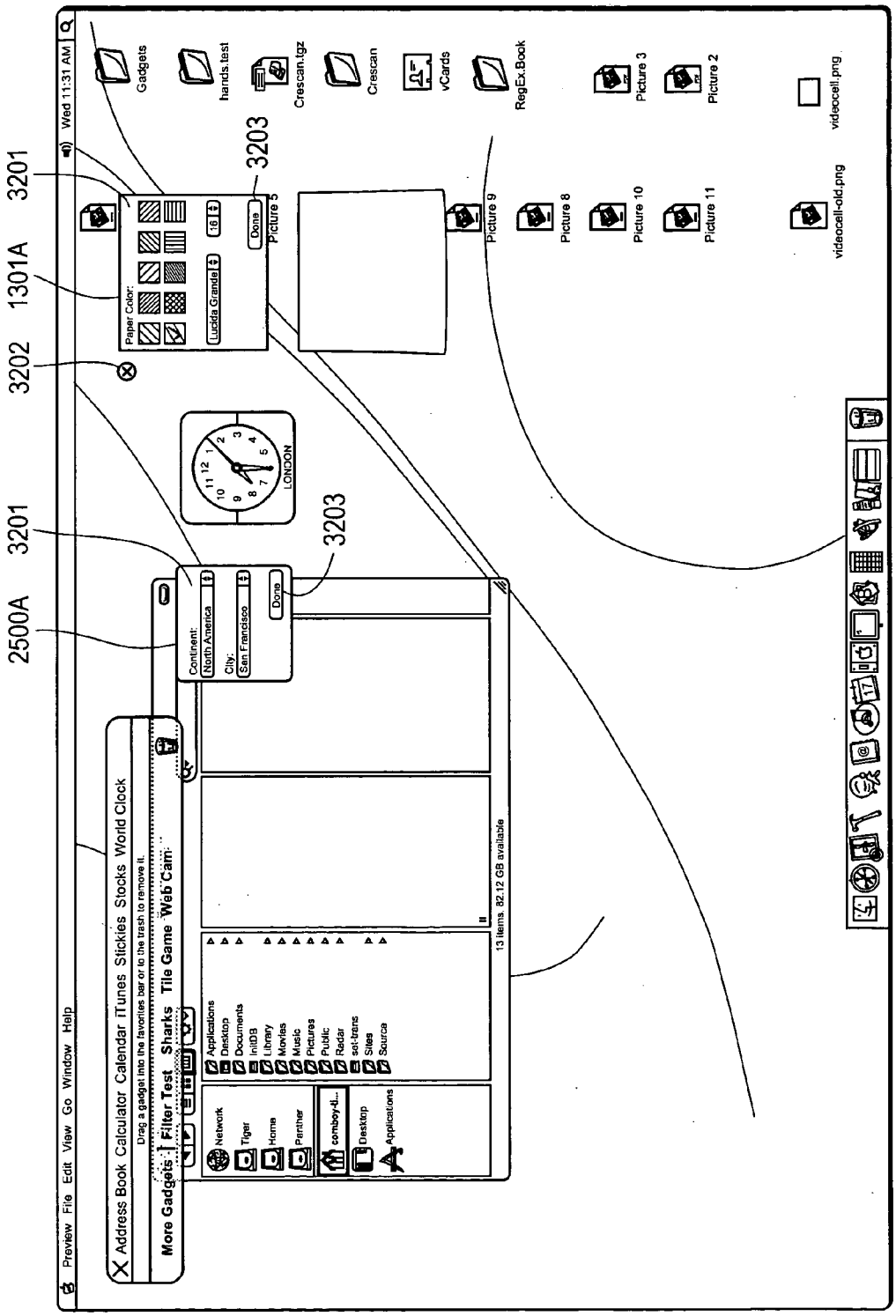
2500A
3201
3202
1301A
3201
3203
3203
Address Book Calculator Calendar iTunes Stickies Stocks World Clock
Drag a gadget into the favorites bar or to the trash to remove it.
More Gadgets
Filter Test
Sharks
Tile Game
Web Cam
Continent:
North America
City:
San Francisco
Done
LONDON
Paper Color:
Lucida Grande
16
Done
Picture 5
Preview File Edit View Go Window Help
Wed 11:31 AM
Gadgets
hands.test
Crescan.tgz
Crescan
vCards
RegEx.Book
Picture 3
Picture 2
videocell.png
Picture 9
Picture 8
Picture 10
Picture 11
videocell-old.png
Network
Tiger
Home
Panther
comboy-4...
Desktop
Applications
Applications
Desktop
Documents
initDB
Library
Movies
Music
Pictures
Public
Radar
sat-trans
Sites
Source
13 items, 82.12 GB available

FIG. 32

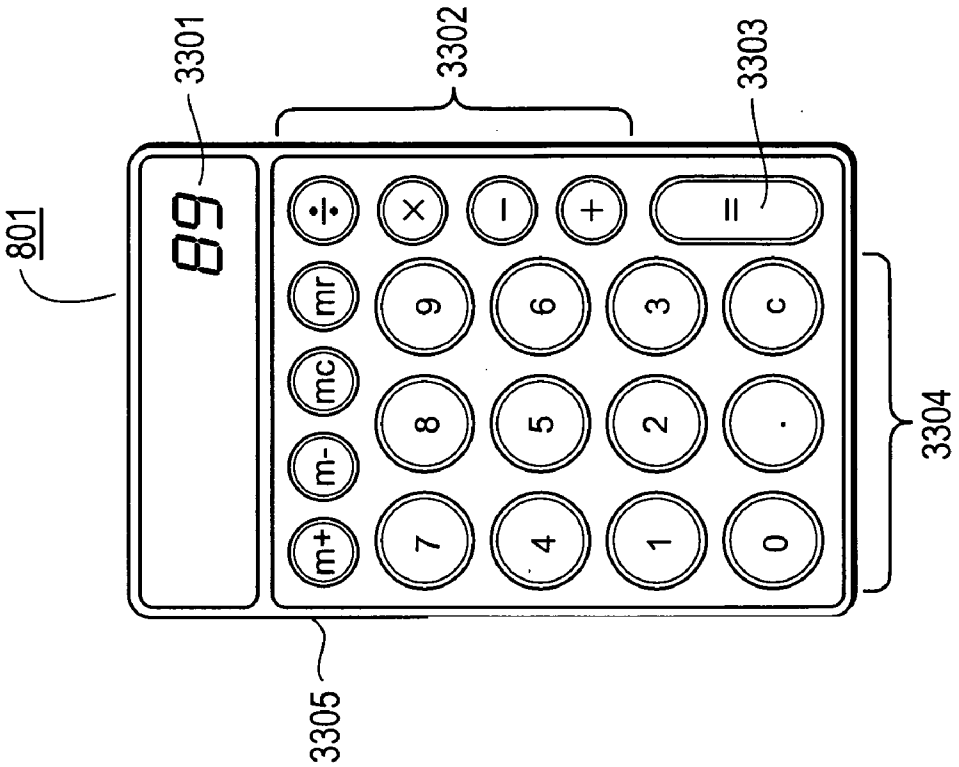

FIG. 33

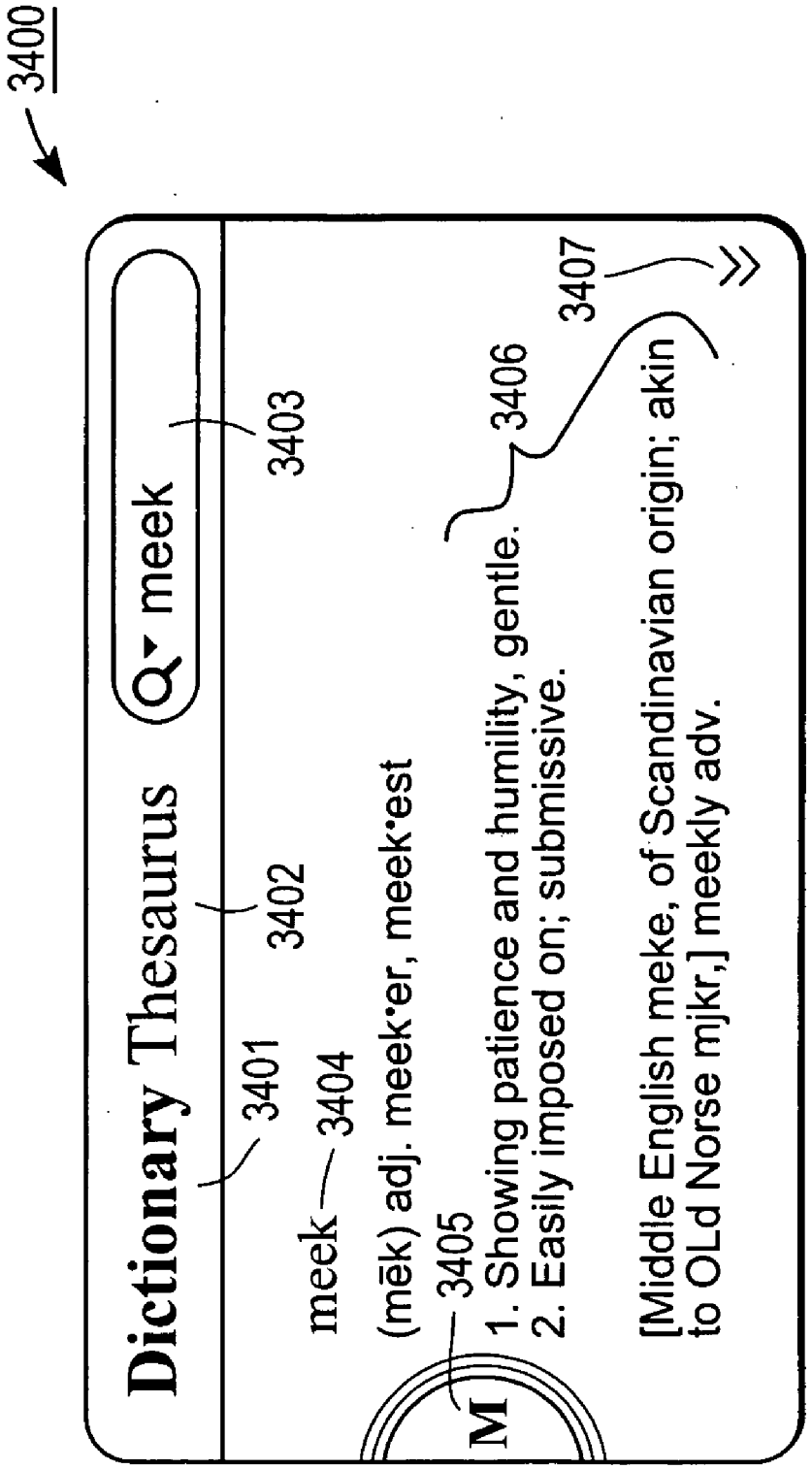
3400
Dictionary Thesaurus
3401
3402
Q meek
3403
meek
3404
(mēk) adj. meek•er, meek•est
3405
M
1. Showing patience and humility, gentle.
2. Easily imposed on; submissive.
3406
[Middle English meke, of Scandinavian origin; akin to OLd Norse mjkr,] meekly adv.
3407

FIG. 34A

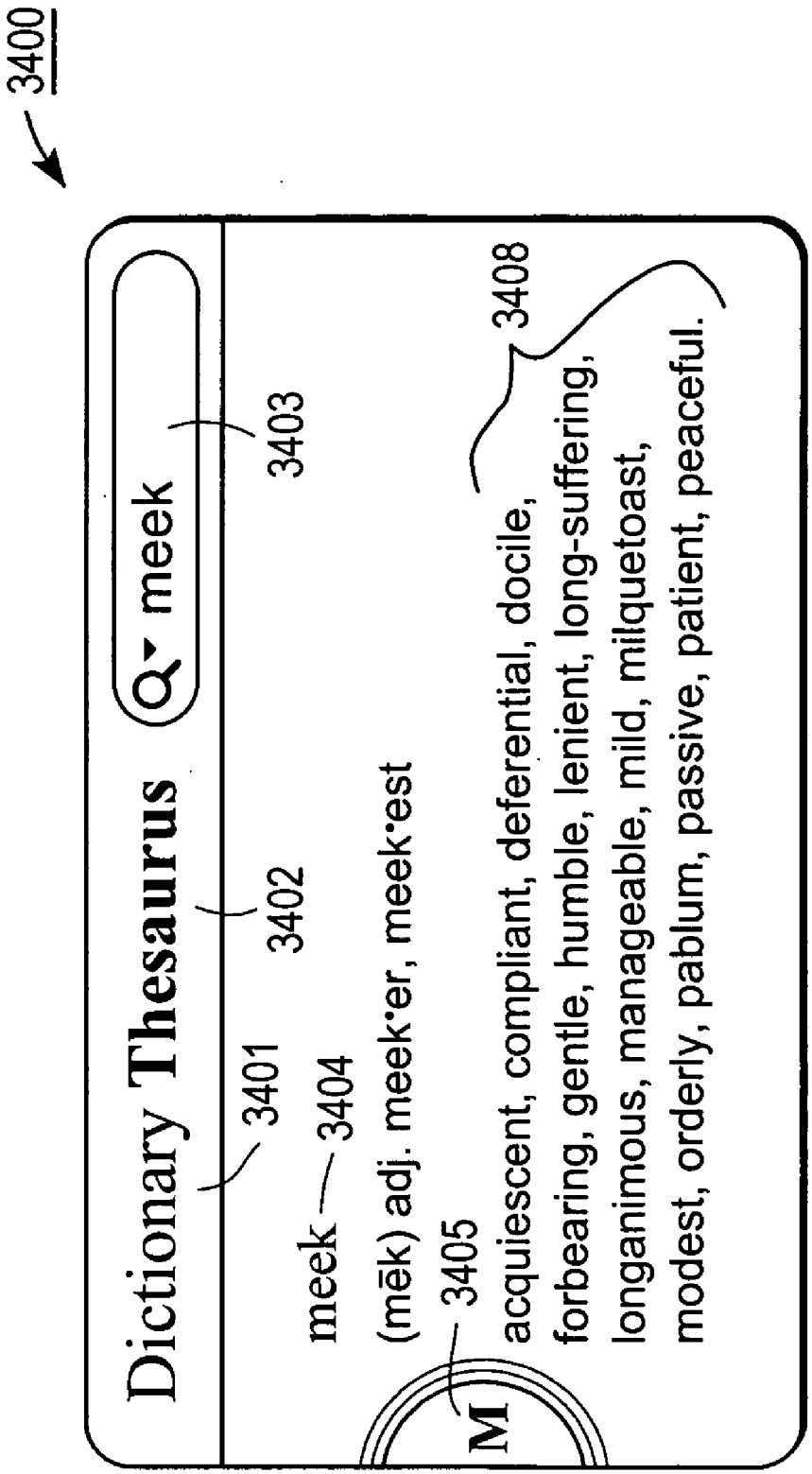
3400
Dictionary Thesaurus
Q meek
3401
3402
3403
meek
3404
(mēk) adj. meek'er, meek'est
3405
M
acquiescent, compliant, deferential, docile,
forbearing, gentle, humble, lenient, long-suffering,
longanimous, manageable, mild, milquetoast,
modest, orderly, pablum, passive, patient, peaceful.
3408

FIG. 34B

UNIFIED INTEREST LAYER FOR USER INTERFACE

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] The subject matter of the invention is generally related to the following jointly owed and co-pending patent applications, each incorporated herein by reference in its entirety:

[0002] U.S. Provisional patent application Ser. No. _____, for "Procedurally Expressing Graphic Objects for Web Pages," filed Jun. 25, 2004 (P3489);

[0003] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. _____, "User Interface for Assisting in the Installation of an Asset," filed Jun. 22, 2004;

[0004] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. _____, "Display-Wide Visual Effects for a Windowing System Using a Programmable Graphics Processing Unit," filed Jun. 25, 2004 (P3351US1);

[0005] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. 10/826,762, for "High-Level Program Interface for Graphics Operations," filed Apr. 16, 2004 (P3352US1);

[0006] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. 10/866,360, for "System and Method for Processing Graphics Operations with Graphics Processing Unit," filed Jun. 11, 2004 (P3354USX1);

[0007] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. 10/826,596, for "Improved Gaussian Blur," filed Apr. 16, 2004 (P3355US1);

[0008] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. 10/826,744, for "System for Emulating Graphics Operations," filed Apr. 16, 2004 (P3356US1);

[0009] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. _____, for "User-Interface Design," filed June 24, 2004 (P3318US1);

[0010] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. _____, for "Gaussian Blur Approximation Suitable for GPU," filed Jun. 24, 2004 (P3362US1);

[0011] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. 10/825,694, for "System for Optimizing Graphics Operations," filed Apr. 16, 2004 (P3353US1);

[0012] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. 10/826,773, for "System for Reducing the Number of Programs Necessary to Render an Image," filed Apr. 16, 2004 (P3357US1); and

[0013] U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. _____, for "Fast Approximation Functions for Image Processing Filters," filed Jun. 24, 2004 (P3429US1).

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0014] The present invention relates generally to graphical user interfaces, and more particularly to a user-activatable, configurable, unified layer containing items of interest to a user.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0015] A hallmark of modern graphical user interfaces is that they allow a large number of items to be displayed on a screen at the same time. The leading personal computer operating systems, such as Apple MacOS X and Microsoft Windows XP, provide user interfaces in which a number of windows can be displayed, overlapped, resized, moved, configured, and reformatted according to the needs of the user. Taskbars, menus, and other UI elements provide mechanisms for accessing and activating windows even when they are hidden behind other windows.

[0016] Although many users appreciate the ability of such user interfaces to present such a wealth of information on the screen simultaneously, the resulting "information overload" can be somewhat overwhelming. Users often find that it is difficult to navigate to a particular UI element or window, or to even locate a desired element, among a large number of onscreen elements. The problem is further compounded when user interfaces allow users to position the on-screen elements in any desired arrangement, including overlapping, minimizing, maximizing, and the like. Such flexibility may be useful to some users but may result in chaos for other users. Having too many items on the screen simultaneously leads to information overload, and can act as an inhibiting factor in the effective use of the computer equipment.

[0017] Some user interfaces dedicate certain areas of the screen for holding certain user interface elements that are commonly used (such as a menu bar, or icons that activate commonly-used programs or files). However, such areas are generally limited in size, so as not to occupy too much valuable screen real estate that could otherwise be devoted to the main workspace area of the display screen. Although small elements, such as a digital clock element or taskbar, may be well suited for display in such dedicated screen areas, other types of elements cannot be usably presented in such a small screen area; thus they must be activated, or enlarged, before they can be used or viewed. This causes yet another level of confusion, since the items need to be activated and dismissed. Furthermore, the items may overlap or otherwise add to the number of onscreen elements that must be dealt with and organized by the user.

[0018] These problems cause many users to fail to use their computers to their full potential, and can further result in frustration or confusion, particularly in novice users.

[0019] What is needed is a mechanism for providing easy access to commonly used user interface elements, without introducing additional clutter or confusion. What is further needed is a mechanism for providing such access in a user-configurable manner that allows the user to activate and dismiss the UI elements at will and with a minimum of confusion. What is further needed is a mechanism that allows users to easily activate and dismiss certain user interface elements regardless of the number of open windows currently on the user's screen, and without requiring the user to search for particular user interface elements among a set of open windows.

[0020] What is further needed is a mechanism for addressing the above-stated problems in a convenient, easy-to-use manner that is likely to be readily adopted by users, and that fits within the framework of existing graphical user interfaces.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0021] According to the techniques of the present invention, a user-activatable dashboard (also referred to as a

unified interest layer) is provided. The dashboard can contain any number of user interface elements, referred to herein as "widgets," for quick access by a user. In response to a command from a user, the dashboard is invoked and the widgets are shown on the screen. In one aspect of the invention, the user can activate the dashboard at any time, causing the dashboard to temporarily replace or overlay the existing user interface display on the user's screen.

[0022] Once the dashboard has been activated, the user can interact with any or all of the widgets, and can configure the dashboard by adding, deleting, moving, or configuring individual widgets as desired. When the user wishes to return to the normal user interface, the user issues a command causing the dashboard to be dismissed. Once the dashboard has been dismissed, the previous user interface state is restored, allowing the user to resume normal interactions with the operating system.

[0023] In one aspect, the dashboard, when activated, temporarily replaces the existing user interface display. In another aspect, the dashboard partially obscures the existing user interface display, but allows some part of the existing display to be visible so as to remind the user of its presence. In another aspect, the existing user interface display is faded, blurred, and/or darkened while the dashboard is active.

[0024] In one aspect, a transition effect is displayed during activation and/or dismissal of the dashboard, so as to assist the user in understanding what is happening when the dashboard appears and disappears.

[0025] In one aspect, the user can select from any number of widgets to be placed on the dashboard in any desired arrangement. Whenever the dashboard is activated, the widgets appear in the locations where the user placed them previously.

[0026] Widgets can be of any type. They can communicate with a remote server to provide information to the user (for example, a weather report), or they can provide commonly needed functionality (for example, a calculator), or they can act as an information repository (for example, a notepad or calendar). Some widgets can provide a combination of these types of functions. In one aspect, an application programming interface (API) is provided so as to allow third-party developers to create and distribute additional widgets that provide different types of functionality.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0027] The accompanying drawings illustrate several embodiments of the invention and, together with the description, serve to explain the principles of the invention.

[0028] **FIG. 1** is a block diagram depicting an overall architecture for implementing the present invention according to one embodiment.

[0029] **FIG. 2** is a flowchart depicting a method for activating and using a dashboard according to one embodiment of the present invention.

[0030] **FIG. 3** is a block diagram depicting a software architecture for implementing the present invention according to one embodiment.

[0031] **FIG. 4** is a screen shot depicting a desktop user interface prior to activation of a dashboard.

[0032] **FIG. 5** is a screen shot depicting an initial state for a dashboard, according to one embodiment.

[0033] **FIG. 6** is a screen shot depicting a configuration bar for a dashboard, according to one embodiment.

[0034] **FIG. 7** is a screen shot depicting user selection of a widget from the configuration bar, according to one embodiment.

[0035] **FIG. 8** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard including a calculator widget, according to one embodiment.

[0036] **FIG. 9** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard including a calculator widget and a music player widget, according to one embodiment.

[0037] **FIG. 10** is a screen shot depicting activation of a music player application as invoked by a music player widget, according to one embodiment.

[0038] **FIG. 11** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard including a calculator widget, a music player widget, and an address book widget, according to one embodiment.

[0039] **FIG. 12** is a screen shot depicting operation of an address book widget, according to one embodiment.

[0040] **FIG. 13** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard including a number of widgets including a notes widget, according to one embodiment.

[0041] **FIG. 14** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard where the configuration bar has been closed, according to one embodiment.

[0042] **FIG. 15** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard wherein widgets have been moved to new positions.

[0043] **FIGS. 16A through 16C** are screen shots depicting a transition animation for dismissing the dashboard, according to one embodiment.

[0044] **FIGS. 17A through 17D** are screen shots depicting a transition animation for activating the dashboard, according to one embodiment.

[0045] **FIG. 18** is an example of a calendar widget according to one embodiment.

[0046] **FIG. 19** is an example of a stock quote widget according to one embodiment.

[0047] **FIG. 20** is an example of a weather widget according to one embodiment.

[0048] **FIG. 21** is an example of a traffic webcam widget according to one embodiment.

[0049] **FIG. 22** is an example of a music player widget according to one embodiment.

[0050] **FIG. 23** is an example of a package tracking widget according to one embodiment.

[0051] **FIG. 24** is an example of an address book widget according to one embodiment.

[0052] **FIG. 25** is an example of a clock widget according to one embodiment.

[0053] **FIG. 26** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard where the configuration bar has been closed, according to one embodiment.

[0054] **FIG. 27** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard where the configuration bar has been opened to show favorite widgets, according to one embodiment.

[0055] **FIG. 28** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard where the configuration bar has been opened to allow access to additional widgets, according to one embodiment.

[0056] **FIG. 29** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard including rollover icons for closing and configuring a widget, according to one embodiment.

[0057] **FIG. 30** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard wherein some labels in the configuration bar have changed in appearance, according to one embodiment.

[0058] **FIG. 31** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard wherein some labels in the configuration bar have changed in appearance, and wherein the dashboard includes rollover icons for closing and configuring a widget according to one embodiment.

[0059] **FIG. 32** is a screen shot depicting a dashboard showing preferences controls for two widgets, according to one embodiment.

[0060] **FIG. 33** is an example of a calculator widget according to one embodiment.

[0061] **FIGS. 34A and 34B** depict an example of a dictionary/thesaurus widget according to one embodiment.

[0062] One skilled in the art will recognize that these Figures are merely examples of the operation of the invention according to one embodiment, and that other user interface arrangements and modes of operation can be used without departing from the essential characteristics of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

[0063] The present invention is now described more fully with reference to the accompanying Figures, in which several embodiments of the invention are shown. The present invention may be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as limited to the embodiments set forth herein. Rather these embodiments are provided so that this disclosure will be complete and will fully convey the invention to those skilled in the art.

Hardware Architecture

[0064] In one embodiment, the present invention is implemented as part of an operating system for a personal computer. One example of an implementation of the present invention is in a Macintosh personal computer running the MacOS X operating system. Referring now to **FIG. 1**, there is shown an example of an architecture for a system **100** for implementing the present invention. Personal computer **102** includes processor **103**, memory **105**, input devices **114** such as keyboard and mouse, and output device **115** such as a display screen. A graphics module **113**, such as a graphics card, may be provided for generating output for output device **115**. User **101** interacts with system **100** by providing input via device **114** and viewing output via device **115**. Computer **102** also includes local storage **106**, such as a hard drive, and can also include network connection **108** for accessing remote server **107**. These components are well-known hardware components commonly used for running software applications. In one embodiment, software embodying the invention is provided on a computer-readable medium such as local storage **106**.

[0065] In another embodiment, the present invention is implemented as a plug-in that can be installed and run on personal computer **102**, and that interacts with the operating system of personal computer **102** to perform the functions described herein. In yet another embodiment, the present invention is implemented as functionality in a software application running on a personal computer.

[0066] For illustrative purposes, in the following description the invention is described as a feature of an operating system; however, one skilled in the art will recognize that the techniques of the present invention can be implemented in other contexts as well, including those described above.

Method of Operation

[0067] Referring now to **FIG. 2**, there is shown a flowchart depicting a method for activating and using a dashboard according to one embodiment of the present invention. In one embodiment, the user can activate the functionality of the present invention at any time, for example by hitting a designated function key or key combination, or by clicking on an icon, or by selecting a command from an onscreen menu, or by moving an onscreen cursor to a designated corner of the screen. In response to the user performing such an action **202**, the current state of the user interface is saved **203**, the user interface is temporarily inactivated (and/or faded **204**), an animation is played **205** to introduce the dashboard, and the dashboard of the present invention is displayed **206**. If applicable, a previous state of the dashboard is retrieved, so that the dashboard can be displayed in the same configuration as the last time the user saw it.

[0068] In one embodiment, the dashboard is overlaid on the existing desktop user interface; the user interface may be darkened, brightened, blurred, distorted, or otherwise altered so as to emphasize that it is temporarily inactivated. The existing desktop may be visible behind the dashboard. In another embodiment, the existing desktop is not visible while the dashboard is active. In another embodiment, the desktop is shrunk to a small portion of the screen while the dashboard is active, and can be reactivated by clicking on it. In another embodiment, the desktop is shrunk and presented as a widget similar to the widgets described herein; the desktop can be reactivated by clicking on the widget.

[0069] The dashboard (also referred to herein as a "unified interest layer") includes a number of elements, referred to herein as "widgets". These widgets generally include software accessories for performing useful, commonly needed functions. Examples of widgets include, without limitation, a calendar, a calculator, an address book, a package tracker, a weather module, and the like. In one embodiment, some widgets may interact with remote sources of information, such as servers, to provide information; for example, a weather module may retrieve live weather data from a remote server. Widgets may be interactive, so that a user performs common input operations (such as clicking a mouse or typing on a keyboard) to utilize the functionality of a widget.

[0070] The user interacts with and/or configures widgets as desired **207**. In one embodiment, the user can move

widgets around the screen, and can resize widgets if applicable. Some widgets may be resizable, and some may be of fixed size; the widget author may specify whether a widget can be resized. Some widgets may automatically resize themselves based on the amount or nature of the data being displayed. In one embodiment, widgets may overlap one another. In another embodiment, widgets do not overlap one another; if the user attempts to move one widget to the position occupied by another widget, one of the widgets may automatically move out of the way to make room. In one embodiment, the position, configuration, and size of widgets are saved when the dashboard is dismissed, so that the same state can be restored the next time the dashboard is invoked.

[**0071**] When the user wishes to dismiss **208** the dashboard and return to the normal user interface, he or she does so by invoking a dismissal command. In various embodiments, the user hits a function key or key combination (which may be the same or different than the key or combination used to activate the dashboard), or clicks on a close box or other icon, or clicks on negative space within the dashboard (in other words, a space between widgets), or moves an onscreen cursor to a predefined corner of the screen. In another embodiment, the dashboard is automatically dismissed after some predetermined period of time without any user activity, or upon some other trigger event. An animation may be played **209** to provide a transition as the dashboard is dismissed.

[**0072**] In one embodiment, when the dashboard is dismissed, the current configuration of the widgets is stored so that it can be retrieved the next time the dashboard is activated. In one embodiment, an animation is played to dismiss the dashboard and re-introduce the user interface. The user interface is restored **210** to its previous state, so that the user can resume normal interaction with the software applications and operating system of the computer.

[**0073**] In one embodiment, the dashboard is configurable. The user can select any number of widgets to be displayed, for example by dragging the widgets from a configuration bar (or other user interface element) onto a location on the dashboard. In one-embodiment, the configuration bar can include different types of widgets, and can be categorized and/or hierarchically organized. In one embodiment, in response to the user dragging a widget onto the configuration bar, the widget is downloaded from a server and installed (if it is not already installed on the user's machine). In one embodiment, certain widgets may cost money, so that the user must provide a credit card or some other payment means before the widget is installed on the user's machine. In another embodiment, widgets are already installed on the user's machine, but are only made visible when they have been dragged from the configuration bar onto the dashboard. One skilled in the art will recognize that the configuration bar is merely an example of one type of user interface element for configuring the dashboard, and that other configuration mechanisms can be used without departing from the essential characteristics of the present invention.

[**0074**] As mentioned above, various types of animations can be used to emphasize and clarify transitions in connection with the present invention. For example, activation of the dashboard can be signaled by a "fly-in" animation, wherein the widgets move from the edge of the screen inwards to their respective positions in the dashboard. Simultaneously, the user interface can be darkened, blurred, distorted, or otherwise altered to indicate that it is temporarily inactive. Dismissal of the dashboard can be signaled by a "fly-out" animation, wherein the widgets move towards the edge of the screen and then appear to fly off the screen. Simultaneously, the user interface is restored to its normal state. In one embodiment, when the user drags a widget from the configuration bar onto the desktop, an animation such as a ripple effect can be shown, to emphasize that the widget has been placed onto the desktop in the selected location. The ripple effect distorts the background temporarily to give the impression that the widget is being placed into water. In one embodiment, the effect is implemented according to animation and distortion techniques described in detail in the related cross-referenced patent applications. In one embodiment, such animations are configurable by the user.

[**0075**] In one embodiment, more than one dashboard is available. For example, the user can configure one dashboard to contain widgets related to work, and another for widgets related to personal matters. Different trigger events (such as different key combinations) can be used for triggering the various dashboards; alternatively, the user can select from a pop-up menu which dashboard he or she wishes to activate. The system of the present invention stores state information for each of the dashboards. Different dashboards can contain one or more of the same widgets; state information for a widget can be maintained separately for each dashboard in which the widget appears, or it can be commonly maintained across all dashboards in which the widget appears. In addition, different dashboards can be available for different users of computer **102**, so that each user can only access the dashboard(s) he or she created. A user can specify a dashboard as being available to other users, if desired. A user can also specify, for any or all of the dashboards he or she creates, whether other users are permitted to make changes to the dashboard(s).

[**0076**] In one embodiment, some or all widgets are associated with related, fully functional applications providing expanded versions of the functionality of the corresponding widgets. These widgets include a button, or icon, or other element, for quickly launching the associated application. When the user clicks on the button, the dashboard is dismissed, the normal desktop user interface is reactivated, and the associated application is automatically launched. For example, as will be described in more detail below, a music player widget can include a button for launching a fully functional music player application containing additional features beyond what is available in the widget.

[**0077**] In one embodiment, a button can be provided for accessing a website, web page, or web-based application having functionality or information related to a widget. When the user clicks on the button, the dashboard is dismissed, the normal desktop user interface is reactivated, a web browser is launched, and the web page (or the like) associated with the widget is automatically launched. For example, a stock quote widget may include a button for accessing a website that includes more detailed information on a portfolio or on a particular stock. In another embodiment, related fully functional applications, websites, web pages, or web-based applications can be accessed by other means than a button within the widget. For example, such functionality can be launched via an on-screen icon or menu, or via a keystroke or key combination.

[0078] In one embodiment, the fully functional application or related website provides context for a launched widget. For example, if the user has high-lighted a word in a document before activating a dictionary widget, the dictionary widget's text field is automatically populated with the highlight word. In one embodiment, a word search is automatically activated, and the results automatically displayed, so that activating the dictionary widget causes a definition to be displayed without any further user interaction. Similarly, if an email message is open on the user's screen when an address book widget is launched, the address book is automatically opened to a page corresponding to the contact information for the sender of the email message. In one embodiment, such pre-population or automatic opening is not performed under certain situations, such as for example if the widget is already open to another page or entry. In one embodiment, the user can configure the operation of the widget, including whether or not such prepopulation or automatic opening occurs and under what circumstances it should occur. One skilled in the art will recognize that there are many other situations where a widget can use context information from a currently-running application or website.

[0079] In one embodiment, some or all widgets have rollover elements; these are user interface elements that appear when the onscreen cursor is moved over the widget. The rollover elements disappear when the onscreen cursor is moved so that it is no longer over the widget. In one embodiment, rollover elements only appear if the cursor is held over the widget for at least a predetermined period of time, such as half a second. An example of a rollover element is a volume ring (not shown) for music player application.

[0080] **FIGS. 4 through 17**D and **26** through **32** depict examples of dashboard operations in response to various user commands; these Figures illustrate various techniques and capabilities of the present invention.

[0081] **FIG. 4** depicts a desktop user interface **400** prior to activation of the dashboard. Desktop user interface **400** (referred to herein as "desktop") is a conventional user interface as may be provided by an operating system such as MacOS X. Desktop **400** has a background image, menu bar **401**, and other standard features. As is known in the art, desktop **400** may also include windows, icons, and other elements (not shown).

[0082] The user activates the dashboard by selecting an item from a menu, or by clicking on an icon, or by pressing a function key or key combination, or by some other means for invoking a command. **FIG. 5** depicts an initial state for a dashboard, according to one embodiment. In the example of **FIG. 5**, a configuration icon **501** is initially displayed. Alternatively, upon activation, the dashboard can include one or more default widgets. Alternatively, if the dashboard has previously been activated and configured, the widgets are displayed as previously configured. As shown in **FIG. 5**, the dashboard itself is not necessarily visible as a distinct layer; rather its various components (such as widgets, icon **501**, and other features) are visible. In one embodiment, these components are displayed in a transparent layer that allows desktop **400** to be seen through it. In one embodiment desktop **400** and its components are darkened (or blurred, or otherwise visually modified) while the dashboard is active, so as to emphasize that desktop **400** is temporarily inactive. The user can easily reactivate desktop **400** and dismiss the dashboard by simply clicking on an area of the screen where no dashboard element is being displayed; in one embodiment, clicking on this "negative space" causes the dashboard to be dismissed according to techniques described in more detail below. In another embodiment, other commands, key combinations, icons, or other user input is used to cause the dashboard to be dismissed. In another embodiment, desktop **400** is not visible while the dashboard is active.

[0083] In one embodiment, the user can move icon **501** to any location on the screen by dragging it, and the position of icon **501** is persistent from one invocation of the dashboard to the next.

[0084] The user clicks on icon **501** to activate configuration bar **601**, as shown in **FIG. 6**. Configuration bar **601** provides access to various widgets that can be placed on the dashboard. In one embodiment, a text label is shown for each available widget. In another embodiment, an icon is shown for each available widget. If many widgets are available, they may be arranged hierarchically by type, or alphabetically, or by any other categorization methodology. For example, a number of categories may be displayed; clicking on one of the categories causes a pull-down menu to be displayed, listing a number of widgets in that category. In one embodiment, a buy command **602** is also available, allowing the user to select widgets from an online store or website. One skilled in the art will recognize that the particular configuration and appearance of configuration bar **601** in **FIG. 6** is merely exemplary, and that many other arrangements are possible. The user can dismiss configuration bar **601** by clicking on dismissal icon **603**. Referring now briefly to **FIG. 31**, a Done button **3101** can also be provided for dismissing configuration bar **601**.

[0085] In one embodiment, the user can move configuration bar **601** to any location on the screen by dragging it, and the position of configuration bar **601** is persistent from one invocation of the dashboard to the next. Also, in one embodiment the state of configuration bar **601** (open or closed) is persistent from one invocation of the dashboard to the next.

[0086] The user can drag widgets from configuration bar **601** onto the surface of the dashboard (in other words, anywhere on the screen), using standard drag-and-drop functionality for moving objects on a screen. **FIG. 7** depicts user selection of a calculator widget from the configuration bar, according to one embodiment. Calculator label **701** is highlighted, to indicate that it has been selected by the user. **FIG. 8** depicts the dashboard after the calculator widget **801** has been placed on the screen. In one embodiment, an animation, such as a ripple animation, is shown when the user "drops" widget **801** by releasing a mouse button (or equivalent input device) to place widget **801** at the desired location. The user can move widget **801** after it has been placed, to any other desired location, or can remove widget **801** from the screen, for example by dragging it off the screen, or dragging it back onto configuration bar **601**, or by invoking a remove command. The position, state, and configuration of widget **801** are preserved when the dashboard is dismissed, so that these characteristics are restored the next time the dashboard is activated.

[0087] In one embodiment, multiple instances of some widgets can be activated, by dragging the widget from

configuration bar **601** onto the dashboard surface two or more times. In another embodiment, only one instance of each widget can be activated. In another embodiment, some widgets can have multiple instances and others cannot.

[**0088**] Once calculator widget **801** has been placed on the dashboard, the user can interact with it by entering numbers via a mouse or other pointing device, or via a keyboard. Conventional operations for calculator applications are available.

[**0089**] **FIG. 9** depicts the screen after the user has dragged both a calculator widget **801** and a music player widget **901** onto the dashboard, according to one embodiment. Music player widget **901** is placed by clicking and dragging from "iTunes" label **903** in configuration bar **601**. Music player widget **901**, in this embodiment, provides a subset of the functionality associated with a fully functional music player application. In one embodiment, music player widget **901** includes button **902** for activating a fully functional music player application. Thus, the user can easily launch an application that provides enhanced functionality with respect to a widget.

[**0090**] In one embodiment, in response to the user clicking button **902** to activate the full music player application, the dashboard is dismissed, the normal desktop **400** is restored, and the full music player application is launched. All of these steps take place automatically, without requiring additional user intervention. **FIG. 10** depicts the screen after the user has activated the full music player application **1001** by clicking on button **902** in music player widget **901**, according to one embodiment. The dashboard has been dismissed, and the various elements of desktop **400**, including menu bar **401**, are once again active.

[**0091**] In **FIG. 11**, the user has reactivated the dashboard (thus restoring widgets **801** and **901** in their previous states and locations), and has placed an address book widget **1101** by dragging it from label **1102**. Again, in one embodiment, a ripple animation is displayed when widget **1101** is dropped onto its location on the dashboard.

[**0092**] The user can interact with address book widget **1101** as he or she would normally interact with an address book application. For example, as shown in **FIG. 12**, the user can type in the first few letters of a person's name in field **1201**; once sufficient information has been entered to identify an individual, that individual's address card is displayed.

[**0093**] **FIG. 13** depicts the dashboard after a number of widgets have been placed, including notes widget **1301**, calculator widget **801**, music player widget **901**, and address book widget **1101**. In one embodiment, double-clicking in notes widget **1301** causes it to enter an edit mode wherein text can be entered or edited. When not in edit mode, widget **1301** can be moved around the dashboard. In other embodiments, other types of user actions (for example pressing modifier keys) can be used to distinguish between text editing operations and widget-dragging operations.

[**0094**] The user can dismiss configuration bar **601** by clicking on dismissal icon **603**. **FIG. 14** depicts a dashboard after configuration bar **601** has been closed, according to one embodiment. Configuration icon **501** is displayed, which allows the user to reactivate configuration bar **601** as desired.

[**0095**] The user can move widgets around the screen as desired. Widget locations are preserved when the dashboard is dismissed, so that the widgets reappear at the same location where they were left, when the dashboard is activated. **FIG. 15** depicts the dashboard after widgets **801**, **901**, **1101**, **1301** have been moved to new positions.

[**0096**] As discussed above, in one embodiment a transition animation is played when the dashboard is dismissed. **FIGS. 16A through 16** C are screen shots depicting a "fly-out" transition animation, wherein widgets **801**, **901**, **1101**, **1301** appear to fly off the edges of the screen when the dashboard is dismissed. While they are flying off the edges of the screen, widgets **801**, **901**, **1101**, **1301** grow in size and fade, so as to reinforce the appearance of movement and transition. At the same time, desktop **400** and its features (such as menu bar **401**) are restored to their normal, non-faded appearance.

[**0097**] As discussed above, in one embodiment a transition animation is played when the dashboard is activated. **FIGS. 17A through 17D** are screen shots depicting a "fly-in" transition animation, wherein widgets **801**, **901**, **1101**, **1301** appear to fly in from the edges of the screen when the dashboard is activated. Widgets **801**, **901**, **1101**, **1301** are faded and enlarged when they first appear at the screen edges; they reduce in size and become more solid in appearance while they are flying in, so as to reinforce the appearance of movement and transition. At the same time, desktop **400** and its features (such as menu bar **401**) gradually fade into the background.

[**0098**] In one embodiment, the system of the present invention includes the capability to alert the user when a widget needs attention or has new information to display to the user, even if the dashboard is not currently active. For example, an icon on a "Dock", or taskbar, or other user interface element commonly associated with a desktop user interface, can blink or bounce or otherwise indicate an alert condition. A distinctive sound can also be played. Alternatively, a dialog box can be presented, or a text alert can be displayed. Whatever form it may take, the alert can be of a generalized type or it may indicate the specific widget that issued the alert, and may even have additional information specifying the nature of the alert. The user can then activate the dashboard (either by a dashboard activation command as described above, or by clicking on an icon or button associated with the alert) to see the widget that issued the alert. Alternatively, the dashboard can automatically be activated in such a situation, or a dialog box can be presented to allow the user to indicate whether or not the dashboard should be activated.

[**0099**] For example, a package tracking widget may issue an alert when a package has been delivered. The alert may be generalized, or it may indicate that the package tracking widget is the source of the alert, or it may even provide the delivery information. The user can dismiss the alert, or activate the dashboard to see the widget and interact with it to obtain more information. As another example, a traffic webcam widget can issue an alert when an accident has occurred on the route covered by the webcam.

[**0100**] In one embodiment, configuration bar **601** has several possible states. Referring now to **FIG. 26**, there is shown an example of the dashboard where the configuration bar is closed, so that configuration icon **501** is displayed.

Two stickies widgets **1301** are currently being displayed, along with two clock widgets **2500**A, **2500**B.

[**0101**] Clicking on configuration icon **501** causes configuration bar **601** to be displayed in a first state, as shown in **FIG. 27**. The first state includes labels **2701** for various widgets that are designated as "favorites"; in one embodiment, these are a subset of all of the widgets currently installed on the user's machine. Thus, in this state, the user is presented with only those widgets that are commonly needed. As will be seen, the user is able to configure this view so that it includes any desired subset of installed widgets. In one embodiment, configuration bar **601** in this state includes a "More" label or icon. The user clicks on this label or icon to cause configuration bar **601** to expand to its second state, as shown in **FIG. 28**. Dismissal icon **603** causes configuration bar. **601** to be dismissed, reverting to configuration icon **501** as shown in **FIG. 26**. In one embodiment, the on-screen position of icon **603** matches that of icon **501**, so that the user can easily open and close configuration bar **601** without moving the cursor around.

[**0102**] The user can drag labels **2701** onto the dashboard surface to place widgets onto the dashboard. As described above, in one embodiment a distinctive animation, such as a ripple effect, is shown to reinforce the notion that the widget is being placed at the specified location.

[**0103**] Referring now to **FIG. 28**, there is shown an example of configuration bar **601** in its second, expanded state, providing access to additional widgets as well as the favorite widgets that were presented in the first state. In this state, configuration bar **601** has two sections **2802**, **2803**. Section **2802** includes labels **2701** for favorite widgets; this includes the same subset of widgets that is included in the first state of configuration bar **601**, as shown in **FIG. 27**. Section **2803** includes labels **2701** for other widgets that are not included in the set of favorite widgets. Dragging a label **2701** from section **2802** to **2803** causes the corresponding widget to be removed from the favorites subset. Dragging a label **2701** from section **2803** to **2802** causes the corresponding widget to be added to the favorites subset. Dragging a label **2701** from either section **2802** or **2803** onto the dashboard surface causes the corresponding widget to be placed at the specified location. Dragging a label **2701** from either section **2802** or **2803** onto trash icon **2801** causes the label **2701** to be removed from configuration bar **601**; in one embodiment, this also causes the corresponding widget to be removed from the dashboard (if it is currently open). In one embodiment, dragging a label **2701** onto trash icon **2801** also causes the corresponding widget to be deleted from the user's machine, or made unavailable. In one embodiment, the user is presented with a dialog box to confirm that he or she wishes to delete the widget. In one embodiment, the user can also drag widgets onto trash icon **2801** to cause the widgets to be closed, dismissed, and/or uninstalled. More gadgets label **2602** provides access to a website, online store, or other resource for obtaining and installing additional widgets; in one embodiment it offers functionality that is similar to buy command **602** as described above in connection with **FIG. 6**.

[**0104**] In one embodiment the state of configuration bar **601** is persistent from one invocation of the dashboard to the next.

[**0105**] Referring now to **FIG. 30**, there is shown an example of a dashboard wherein some labels **2701**A in configuration bar **601** have changed in appearance, while other labels **2701**B, **2701**C are unchanged, according to one embodiment. In one embodiment, when a widget is open, its corresponding label **2701** on configuration bar **601** changes in appearance; for example, it is grayed out or displayed in some other color. In another embodiment, label **2701** is grayed out (or otherwise changed) only if the widget is a single-instance widget (as described above); for multiple-instance widgets, label **2701** remains unchanged when the widget is opened. Such a technique provides an indication to the user as to which labels **2701** can be used to activate a widget (either because they are not currently open or because they are multiple-instance widgets) and which labels **2701** are currently inactive (because they correspond to single-instance widgets that have already been opened). In the example of **FIG. 30**, address book **1101**, calculator **801**, calendar **1801**, music player **901**, and stock quote widget **1901** are open, single-instance widgets; therefore their corresponding labels **2701**A are grayed-out. Stickies **1301** and clock **2500** are open, multiple-instance widgets; therefore their corresponding labels **2701**B are unchanged. Labels **2701**C are also unchanged, since they correspond to widgets that are not currently open.

[**0106**] In another embodiment, labels **2701** corresponding to open multiple-instance widgets have a different appearance than labels **2701** corresponding to widgets that are not currently open.

[**0107**] In another embodiment, when a widget is opened, its label **2701** is removed from configuration bar **601**. When the widget is closed, its label **2701** is restored in configuration bar **601**. In another embodiment, when a single-instance widget is opened, its label **2701** is removed from configuration bar **601**, but when a multiple-instance widget is opened, its label **2701** remains on configuration bar **601**. When the single-instance widget is closed, its label **2701** is restored in configuration bar **601**. Removing and/or restoring labels **2701** can be accompanied by animations to reinforce the transition from configuration bar **601** onto dashboard surface and vice versa. For example, when closing a widget, the widget can appear to be sucked into configuration bar **601** as the corresponding label **2701** is restored.

[**0108**] If a widget is deleted or removed (by dragging it or its label to trash icon **2801**, for example), its label **2701** is removed from configuration bar **601**.

[**0109**] In one embodiment, the user can close a widget by clicking on a close icon, or by dragging the widget back to configuration bar **601**. Referring now to **FIG. 29**, there is shown a screen shot depicting a dashboard including close icon **2901** for closing widget **2500**B. In one embodiment, icon **2901** is a rollover icon; it appears when the user has positioned the cursor over widget **2500**B, and it disappears when the cursor is no longer positioned over widget **2500**B. In one embodiment, rollover icon **2901** only appears if the cursor is held over widget **2500**B for at least a predetermined period of time, such as half a second. In one embodiment, when a widget is closed, an animation is played to reinforce the notion that the widget is closing. For example, the widget may be momentarily distorted in such a way that it appears to be sucked into close icon **2901**, or onto configuration bar **601**, before it disappears from the screen. Other types of animations or effects may also be used, such as a fade, or a

wipe, or a shrinking effect. In one embodiment, the user can configure which effect is desired, or if no effect is desired.

[0110] Widget **2500**B also includes preferences icon **2902** for accessing preferences controls for widget **2500**B. In one embodiment, icon **2902** is a rollover icon; it appears when the user has positioned the cursor over widget **2500**B, and it disappears when the cursor is no longer positioned over widget **2500**B (although it continues to be visible when the cursor is moved over to icon **2902**). In one embodiment, icon **2902** only appears if the cursor is held over widget **2500**B for at least a predetermined period of time, such as half a second. Clicking on icon **2902** causes preferences controls to be displayed. In one embodiment, preferences are entered using a conventional dialog box (not shown) as is known in the art. In another embodiment, clicking on icon **2902** causes widget **2500**B to appear to flip over, revealing its reverse side, which contains preferences controls.

[0111] Referring now to **FIG. 32**, there is shown an example of the dashboard where two widgets **2500**A and **1301**A have been flipped over, revealing preferences controls **3201**. In the example, preferences controls **3201** include menus for selecting a location (for clock widget **2500**A), and paper color selector and font selector (for stickies widget **1301**A). One skilled in the art will recognize that any type of controls, menus, fields, or other elements can be included in preferences controls **3201**. The user can dismiss preferences controls **3201** by clicking on Done button **3203** or on close box **3202**. In one embodiment, close box **3202** is a rollover icon, so that it is only visible when the cursor is positioned over widget **1301**A (although it continues to be visible when the cursor is moved over to close box **3202**). In one embodiment, when preferences controls **3201** are dismissed, a flip-over animation is again played, and the normal appearance of the widget is restored (reflecting any changes that were made via preferences controls **3201**).

[0112] Referring now to **FIG. 31**, there is shown another example of a dashboard wherein some labels **2701**A in configuration bar **601** have changed in appearance, while other labels **2701**B, **2701**C are unchanged, according to one embodiment. Address book **1101**, calculator **801**, calendar **1801**, music player **901**, and stock quote widget **1901** are open, single-instance widgets; therefore their corresponding labels **2701**A are grayed-out. Stickies **1301**A and **1301**B are open, multiple-instance widgets; therefore their corresponding label **2701**B is unchanged. Labels **2701**C, including world clock label, are also unchanged, since they correspond to widgets that are not currently open. In **FIG. 31**, the cursor (not shown) is positioned over stickies widget **1301**B, so that close box **2901** and preferences icon **2902** are displayed, as described above in connection with **FIG. 29**.

[0113] In the example of **FIG. 31**, configuration bar **601** includes Done button **3101**, which dismisses configuration bar **601** and restores configuration icon **501**. Thus, Done button **3101** performs the same action as dismissal icon **603**.

[0114] In one embodiment, flipping a widget over reveals other information, fields, or controls in addition to (or instead of) preferences fields and controls. One skilled in the art will recognize that the reverse side of a widget can include any type of auxiliary information, fields, or controls, and is not limited to a mechanism for accessing preferences controls.

Widget Installation

[0115] In one embodiment, widgets are preinstalled on the user's computer, so that dragging them onto the dashboard merely makes them active. In another embodiment, widgets are not preinstalled, but are installed in response to the user dragging them onto the dashboard. In another embodiment, dragging a widget onto the desktop causes code for the widget to be downloaded from a remote server and installed on the user's machine. In another embodiment, installing a widget in this manner also causes a fully functional application containing related functionality to be automatically installed as well (although the user can be given the option to decline such an installation); for example, installing a music player widget can cause a fully functional music player application to be installed as well. Authentication and payment may be prerequisites for such operations in some embodiments.

[0116] For example, referring briefly to **FIG. 28**, in one embodiment the user clicks on more gadgets label **2602** to access an online widget store or website where widgets are available for purchase or for free download. The user selects widget(s) for installation on his or her machine, and pays via credit card (if required). The online store or website is dismissed, the selected widget(s) are downloaded and installed, the dashboard is automatically reactivated, and the selected widget appears in configuration bar **601**, ready to be dragged onto the dashboard surface. Alternatively the new widget can automatically be placed on the dashboard surface. Thus, the present invention provides an easy, seamless way to install widgets.

[0117] In one embodiment, an online store or free distribution site is provided for making widgets **303** available. Available widgets **303** can be viewed, previewed, selected and installed from a website, or from a configuration option within the dashboard. In one embodiment, users can pay for widgets **303** using a credit card or any other conventional means for online purchases. Widgets **303** are transmitted and installed on the user's computer according to conventional means. In one embodiment, widgets **303** are installed according to techniques describe in related U.S. Utility patent application Ser. No. _____, for "User Interface for Assisting in the Installation of an Asset," filed Jun. 22, 2004, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

[0118] In one embodiment, widgets such as **801** are implemented using HTML technology with enhancements that are more fully described below and in the related cross-referenced applications. One skilled in the art will recognize, however, that any graphics technology can be used for implementing widgets such as **801**.

[0119] In one embodiment, widgets **303** are encrypted into a flat file that is expandable in memory, either in whole or in parts. Widget **303** contents are indexed so that particular resources can be accessed as needed. Widgets **303** may be encrypted according to any conventional encryption technology.

[0120] In one embodiment, clients **302** have complete control of resource loading of the WebView. When a relative resource is requested, the client **302** converts the protocol to one specific to the process. In one embodiment, the NSURL Protocol in Foundation is used to fetch data from the encrypted source.

Software Architecture

[0121] Referring now to **FIG. 3**, there is shown an example of a software architecture **300** for implementing the present invention according to one embodiment. In the embodiment, the present invention operates in connection with an operating system **109** as described above.

[0122] In one embodiment, software architecture **300** includes dashboard server **301**, dashboard client(s) **302**, and widget(s) **303**. Dashboard configuration information **304** is used by server **301** and/or clients **302** to specify the configuration options for displaying widgets **303**. All of the dashboard configuration information, including access levels and the like (if applicable), is stored in dashboard configuration information **304**. As described above, such information may include dashboard configuration information for two or more dashboards configured by the same user or by different users.

[0123] In one embodiment, widgets **303** are displayed using HTML and related web technology. Dashboard server **301** manages and launches dashboard client **302** processes. Each dashboard client **302** loads a widget **303**, which in one embodiment is an HTML webpage and related resources needed to display the page. In one embodiment, a client **302** is initiated for each widget **303** to be displayed. In one embodiment, clients **302** display widgets **303** without a conventional window frame, menu bar, or other components typically associated with on-screen windows; this provides a clean, straightforward display of the overall dashboard that avoids confusion and clutter. Clients **302** display widgets **303** by rendering web pages into a "WebView"; the size of each WebView is defined as metadata associated with the corresponding widget **303**. Server **301** is a window server that provides data for rendering a layer that can be overlaid on the normal desktop of the user interface. Widgets **303** are rendered into the separate layer, and then that layer is drawn on top of the normal desktop, so as to partially or completely obscure the desktop while the dashboard is active.

Dashboard Server **301**

[0124] Dashboard server **301** is a lightweight process that can stand alone or be imbedded in another process. Server **301** can be located at computer **102**, or at remote server **107**. Server **301** provides the following functionality:

[0125] Non-widget UI. In one embodiment, server **301** handles user interface functionality that is not directly related to widgets. This includes, for example: activation; deactivation; dashboard background; background animations; and the like.

[0126] Window management. In one embodiment, server **301** acts as a lightweight window server for the dashboard client **302** processes. Windows are created in server **301** process and then passed to dashboard clients **302**. Operations performed on windows go through dashboard server **301**. Such operations include, for example: resizing; moving; fetching of position and size; and the like. One advantage to having window operations pass through server **301** is that server **301** can then react to widget **303** changes and update the overall environment. For example, server **301** can cause displayed widgets **303** to bounce off of each other, stick to sides of the screen, snap to grids, or the like.

[0127] Fast login. In one embodiment, dashboard clients **302** are launched and then rendered into a window from dashboard server **301**. Since this can take some time, dashboard server **302** provides an initial image to be rendered in the window while client **302** is launched, so as to improve visual feedback and to make initial activation animation appear instantaneous. As dashboard clients **302** load and render, they take over the window and draw their content.

[0128] Event management. In one embodiment, server **301** acts as an event server as well as a window server. Events come from the operating system window server to dashboard server **301** and are routed to the appropriate dashboard client **302**. This indirection allows for a variety of features, including: server-side dragging (even if a dashboard client **302** is hung); filtering of events; insertion of server-generated events; and the like. Dashboard clients **302** communicate with server **301** to describe control regions, so that server **301** can initiate server-side drags correctly.

[0129] Loading widgets **303**. In one embodiment, server **301** is responsible for loading widgets **303**. It maintains the list of widgets **303** to load when starting up. In one embodiment, the dashboard client **302** corresponding to a particular widget **303** is not launched until the first time the dashboard is activated.

[0130] Arbitration of widgets **303**. In one embodiment, server **301** is the arbitrator of dashboard clients **302**. It controls the process and passes information to and from each widget **303**. If a widget **303** crashes, dashboard server **301** relaunches the process automatically. It also prevents crash loops where a widget **303** crashes repeatedly at startup. In one embodiment, all communication to a widget **303** goes through dashboard server **301** first.

[0131] CoreImage integration. In one embodiment, server **301** uses CoreImage technology, as described in related U.S. Utility patent applications cross-referenced above. Filters are applied to the background window of the server to provide spotlight and ripple effects.

[0132] Widget **303** preference management. In one embodiment, server **301** stores, in configuration information **304** that is stored according to a conventional file system, preferences associated with widgets **303**, and vends those preferences to widgets **303**.

Dashboard Client **302**

[0133] In one embodiment, each client **302** is a lightweight process that uses, for example, objects defined as part of a development environment such as Cocoa Application Framework (also referred to as the Application Kit, or AppKit), described for example at Mac OS X Panther Release Notes Cocoa Application Framework, available at "http://developer.apple.com/documentation/ReleaseNotes/Cocoa/AppKit.ht ml"). Clients **302** can be implemented as simplified browser screens that omit conventional interface features such as a menu bar, window frame, and the like. In one embodiment, clients **302** provide the following functionality in implementing the present invention:

[0134] Control of the WebView. Client **302** creates a WebView and attaches the HTML of widget **303** to the WebView. Client **302** acts as the delegate for user interface requests made by the WebView. In one embodiment, client **302** overrides much of AppKit's default behavior as it regards to communication to server **301** and event handling. WebViews are generic controls for viewing and manipulat-

ing HTML and XHTML; they are described, for example, at Web Kit Reference for Objective-C, available at "http://developer.apple.com/documentation/Cocoa/Reference/WebKit/ObjC_classic/index.html".

[0135] JavaScript extensions. In one embodiment, client **302** inserts a custom object in the JavaScript runtime of the WebView. This allows for a variety of extensions for widgets **303**, including without limitation: copy/cut/paste; getting/setting preferences; notifications when preferences have changed; opening a linked application (for example, a widget **303** may include a button or other trigger that causes a corresponding application to be launched); quitting; moving/resizing; and the like.

[0136] Managing Plug-ins. Some widgets **303** use native code as part of their implementations. In one embodiment, client **302** includes the capability to interface with such native code and/or with databases and data stores available locally or remotely. Intone embodiment, widgets **303** also have the ability to create a custom AppKit NSView. A widget developer can use a custom view to enable other types of animations, such as OpenGL views, plug-ins such as Flash, and the like.

[0137] In one embodiment, plug-ins are implemented as follows. An ObjC bundle is loaded from a resources folder associated with widget **303**. The bundle has two methods on its Principal Class:

[0138] -(id) initWithWebView:(WebView*)webview;

[0139] -(void) windowScriptObjectAvailable:(WebScriptObject *)windowScriptObject (this allows the plugin to add JavaScript extensions before the web page has loaded).;

[0140] initWithWebView is called when the Dashboard Client starts up, and webViewLoaded is called when the page finishes loading. The developer of a plug-in can use the WebKit's scripting APIs to extend the JavaScript for a particular widget **303**.

Widget **303** Format

[0141] In one embodiment, each widget **303** is implemented as an HTML file. The HTML file can reference other local and remote resources such as style sheets, other HTML files, JavaScript files, images, and the like. Widgets **303** can be implemented using, for example, a flat bundle file format or a packaged HTML file format.

[0142] Flat Bundle. The Flat Bundle format has the following directory structure:

[0143] -My.widget (directory/Bundle)

[0144] -Info.plist (file)

[0145] -My.html (file)

[0146] -My.png (file)

[0147] -English.1proj (optional directory)

[0148] -Localizable.strings (file)

[0149] The Info.plist describes widget **303**. It also provides an identifier for widget **303**, and points to the main HTML file and default PNG file. The default PNG file is used as a temporary display while dynamic elements are loaded from server **301**. An example of a structure for Info.plist is as follows:

Key	Type	Description/Value
CFBundleIdentifier	CFString.	com.apple.widget <widget name>
CFBundleName	CFString	name of the widget
MainHTML	CFString	name of main HTML resource
Width	CFNumber	default width of the widget
Height	CFNumber	default height of the widget
DefaultImage	CFString	resource name of default PNG
Plugin (optional)	CFString	resource name of native plugin

[0150] My.html can reference any other local resource as well. In one embodiment, the resources are specified relative to the HTML file's location.

[0151] My.png can have any name, based on the "DefaultImage" key in the Info.plist. This image is rendered by server **301** if there is no cached representation.

[0152] The English.1proj and other localizable directories are for localizable strings.

Widget **303** Location

[0153] In one embodiment, widgets **303** are stored locally in storage device **106** such as a hard drive. Per-machine widgets **303** are stored at, for example:

[0154] /Library/Widgets/

[0155] /Applications/Widgets/

[0156] Widgets **303** can also be made available on a per-user basis, particularly in situations where more than one user uses the same computer **102**. Per-user widgets **303** are stored, for example, at:

[0157] ~/Widgets

[0158] ~/Library/Widgets/

[0159] One skilled in the art will recognize that these configurations are merely exemplary, and that any other file format or directory structure can be used.

Widget **303** Development

[0160] In one embodiment, widgets **303** can be developed using WebKit, described, for example, at Web Kit Reference for Objective-C, available at "http://developer.apple.com/documentation/Cocoa/Reference/WebKit/ObjC_classic/index.html". Additional functionality can also be provided, such as the ability to drag to and from web pages, detect control regions, stop plug-ins and timers from firing when the dashboard is hidden, and the like. In one embodiment, such additional functionality is provided using an enhanced Canvas architecture, as described in related U.S. Provisional patent application _____, for "Procedurally Expressing Graphic Objects for Web Pages," filed Jun. 25, 2004, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference. In addition, web extensions that are well known in the art can be used for providing additional functionality such as drag-and-drop capability, detection of control regions, and the like.

[0161] For widgets that involve additional, more detailed rendering than is available from WebKit/HTML, a <canvas> tag is provided. A CoreGraphics context is fetchable from the <canvas> tag, and JavaScript is then used to draw into the context and effectively the HTML page. Detailed description of this implementation can be found in the related applications.

Remote Server **107** Access

[0162] In one embodiment, some or all widgets **303** communicate with a remote server **107** in order to perform their functions. For example, a weather widget requests current weather data from a remote server **107**, while a package tracking widget requests current data regarding package locations from a remote server **107**. Such communication takes place according to well-known techniques for requesting and receiving information across a network such as the Internet: widget **303** or client **302** forms a request for data, and transmits the request according to HTTP or some other network protocol; server **107** responds to the request with the information; and widget **303** uses the information in forming the output that will be displayed to the user. In one embodiment, these operations take place in response to JavaScript code within widget **303**. Server **107** can be a resource that is available generally to the public, or it can be a proprietary source of information to which the user has been given access. Where appropriate, authorization and/or user verification can be required before server **107** transmits requested information. If desired, the information can be transmitted across a secure channel and/or encrypted prior to transmission, according to techniques that are well known in the art.

Examples of Widgets **303**

[0163] The following is a list of examples of widgets **303** that can be provided using the techniques of the present invention. One skilled in the art will recognize that many other types of widgets **303** can be provided.

[0164] buddy list

[0165] calculator

[0166] date book

[0167] dictionary

[0168] online music store and music player

[0169] movie show times

[0170] news feed

[0171] package tracker

[0172] rolodex

[0173] sports scores

[0174] stickies

[0175] stock quotes

[0176] webcam

[0177] weather

[0178] world clock

[0179] currency converter

[0180] online auction viewer and tool

[0181] lottery

[0182] mini inbox for receiving email

[0183] puzzle

[0184] telephone directory (e.g., yellow pages)

[0185] **FIGS. 18 through 25** depict examples of some of these types of widgets **303**. One skilled in the art will recognize that the particular layout, appearance, and arrangement of each of these widgets **303** are merely exemplary. In particular, any or all of these widgets **303** can include a button for accessing a fully functional application having expanded functionality, as described above in connection with **FIGS. 9 and 10**.

[0186] **FIG. 18** depicts an example of a calendar widget **1801** according to one embodiment, including current date **1802**, calendar display **1803** showing current month, and appointments **1803** A. In one embodiment, data for the calendar is stored locally at computer **102**; in another embodiment, widget **1801** retrieves calendar data from a remote server **107**.

[0187] **FIG. 19** depicts an example of a stock quote widget **1901** according to one embodiment, including several stock quotes **1902**, a graph **1903** for a selected stock, and an edit button **1904** for making changes to the stocks to be included in widget **1901**. In one embodiment, widget **1901** retrieves stock quote data from a remote server **107**.

[0188] **FIG. 20** depicts an example of a weather widget **2001** according to one embodiment, including current temperature conditions **2002**, current time **2003**, and forecast **2004**. Widget **2001** can be configured to show weather information for any one or more locations of interest to the user. In one embodiment, widget **2001** retrieves weather data from a remote server **107**.

[0189] **FIG. 21** depicts an example of a traffic webcam widget **2100**, including a current photograph **2102** (or live video feed) of a specified location, and an identifier **2101** of the location according to one embodiment. Widget **2100** can be configured to show images for any one or more locations of interest to the user. In one embodiment, widget **2100** retrieves photographs and/or video from a remote server **107**.

[0190] **FIG. 22** depicts an example of a music player widget **901** according to one embodiment, including now-playing indicator **909**, counter **2202**, controls **2201** for pausing, playing, rewinding and fast-forwarding, and button **902** for accessing a fully functional music player application, as described above in connection with **FIGS. 9 and 10**. In one embodiment, widget **901** retrieves music data from a remote server **107**.

[0191] **FIG. 23** depicts an example of a package tracking widget **2300** according to one embodiment, including a list of delivery services **2303**, one of which is currently selected. Package tracking information **2301** for the selected delivery service is shown, including a name for each item being delivered, current status, tracking number, and the date of the last update for that item. Detailed tracking info **2302** is shown for a selected item in **2301**. The user can configure widget **2300** to add items to be tracked, format the results, and the like. In one embodiment, widget **2300** retrieves package tracking data from a remote server **107**.

[0192] **FIG. 24** depicts an example of an address book widget **1101** according to one embodiment. Widget **1101** includes the following information for an individual: a name **2402**, photograph **2401**, and contact information **2403**. Arrows **2404** allow the user to navigate to other records in the address book. Search field **1201** allows the user to search for names that begin with or include the search terms. In one embodiment, data for the address book is stored locally at computer **102**; in another embodiment, widget **1101** retrieves address book data from a remote server **107**.

[0193] **FIG. 25** depicts an example of a clock widget **2500** according to one embodiment, including a current time display **2501** (which can take any form, digital and/or analog), and a location **2502** corresponding to the current time display **2501**. The user can configure widget **2500** to change the time, location, and/or format of the display.

[0194] In one embodiment, clock widget **2500** changes in appearance according to the time of day. For example, a light-colored face can be shown during the day, and a dark face can be shown at night. Referring again to **FIG. 26**, clock widget **2500**A has a light-colored face because the local time in San Francisco is 11:28 am, while clock widget **2500**B has a dark face because the local time in London is 7:28 pm. In one embodiment, other distinguishing visual characteristics are used to denote day and night. In one embodiment, local times from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm are indicated as being daytime, while local times from **6:00** pm to **6:00** am are indicated as being night time. In another embodiment, actual sunrise and sunset times are used for controlling the appearance of clock widget **2500** (based on the selected location for the clock widget **2500**, and further based on sunrise/sunset information retrieved from stored tables or from a resource such as a website). In another embodiment, a continuous gradation is used, so that times near sunset or sunrise are shown in some gradation between the dark and light-colored faces; such times may also be shown in a pinkish hue to further reinforce the sunset or sunrise time period.

[0195] **FIG. 33** depicts an example of a calculator widget **801** according to one embodiment, including numeric display **3301**, keypad **3304**, arithmetic operator keys **3302**, memory keys **3305**, and equals key **3303**. Keys **3302**, **3303**, **3304**, and **3305** generally function in a manner similar to that of conventional calculators and calculator accessories, except as noted herein. Display **3301** shows results of calculations in a manner similar to that of conventional calculators and calculator accessories, except as noted herein.

[0196] In one embodiment, display **3301** lights up, or otherwise changes in appearance, to indicate that calculator widget **801** is active. For example, display **3301** may light up when the user first clicks somewhere within widget **801**, and may stay lit until the user dismisses widget **801** or clicks somewhere outside widget **801**. While display **3301** is lit, widget **801** is active and can receive user input via the onscreen cursor or via a keyboard or other input device.

[0197] In one embodiment, operator keys **3302** light up when lit, and stay lit until the next key is pressed, so as to remind the user what operation is being performed. For example, in **FIG. 33** the division operator key **3302** is lit, signifying that the user has clicked on that key, and reminds the user that the current operation is a division operation. In one embodiment, operator key **3302** stays lit until another operator key **3302** is pressed, or until the clear button is pressed, or until equals key **3303** is pressed; in another embodiment, operator key **3302** stays lit until any other key is pressed.

[0198] Referring now to **FIGS. 34A and 34B**, there is shown an example of a dictionary/thesaurus widget **3400** according to one embodiment. A user can type a word in text input field **3403**, and can select dictionary or thesaurus functionality by clicking on text labels **3401** or **3402**, respectively, to see either definition **3406** or synonyms **3408**. If either definition **3406** or synonyms **3408** do not fit within the bounds of widget **3400**, widget **3400** can auto-resize accordingly, or can display arrows **3407** for accessing the rest of the information. Thumb index **3405** can also be presented, allowing the user to quickly access other words that appear on the same dictionary page as the entered word. In one embodiment, a reverse lookup dictionary (not shown) can also be provided (the user enters a definition or part thereof, and widget **303** responds with one or more words that match the entry). In one embodiment, data for the dictionary/thesaurus is stored locally at computer **102**; in another embodiment, the dictionary/thesaurus widget retrieves its data from a remote server **107**.

[0199] In one embodiment, the dashboard is also available to a user from a remote location. Configuration information for the user's dashboard is stored at a remote server, pursuant to a user command or automatically. The user can then log in from a remote computer or other device, and be presented with a web page that duplicates the user's dashboard as it would be viewed from his or her own computer. Widgets **303** are provided via HTML pages per the extended functionality described above. The user can interact with widgets **303** in the same manner as from his or her own computer.

[0200] In the above description, for purposes of explanation, numerous specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the invention. It will be apparent, however, to one skilled in the art that the invention can be practiced without these specific details. In other instances, structures and devices are shown in block diagram form in order to avoid obscuring the invention.

[0201] In particular, one skilled in the art will recognize that other architectures and graphics environments may be used, and that the present invention can be implemented using graphics tools and products other than those described above. In particular, the client/server approach is merely one example of an architecture for providing the dashboard functionality of the present invention; one skilled in the art will recognize that other, non-client/server approaches can also be used.

[0202] Reference in the specification to "one embodiment" or "an embodiment" means that a particular feature, structure, or characteristic described in connection with the embodiment is included in at least one embodiment of the invention. The appearances of the phrase "in one embodiment" in various places in the specification are not necessarily all referring to the same embodiment.

[0203] Some portions of the detailed description are presented in terms of algorithms and symbolic representations of operations on data bits within a computer memory. These

algorithmic descriptions and representations are the means used by those skilled in the data processing arts to most effectively convey the substance of their work to others skilled in the art. An algorithm is here, and generally, conceived to be a self-consistent sequence of steps leading to a desired result. The steps are those requiring physical manipulations of physical quantities. Usually, though not necessarily, these quantities take the form of electrical or magnetic signals capable of being stored, transferred, combined, compared, and otherwise manipulated. It has proven convenient at times, principally for reasons of common usage, to refer to these signals as bits, values, elements, symbols, characters, terms, numbers, or the like.

[0204] It should be borne in mind, however, that all of these and similar terms are to be associated with the appropriate physical quantities and are merely convenient labels applied to these quantities. Unless specifically stated otherwise as apparent from the discussion, it is appreciated that throughout the description, discussions utilizing terms such as "processing" or "computing" or "calculating" or "determining" or "displaying" or the like, refer to the action and processes of a computer system, or similar electronic computing device, that manipulates and transforms data represented as physical (electronic) quantities within the computer system's registers and memories into other data similarly represented as physical quantities within the computer system memories or registers or other such information storage, transmission or display devices.

[0205] The present invention also relates to an apparatus for performing the operations herein. This apparatus may be specially constructed for the required purposes, or it may comprise a general-purpose computer selectively activated or reconfigured by a computer program stored in the computer. Such a computer program may be stored in a computer readable storage medium, such as, but is not limited to, any type of disk including floppy disks, optical disks, CD-ROMs, and magnetic-optical disks, read-only memories (ROMs), random access memories (RAMs), EPROMs, EEPROMs, magnetic or optical cards, or any type of media suitable for storing electronic instructions, and each coupled to a computer system bus.

[0206] The algorithms and modules presented herein are not inherently related to any particular computer or other apparatus. Various general-purpose systems may be used with programs in accordance with the teachings herein, or it may prove convenient to construct more specialized apparatuses to perform the method steps. The required structure for a variety of these systems will appear from the description below. In addition, the present invention is not described with reference to any particular programming language. It will be appreciated that a variety of programming languages may be used to implement the teachings of the invention as described herein. Furthermore, as will be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the relevant art, the modules, features, attributes, methodologies, and other aspects of the invention can be implemented as software, hardware, firmware or any combination of the three. Of course, wherever a component of the present invention is implemented as software, the component can be implemented as a standalone program, as part of a larger program, as a plurality of separate programs, as a statically or dynamically linked library, as a kernel loadable module, as a device driver, and/or in every and any other way known now or in the future to those of skill in the art of computer programming. Additionally, the present invention is in no way limited to implementation in any specific operating system or environment.

[0207] It will be understood by those skilled in the relevant art that the above-described implementations are merely exemplary, and many changes can be made without departing from the true spirit and scope of the present invention. Therefore, it is intended by the appended claims to cover all such changes and modifications that come within the true spirit and scope of this invention.

What is claimed is:

1. In a computer system including a display screen comprising an area displaying a user interface, a method for presenting a unified interest layer, comprising:

detecting a first trigger event for activating a unified interest layer;

responsive to the first trigger event:

temporarily inactivating the user interface; and

displaying, in the area of the display screen, a unified interest layer comprising a plurality of layer elements; detecting a second trigger event for dismissing the unified interest layer; and

responsive to the second trigger event:

dismissing the unified interest layer; and

reactivating the user interface.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the user interface comprises a plurality of graphical user interface elements.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein the user interface comprises a plurality of windows.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein the first trigger event comprises a first user command and the second trigger event comprises a second user command.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein detecting the second trigger event comprises:

detecting an input signal while an onscreen cursor is at an onscreen location where no layer element is being displayed.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein detecting the second trigger event comprises:

detecting a mouse click while an onscreen cursor is at an onscreen location where no layer element is being displayed.

7. The method of claim 1, wherein detecting the second trigger event comprises:

detecting that a predetermined period of time has transpired without user input.

8. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

receiving user input to configure the unified interest layer;

displaying the unified interest layer according to the layer configuration; and

saving the layer configuration.

9. The method of claim 8, wherein receiving user input to configure the unified interest layer comprises:

receiving a command to activate a configuration bar; and

receiving a command to drag at least one layer element from the configuration bar to a position on the unified interest layer.

10. The method of claim 9, further comprising:

displaying a transitional animation to place the dragged layer element at the position.

11. The method of claim 10, wherein the transitional animation comprises a ripple animation.

12. The method of claim 9, further comprising, responsive to the command to drag the layer element to a position on the unified interest layer:

automatically retrieving, from a server, software code for the layer element; and

installing the software code for the layer element.

13. The method of claim 9, wherein the configuration bar comprises a plurality of categories of layer elements, and wherein:

receiving a command to drag at least one layer element from the configuration bar comprises:

receiving a command to access layer elements within one of the categories;

displaying commands within the selected category; and

receiving a command to drag at least one layer element from the selected category to a position in the unified interest layer.

14. The method of claim 8, wherein saving the layer configuration comprises:

saving at least one of a position, size, and configuration for each layer element.

15. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

receiving a command to activate a configuration bar, the configuration bar having at least two active states; and

responsive to receiving a command to switch the state of the configuration bar, switching between the at least two active states;

wherein:

in the first state the configuration bar displays a first region comprising at least one label corresponding to a favorite layer element; and

in the second state the configuration bar displays the first region comprising at least one label corresponding to a favorite layer element and a second region comprising at least one label corresponding to a non-favorite layer element.

16. The method of claim 15, further comprising:

responsive to receiving a command to move a layer element between the first and second regions, moving the layer element according to the command.

17. The method of claim 15, wherein:

in the second state the configuration bar further displays an icon for deleting a layer element; and

responsive to receiving a command to move a layer element to the delete icon, deleting the layer element.

18. The method of claim 15, further comprising:

responsive to receiving a command to move a layer element from one of the regions to the unified interest layer, displaying the layer element in the unified interest layer.

19. The method of claim 15, further comprising:

responsive to receiving a command to move a layer element from the unified interest layer to one of the regions, removing the layer element from the unified interest layer and displaying a label corresponding the layer element in the specified region.

20. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

receiving a command to activate a configuration bar, the configuration bar comprising labels corresponding to layer elements.

21. The method of claim 20, wherein a label corresponding to a currently-active layer element is shown in a first visual format, and a label corresponding to a currently-inactive layer elements is shown in a second visual format.

22. The method of claim 21, wherein the first visual format is grayed-out.

23. The method of claim 20, wherein at least one layer element is capable of being instantiated multiple times, and at least one layer element is not capable of being instantiated multiple times, and wherein:

a label corresponding to a currently-active layer element that is not capable of being instantiated multiple times is shown in a first visual format; and

a label corresponding to a currently-active layer element that is capable of being instantiated multiple times is shown in a second visual format.

24. The method of claim 23, wherein the first visual format is grayed-out.

25. The method of claim 20, wherein at least one layer element is capable of being instantiated multiple times, and at least one layer element is not capable of being instantiated multiple times, and wherein:

a label corresponding to a currently-active layer element that is not capable of being instantiated multiple times is shown in a first visual format;

a label corresponding to a currently-active layer element that is capable of being instantiated multiple times is shown in a second visual format; and

a label corresponding to a currently-inactive layer element is shown in a third visual format.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein the first visual format is grayed-out.

27. The method of claim 1, wherein displaying the unified interest layer comprises displaying the unified interest layer over the inactivated user interface.

28. The method of claim 1, wherein temporarily inactivating the user interface comprises modifying a visual characteristic of the user interface.

29. The method of claim 28, wherein modifying a visual characteristic of the user interface comprises performing at least one selected from the group consisting of:

fading the user interface;

darkening the user interface;

brightening the user interface;

blurring the user interface;

changing a color saturation of the user interface;

displaying the user interface in black and white;

distorting the user interface; and

shrinking the user interface.

30. The method of claim 1, wherein displaying the unified interest layer comprises displaying the unified interest layer in such a manner that at least a portion of the inactivated user interface is still visible.

31. The method of claim 1, further comprising, concurrently with displaying the unified interest layer, displaying a miniature representation of the user interface.

32. The method of claim 1, further comprising displaying a miniature representation of the user interface within one of the layer elements.

33. The method of claim 1, wherein the displayed user interface comprises a task bar, the method further comprising:

displaying, in the task bar, an icon representing a layer element;

wherein:

the first trigger event comprises a user action with respect to the icon; and

displaying the unified interest layer comprises displaying the layer element represented by the icon.

34. The method of claim 33, further comprising highlighting the displayed icon to indicate an alert in connection with the layer element represented by the icon.

35. The method of claim 33, wherein at least one of the layer elements is associated with an application, and wherein the second trigger event comprises a user command to launch the application associated with a layer element, the method further comprising:

after the user interface has been reactivated, launching the application associated with the layer element.

36. The method of claim 35, wherein the user command to launch the application associated with a layer element comprises user activation of a button in the layer element.

37. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

responsive to the first trigger event:

displaying a first transitional animation for inactivating the user interface and introducing the unified interest layer; and

responsive to the second trigger event:

displaying a second transitional animation for dismissing the unified interest layer and restoring the user interface.

38. The method of claim 37, wherein each transitional animation comprises one selected from the group consisting of:

a fly-in animation;

a fly-out animation;

a zoom-in animation; and

a zoom-out animation.

39. The method of claim 1, wherein the layer elements are movable.

40. The method of claim 39, wherein, responsive to the user moving a first layer element on top of a second layer element, the second layer element automatically moves to make room for the first layer element.

41. The method of claim 1, wherein displaying the unified interest layer comprises displaying at least one layer element at a position previously selected by the user.

42. The method of claim 1, wherein the layer elements are editable.

43. The method of claim 1, wherein at least one layer element overlaps another layer element.

44. The method of claim 1, wherein at least one layer element comprises one selected from the group consisting of:

a calendar element;

a calculator element;

a music player element;

an address book element;

a notes element;

a stock quote element;

a weather element;

a traffic element;

a package tracking element;

a contact manager element; and

a clock element.

45. The method of claim 1, wherein reactivating the user interface comprises restoring the user interface to a state substantially identical to its state at the time of inactivation.

46. The method of claim 1, wherein at least one of the layer elements responds to user input.

47. The method of claim 1, wherein the area displaying a user interface occupies substantially the entire display screen.

48. The method of claim 1, wherein at least one layer element receives data from a remote server.

49. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

responsive to the first trigger event, obtaining contextual information from a currently-running application; and

activating a layer element using a parameter derived from the obtained contextual information.

50. The method of claim 49, wherein the contextual information comprises an item currently selected in the application.

51. The method of claim 49, wherein the contextual information comprises an item currently open in the application.

52. In a computer system including a display screen comprising an area displaying a user interface, a method for presenting a unified interest layer, comprising:

detecting a first trigger event for activating a unified interest layer; and

responsive to the first trigger event:

temporarily inactivating the user interface; and

displaying, in the area of the display screen, a unified interest layer comprising a plurality of layer elements.

53. A method for displaying a user interface element representing a clock, comprising:

determining a current time at a specified location;

responsive to the determined time, selecting a background color from at least two colors;

displaying the selected background color; and

displaying a representation of the current time at the location.

54. The method of claim 53, wherein:

the at least two colors comprises a first color representing day and a second color representing night.

55. The method of claim 54, wherein:

the at least two colors comprises a third color representing twilight.

56. The method of claim 53, wherein:

selecting a background color from at least two colors comprises:

responsive to the determined time falling within a first range, selecting a first color; and

responsive to the determined time falling within a second range, selecting a second color.

57. The method of claim 56, wherein the first range comprises 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM, and the second range comprises 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM.

58. The method of claim 53, wherein selecting a background color further comprises interpolating between the at least two colors according to the determined time.

59. The method of claim 53, wherein:

selecting a background color from at least two colors comprises:

obtaining sunrise and sunset times at the location;

responsive to the determined time falling between sunrise and sunset, selecting a first color; and

responsive to the determined time falling between sunset and sunrise, selecting a second color.

60. A method for distributing a layer element for use in a unified interest layer in a computer system, the method comprising:

receiving a request for a layer element to be used in a computer system including:

a user interface; and

a unified interest layer that detects a first trigger event for activating the unified interest layer, and, responsive to the first trigger event, temporarily inactivates the user interface and displays the unified interest layer comprising a plurality of layer elements; and

responsive to the request, providing the layer element.

61. A method for authoring a layer element for use in a unified interest layer in a computer system, the method comprising:

authoring a layer element to be used in a computer system including:

a user interface; and

a unified interest layer that detects a first trigger event for activating the unified interest layer, and, responsive to the first trigger event, temporarily inactivates the user interface and displays the unified interest layer comprising a plurality of layer elements; and

performing at least one of:

installing the layer element; and

making the layer element available for use.

62. A method for editing a layer element for use in a unified interest layer in a computer system, the method comprising:

editing a layer element to be used in a computer system including:

a user interface; and

a unified interest layer that detects a first trigger event for activating the unified interest layer, and, responsive to the first trigger event, temporarily inactivates the user interface and displays the unified interest layer comprising a plurality of layer elements; and

performing at least one of:

installing the edited layer element; and

making the edited layer element available for use.

63. A method for displaying a rollover close control for a user interface element on a display screen, the user interface element comprising an active region, the method comprising:

displaying the user interface element;

responsive to an onscreen cursor being placed over the active region for at least a predetermined period of time, displaying a close control;

responsive to an onscreen cursor being moved off the active region for at least a predetermined period of time, removing the close control;

responsive to the close control being activated, dismissing the user interface element.

64. The method of claim 63, wherein displaying the user interface element comprises displaying the user interface element in a unified interest layer.

65. A method for displaying a preferences control for a first user interface element on a display screen, the user interface element comprising an active region, the method comprising:

displaying the user interface element;

responsive to an onscreen cursor being placed over the active region for at least a predetermined period of time, displaying a preferences control;

responsive to an onscreen cursor being moved off the active region for at least a predetermined period of time, removing the preferences control;

responsive to the preferences control being activated, displaying at least one user interface element for specifying preferences.

66. The method of claim 65, wherein displaying the first user interface element comprises displaying the first user interface element in a unified interest layer.

67. The method of claim 65, wherein displaying at least one user interface element for specifying preferences comprises:

displaying an animation simulating the first user interface element turning over; and

displaying the at least one user interface element for specifying preferences on the reverse side of the first user interface element.

68. A method for displaying an animation to represent placement of a user interface element at a location on a screen, the method comprising:

receiving user input moving a user interface element to a location on a screen;

receiving user input dropping the user interface element at the location;

displaying an animation resembling a ripple effect; and

displaying the user interface element at the location.

69. The method of claim 68, wherein:

the user input moving a user interface element to a location on a screen comprises a drag operation; and

the user input dropping the user interface element at the location comprises a drop operation.

70. The method of claim 68, wherein:

receiving the user input moving a user interface element to a location on a screen comprises receiving a cursor movement while a button is held down; and

receiving the user input dropping the user interface element at the location comprises detecting that the button has been released.

71. A method for displaying auxiliary functions for a first user interface element on a display screen, the method comprising:

displaying the user interface element;

receiving user input indicating that auxiliary functions should be displayed;

displaying an animation simulating the first user interface element turning over; and

displaying the auxiliary functions on the reverse side of the first user interface element.

72. The method of claim 71, wherein the auxiliary functions comprise controls for setting preferences.

73. A method for dismissing a user interface element, comprising:

displaying the user interface element on a display screen;

receiving user input, via an on-screen control, indicating that the user interface element should be dismissed;

displaying an animation representing the user interface element being sucked into the on-screen control; and

removing the user interface element from the display screen.

74. The method of claim 73, wherein displaying the user interface element comprises displaying the first user interface element in a unified interest layer, and wherein removing the user interface element comprises removing the user interface element from the unified interest layer.

75. A method for dismissing a user interface element, comprising:

displaying the user interface element on a display screen;

receiving user input, via an on-screen control, indicating that the user interface element should be dismissed;

displaying an animation representing the user interface element being sucked into a configuration bar; and

removing the user interface element from the display screen.

76. The method of claim 75, wherein displaying the user interface element comprises displaying the first user interface element in a unified interest layer, and wherein removing the user interface element comprises removing the user interface element from the unified interest layer.

77. A method for displaying a user interface element representing a calculator, comprising:

displaying a calculator element, comprising a numeric display, a plurality of numeric keys, and a plurality of operator keys;

responsive to user input representing a click action within the calculator element, changing a visual characteristic of the numeric display to a first state to indicate that the calculator is active; and

responsive to user input representing a click action outside the calculator element, changing the visual characteristic of the numeric display to a second state to indicate that the calculator is not active.

78. The method of claim 77, wherein changing a visual characteristic of the numeric display to a first state comprised lighting up the numeric display.

79. A method for displaying a user interface element representing a calculator, comprising:

displaying a calculator element, comprising a numeric display, a plurality of numeric keys, and a plurality of operator keys;

responsive to user input representing a click action within a first operator key, highlighting the first operator key; and

responsive to user input representing a click action within a key other than the first operator key, restoring the first operator key to a non-highlighted state.

80. A computer program product for presenting a unified interest layer in a computer system including a display screen comprising an area displaying a user interface, the computer program product comprising:

a computer-readable medium; and

computer program code, encoded on the medium, for:

detecting a first trigger event for activating a unified interest layer;

responsive to the first trigger event:

temporarily inactivating the user interface; and

displaying, in the area of the display screen, a unified interest layer comprising a plurality of layer elements;

81. The computer program product of claim 80, further comprising computer program code, encoded on the medium, for:

detecting a second trigger event for dismissing the unified interest layer; and

responsive to the second trigger event:

dismissing the unified interest layer; and

reactivating the user interface.

82. The computer program product of claim 80, further comprising computer program code, encoded on the medium, for:

receiving user input to configure the unified interest layer;

displaying the unified interest layer according to the layer configuration; and

saving the layer configuration.

83. A system for presenting a unified interest layer in a computer system including a display screen, the system comprising:

an input device for detecting a first trigger event for activating a unified interest layer;

a processor, for processing user input received from the user input device; and

a display screen, coupled to the processor and comprising an area displaying a user interface, the display screen for, responsive to the first trigger event:

temporarily inactivating the user interface; and

displaying, in the area of the display screen, a unified interest layer comprising a plurality of layer elements;

84. The system of claim 83, wherein:

the input device further detects a second trigger event for dismissing the unified interest layer; and

responsive to the second trigger event, the display screen:

dismisses the unified interest layer; and

reactivates the user interface.

85. The system of claim 83:

wherein:

the input device further receives user input to configure the unified interest layer; and

the display device displaying the unified interest layer according to the layer configuration; and

the system further comprising a storage device, coupled to the processor, for saving the layer configuration.

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