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(54) Wireless earphone that transitions between wireless networks

Drahtloser Kopfhörer mit Übergang zwischen drahtlosen Netzwerken

Écouteur sans fil qui effectue des transitions entre des réseaux sans fil

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Description

PRIORITY CLAIM

[0001] The present application claims priority to United States provisional application serial number 61/123,265, filed April 7, 2008.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Digital audio players, such as MP3 players and iPods, that store and play digital audio files, are very popular. Such devices typically comprise a data storage unit for storing and playing the digital audio, and a headphone set that connects to the data storage unit, usually with a ¼" or a 3.5 mm jack and associated cord. Often the headphones are in-ear type headphones. The cord, however, between the headphones and the data storage unit can be cumbersome and annoying to users, and the length of the cord limits the physical distance between the data storage unit and the headphones. Accordingly, some cordless headphones have been proposed, such as the Monster iFreePlay cordless headphones from Apple Inc., which include a docking port on one of the earphones that can connect directly to an iPod Shuffle. Because they have the docking port, however, the Monster iFreePlay cordless headphones from Apple are quite large and are not in-ear type phones. Recently, cordless headphones that connect wirelessly via IEEE 802.11 to a WLAN-ready laptop or personal computer (PC) have been proposed, but such headphones are also quite large and not in-ear type phones.

SUMMARY

[0003] The present invention is directed to a system as defined in claims 1-8. Those embodiments of the description not falling under the scope of the claims are considered only as examples useful for understanding the present invention. In one general aspect, the present invention is directed to a wireless earphone that comprises a transceiver circuit for receiving streaming audio from a data source, such as a digital audio player or a computer, over an ad hoc wireless network. When the data source and the earphone are out of range via the ad hoc wireless network, they may transition automatically to a common infrastructure wireless network (e.g., a wireless LAN). If there is no common infrastructure wireless network for both the data source and the earphone, the earphone may connect via an available infrastructure wireless network to a host server. The host server may, for example, broadcast streaming audio to the earphone and/or transmit to the earphone a network address (e.g., an Internet Protocol (IP) address) for a network-connected content server that streams digital audio. The earphone may then connect to the content server using the IP address. The content server may be an Internet radio server, including, for example, an Internet radio server that broadcasts streaming audio from the data source or some other content.

[0004] These and other advantageous, unique aspects of the wireless earphone are described below.

FIGURES

[0005] Various embodiments of the present invention are described herein by way of example in conjunction with the following figures, wherein:

Figures 1A-1E are views of a wireless earphone according to various embodiments of the present invention;

Figures 2A-2D illustrate various communication modes for a wireless earphone according to various embodiments of the present invention;

Figure 3 is a block diagram of a wireless earphone according to various embodiments of the present invention;

Figures 4A-4B show the wireless earphone connected to another device according to various embodiments of the present invention;

Figure 5 is a diagram of a process implemented by a host server according to various embodiments of the present invention;

Figure 6 is a diagram of a process implemented by the wireless earphone to transition automatically between wireless networks according to various embodiments of the present invention;

Figures 7, 8 and 10 illustrate communication systems involving the wireless earphone according to various embodiments of the present invention;

Figure 9 is a diagram of a headset including a wireless earphone and a microphone according to various embodiments of the present invention; and

Figure 11 is a diagram of a pair of wireless earphones with a dongle according to various embodiments of the present invention.

DESCRIPTION

[0006] In one general aspect, the present invention is directed to a wireless earphone that receives streaming audio data via ad hoc wireless networks and infrastructure wireless networks, and that transitions seamlessly between wireless networks. The earphone may comprise one or more in-ear, on-ear, or over-ear speaker elements. Two exemplary in-ear earphone shapes for the wireless earphone 10 are shown in Figures 1A and 1B, respectively, although in other embodiments the earphone may take different shapes and the exemplary shapes shown in Figures 1A and 1B are not intended to be limiting. In one embodiment, the earphone transitions automatically and seamlessly, without user intervention, between communication modes. That is, the earphone may transition automatically from an ad hoc wireless network to an infrastructure wireless network, without user intervention. As used herein, an "ad hoc wireless network" is a network where two (or more) wireless-capable devices, such as the earphone and a data source, communicate directly and wirelessly, without using an access point. An "infrastructure wireless network," on the other hand, is a wireless network that uses one or more access points to allow a wireless-capable device, such as the wireless earphone, to connect to a computer network, such as a LAN or WAN (including the Internet).

[0007] Figures 1A and 1B show example configurations for a wireless earphone 10 according to various embodiments of the present invention. The examples shown in Figures 1A and 1B are not limiting and other configurations are within the scope of the present invention. As shown in Figures 1A and 1B, the earphone 10 may comprise a body 12. The body 12 may comprise an ear canal portion 14 that is inserted in the ear canal of the user of the earphone 10. In various embodiments, the body 12 also may comprise an exterior portion 15 that is not inserted into user's ear canal. The exterior portion 15 may comprise a knob 16 or some other user control (such as a dial, a pressure-activated switch, lever, etc.) for adjusting the shape of the ear canal portion 14. That is, in various embodiments, activation (e.g. rotation) of the knob 16 may cause the ear canal portion 14 to change shape so as to, for example, radially expand to fit snugly against all sides of the user's ear canal. Further details regarding such a shape-changing earbud earphone are described in application PCT/US08/88656, filed 31 December 2008, entitled "Adjustable Shape Earphone,". The earphone 10 also may comprise a transceiver circuit housed within the body 12. The transceiver circuit, described further below, may transmit and receive the wireless signals, including receive streaming audio for playing by the earphone 10. The transceiver circuit may be housed in the exterior portion 15 of the earphone 10 and/or in the ear canal portion 14.

[0008] Although the example earphones 10 shown in Figures 1A and 1B include a knob 16 for adjusting the shape of the ear canal portion 14, the present invention is not so limited, and in other embodiments, different means besides a knob 16 may be used to adjust the ear canal portion 14. In addition, in other embodiments, the earphone 10 may not comprise a shape-changing ear canal portion 14.

[0009] In various embodiments, the user may wear two discrete wireless earphones 10: one in each ear. In such embodiments, each earphone 10 may comprise a transceiver circuit. In such embodiments, the earphones 10 may be connected by a string or some other cord-type connector to keep the earphones 10 from being separated.

[0010] In other embodiments, as shown in Figure 1C, a headband 19 may connect the two (left and right) earphones 10. The headband 19 may be an over-the-head band, as shown in the example of Figure 1C, or the headband may be a behind-the-head band. In embodiments comprising a headband 19, each earphone 10 may comprise a transceiver circuit; hence, each earphone 10 may receive and transmit separately the wireless communication signals. In other embodiments comprising a headband 19, only one earphone 10 may comprise the transceiver circuit, and a wire may run along the headband 19 to the other earphone 10 to connect thereby the transceiver circuit to the acoustic transducer in the earphone that does not comprise the transceiver circuit. The embodiment shown in Figure 1C comprises on-ear earphones 10; in other embodiments, in-ear or over-ear earphones may be used.

[0011] In other embodiments, the earphone 10 may comprise a hanger bar 17 that allows the earphone 10 to clip to, or hang on, the user's ear, as shown in the illustrated embodiment of Figures 1D-1E. Figure ID is a perspective view of the earphone and Figure IE is a side view according to one embodiment. As shown in the illustrated embodiment, the earphone 10 may comprise dual speaker elements 106-A, 106-B. One of the speaker elements (the smaller one) 106-A is sized to fit into the cavum concha of the listener's ear and the other element (the larger one) 106-B is not. The listener may use the hanger bar to position the earphone on the listener's ear. In that connection, the hanger bar may comprise a horizontal section that rests upon the upper external curvature of the listener's ear behind the upper portion of the auricula (or pinna). The earphone may comprise a knurled knob that allows the user to adjust finely the distance between the horizontal section of the hanger bar and the speaker elements, thereby providing, in such embodiments, another measure of adjustability for the user. More details regarding such a dual element, adjustable earphone may be found in United States provisional patent application Serial No. 61/054,238.

[0012] Figures 2A-2D illustrate various communication modes for a wireless data communication system involving the earphone 10 according to embodiments of the present invention. As shown in Figure 2A, the system comprises a data source 20 in communication with the earphone 10 via an ad hoc wireless network 24. The earphone 10, via its transceiver circuit (described in more detail below), may communicate wirelessly with a data source 20, which may comprise a wireless network adapter 22 for transmitting the digital audio wirelessly. For example, the data source 20 may be a digital audio player (DAP), such as an mp3 player or an iPod, or any other suitable digital audio playing device, such as a laptop or personal computer, that stores and/or plays digital audio files. In other embodiments, the data source 20 may generate analog audio, and the wireless network adapter 22 may encode the analog audio into digital format for transmission to the earphone 10.

[0013] The wireless network adapter 22 may be an integral part of the data source 20, or it may be a separate device that is connected to the data source 20 to provide wireless connectivity for the data source 20. For example, the wireless network adapter 22 may comprise a wireless network interface card (WNIC) or other suitable transceiver that plugs into a USB port or other port or jack of the data source 20 (such as a TRS connector) to stream data, e.g., digital audio files, via a wireless network (e.g., the ad hoc wireless network 24 or an infrastructure wireless network). The digital audio transmitted from the data source 20 to the earphone 10 via the wireless networks may comprise compressed or uncompressed audio. Any suitable file format may be used for the audio, including mp3, lossy or lossless WMA, Vorbis, Musepack, FLAC, WAV, AIFF, AU, or any other suitable file format.

[0014] When in range, the data source 20 may communicate with the earphone 10 via the ad hoc wireless network 24 using any suitable wireless communication protocol, including Wi-Fi (e.g., IEEE 802.11a/b/g/n), WiMAX (IEEE 802.16), Bluetooth, Zigbee, UWB, or any other suitable wireless communication protocol. For purposes of the description to follow, it is assumed that the data source 20 and the earphone 10 communicate using a Wi-Fi protocol, although the invention is not so limited and other wireless communication protocols may be used in other embodiments of the invention. The data source 20 and the earphone 10 are considered in range for the ad hoc wireless network 24 when the signal strengths (e.g., the RSSI) of the signals received by the two devices are above a threshold minimum signal strength level. For example, the data source 20 and the earphone 10 are likely to be in range for an ad hoc wireless network when then are in close proximity, such as when the wearer of the earphone 10 has the data source 20 on his/her person, such as in a pocket, strapped to their waist or arm, or holding the data source in their hand.

[0015] When the earphone 10 and the data source 20 are out of range for the ad hoc wireless network 24, that is, when the received signals degrade below the threshold minimum signal strength level, both the earphone 10 and the data source 20 may transition automatically to communicate over an infrastructure wireless network (such as a wireless LAN (WLAN)) 30 that is in the range of both the earphone 10 and the data source 20, as shown in Figure 2B. The earphone 10 and the data source 20 (e.g., the wireless network adapter 22) may include firmware, as described further below, that cause the components to make the transition to a common infrastructure wireless network 30 automatically and seamlessly, e.g., without user intervention. The earphone 10 may cache the received audio in a buffer or memory for a time period before playing the audio. The cached audio may be played after the connection over the ad hoc wireless network is lost to give the earphone 10 and the data source 20 time to connect via the infrastructure wireless network.

[0016] For example, as shown in Figure 2B, the infrastructure network may comprise an access point 32 that is in the range of both the data source 20 and the earphone 10. The access point 32 may be an electronic hardware device that acts as a wireless access point for, and that is connected to, a wired and/or wireless data communication network 33, such as a LAN or WAN, for example. The data source 20 and the earphone 10 may both communicate wirelessly with the access point 32 using the appropriate network data protocol (a Wi-Fi protocol, for example). The data source 20 and the earphone 10 may both transition automatically to an agreed-upon WLAN 30 that is in the range of both devices when they cannot communicate satisfactorily via the ad hoc wireless network 24. A procedure for specifying an agreed-upon infrastructure wireless network 30 is described further below. Alternatively, the infrastructure wireless network 30 may have multiple access points 32a-b, as shown in Figure 2C. In such an embodiment, the data source 20 may communicate wirelessly with one access point 32b and the earphone 10 may communicate wirelessly with another access point 32a of the same infrastructure wireless network 30. Again, the data source 20 and the earphone 10 may transition to an agreed-upon WLAN.

[0017] If there is no suitable common infrastructure wireless network over which the earphone 10 and the data source 20 can communicate, as shown in Fig. 2D, the earphone 10 may transition to communicate with an access point 32a for an available (first) wireless network (e.g., WLAN) 30a that is in the range of the earphone 10. In this mode, the earphone 10 may connect via the wireless network 30a to a network-enabled host server 40. The host server 40 may be connected to the wireless network 30a via an electronic data communication network 42, such as the Internet. In one mode, the host server 40 may transmit streaming digital audio via the networks 33a, 42 to the earphone 10. In another mode, the host server 40 may transmit to the earphone 10 a network address, such as an Internet Protocol (IP) address, for a streaming digital audio content server 70 on the network 42. Using the received IP address, the earphone 10 may connect to the streaming digital audio content server 70 via the networks 30a, 42 to receive and process digital audio from the streaming digital audio content server 70.

[0018] The digital audio content server 70 may be, for example, an Internet radio station server. The digital audio content server 70 may stream digital audio over the network 42 (e.g., the Internet), which the earphone 10 may receive and process. In one embodiment, the streaming digital audio content server 70 may stream digital audio received by the streaming digital audio content server 70 from the data source 20. For example, where the data source 20 is a wireless-capable device, such as a portable DAP, the data source 20 may connect to the streaming digital audio content server 70 via a wireless network 30b and the network 42. Alternatively, where for example the data source 20 is non-wireless-capable device, such as a PC, the data source 20 may have a direct wired connection to the network 42. After being authenticated by the streaming digital audio content server 70, the data source 20 may stream digital audio to the streaming digital audio content server 70, which may broadcast the received digital audio over the network 42 (e.g., the Internet). In such a manner, the user of the earphone 10 may listen to audio from the data source 20 even when (i) the earphone 10 and the data source 20 are not in communication via an ad hoc wireless network 24 and (ii) the earphone 10 and the data source 20 are not in communication via a common local infrastructure wireless network 30.

[0019] Figure 3 is a block diagram of the earphone 10 according to various embodiments of the present invention. In the illustrated embodiment, the earphone 10 comprises a transceiver circuit 100 and related peripheral components. As shown in Figure 3, the peripheral components of the earphone 10 may comprise a power source 102, a microphone 104, one or more acoustic transducers 106 (e.g., speakers), and an antenna 108. The transceiver circuit 100 and some of the peripheral components (such as the power source 102 and the acoustic transducers 106) may be housed within the body 12 of the earphone 10 (see Figure 1). Other peripheral components, such as the microphone 104 and the antenna 108 may be external to the body 12 of the earphone 10. In addition, some of the peripheral components, such as the microphone 104, are optional in various embodiments.

[0020] In various embodiments, the transceiver circuit 100 may be implemented as a single integrated circuit (IC), such as a system-on-chip (SoC), which is conducive to miniaturizing the components of the earphone 10, which is advantageous if the earphone 10 is to be relatively small in size, such as an in-ear earphone (see Figures 1A-1B for example). In alternative embodiments, however, the components of the transceiver circuit 100 could be realized with two or more discrete ICs or other components, such as separate ICs for the processors, memory, and RF (e.g., Wi-Fi) module, for example.

[0021] The power source 102 may comprise, for example, a rechargeable or non-rechargeable battery (or batteries). In other embodiments, the power source 102 may comprise one or more ultracapacitors (sometimes referred to as supercapacitors) that are charged by a primary power source. In embodiments where the power source 102 comprises a rechargeable battery cell or an ultracapacitor, the battery cell or ultracapacitor, as the case may be, may be charged for use, for example, when the earphone 10 is connected to a docking station or computer. The docking station may be connected to or part of a computer device, such as a laptop computer or PC. In addition to charging the rechargeable power source 102, the docking station and/or computer may facilitate downloading of data to and/or from the earphone 10. In other embodiments, the power source 102 may comprise capacitors passively charged with RF radiation, such as described in U.S. Patent No. 7,027,311. The power source 102 may be coupled to a power source control module 103 of transceiver circuit 100 that controls and monitors the power source 102.

[0022] The acoustic transducer(s) 106 may be the speaker element(s) for conveying the sound to the user of the earphone 10. According to various embodiments, the earphone 10 may comprise one or more acoustic transducers 106. For embodiments having more than one transducer, one transducer may be larger than the other transducer, and a crossover circuit (not shown) may transmit the higher frequencies to the smaller transducer and may transmit the lower frequencies to the larger transducer. More details regarding dual element earphones are provided in U.S. Patent 5,333,206, assigned to Koss Corporation. The antenna 108 may receive and transmit the wireless signals from and to the wireless networks 24, 30. A RF (e.g., Wi-Fi) module 110 of the transceiver circuit 100 in communication with the antenna 108 may, among other things, modulate and demodulate the signals transmitted from and received by the antenna 108. The RF module 110 communicates with a baseband processor 112, which performs other functions necessary for the earphone 10 to communicate using the Wi-Fi (or other communication) protocol.

[0023] The baseband processor 112 may be in communication with a processor unit 114, which may comprise a microprocessor 116 and a digital signal processor (DSP) 118. The microprocessor 116 may control the various components of the transceiver circuit 100. The DSP 114 may, for example, perform various sound quality enhancements to the digital audio received by the baseband processor 112, including noise cancellation and sound equalization. The processor unit 114 may be in communication with a volatile memory unit 120 and a non-volatile memory unit 122. A memory management unit 124 may control the processor unit's access to the memory units 120, 122. The volatile memory 122 may comprise, for example, a random access memory (RAM) circuit. The non-volatile memory unit 122 may comprise a read only memory (ROM) and/or flash memory circuits. The memory units 120, 122 may store firmware that is executed by the processor unit 114. Execution of the firmware by the processor unit 114 may provide various functionality for the earphone 10, such as the automatic transition between wireless networks as described herein. The memory units 120, 122 may also cache received digital audio.

[0024] A digital-to-analog converter (DAC) 125 may convert the digital audio from the processor unit 114 to analog form for coupling to the acoustic transducer(s) 106. An I^2S interface 126 or other suitable serial or parallel bus interface may provide the interface between the processor unit 114 and the DAC 125. An analog-to-digital converter (ADC) 128, which also communicates with the I^2S interface 126, may convert analog audio signals picked up by the microphone 104 for processing by the processor unit 114.

[0025] The transceiver circuit 100 also may comprise a USB or other suitable interface 130 that allows the earphone 10 to be connected to an external device via a USB cable or other suitable link. As shown in Figure 4A, the external device may be a docking station 200 connected to a computer device 202. Also, in various embodiments, the earphone 10 could be connected directly

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