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(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING INFORMATION TO AN OCCUPANT OF A VEHICLE**

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(58) **Field of Search** 701/1, 200, 210, 701/211; 340/990, 995, 825.49, 825.5; 345/717, 718, 204, 5

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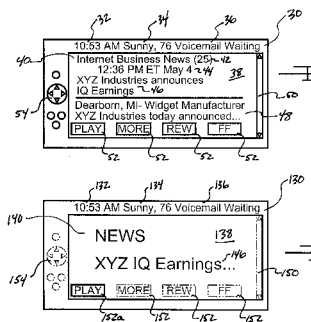
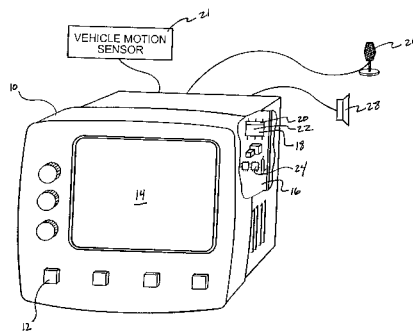
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A vehicle computer system and method of providing information to an occupant of a vehicle that minimizes complete feature lock out are provided. The operating system of the computer is adapted to selectively display full and limited functionality versions of a particular screen, preferably based on whether the vehicle is in motion. A text-to-speech engine can automatically generate audio based on a particular screen once motion is detected. The availability of a limited functionality version of the screen and audio, either independently or together, allow a vehicle occupant to retrieve information from the computer system without distraction.

22 Claims, 2 Drawing Sheets



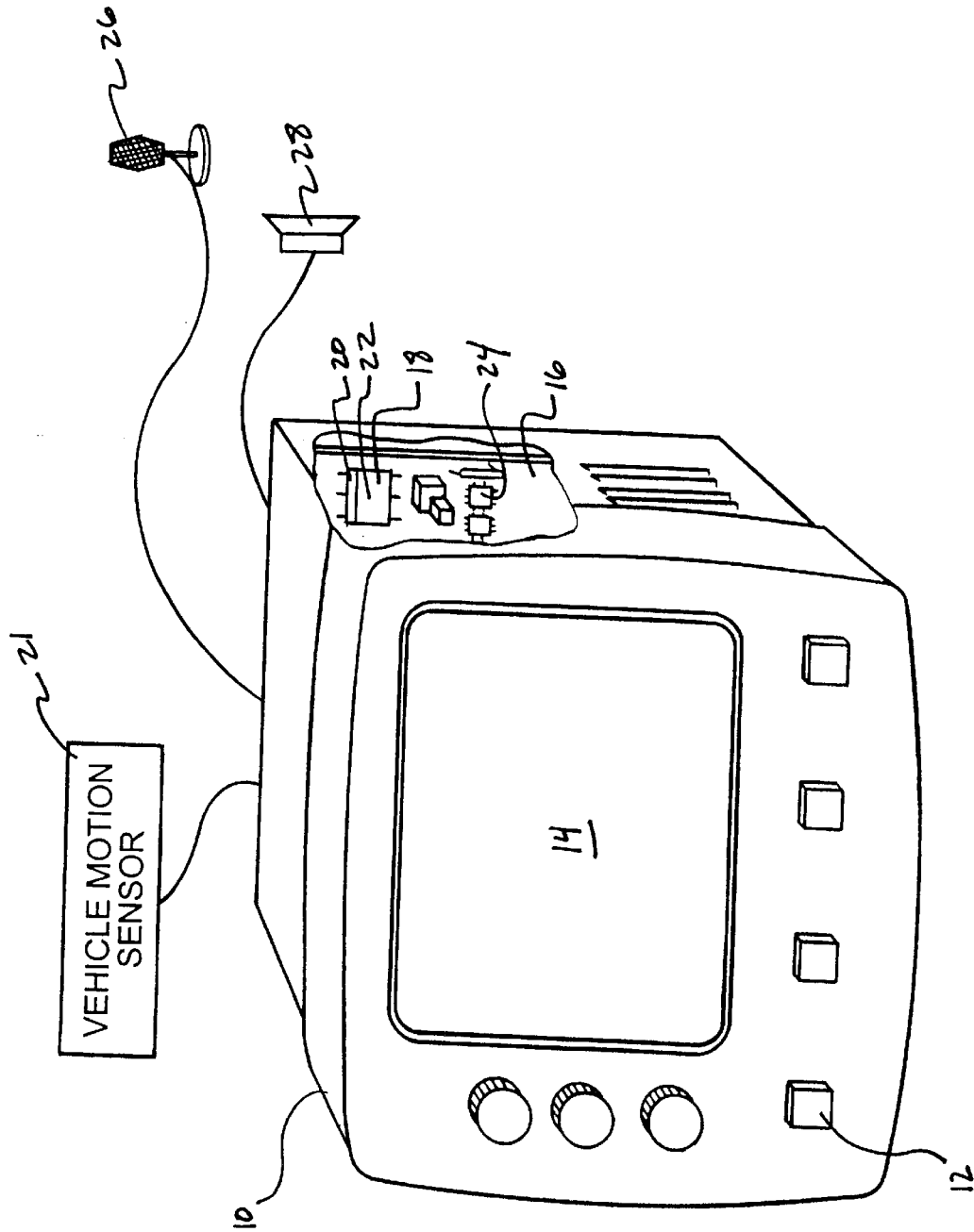


FIG. 1

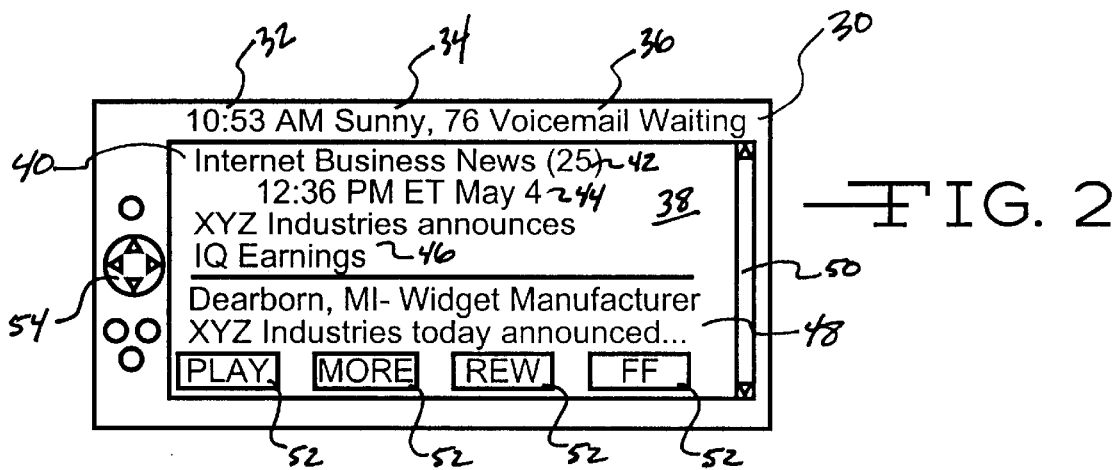


FIG. 2

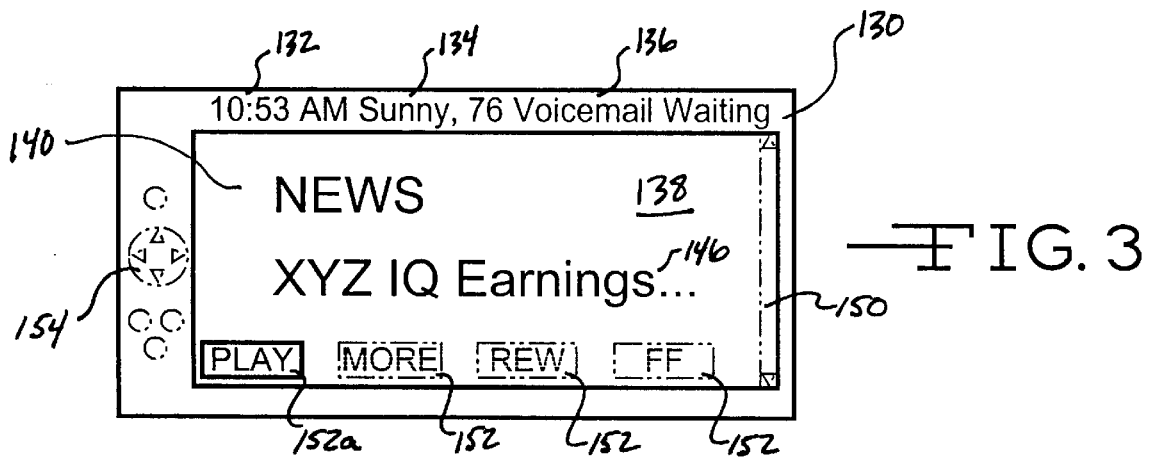


FIG. 3

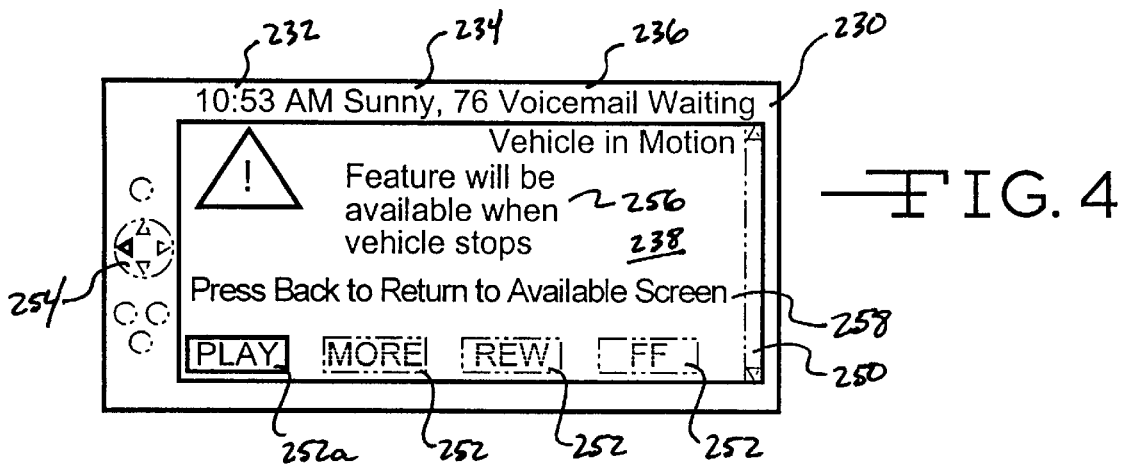


FIG. 4

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING INFORMATION TO AN OCCUPANT OF A VEHICLE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to methods and apparatuses for providing various types of information to one or more occupants of a motor vehicle.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Vehicle computer systems frequently contain an output for displaying information to an occupant of the vehicle. Also, these systems typically allow for interaction, via an input, with the occupant that affects the information displayed on the output. For example, by pressing one or more input keys, an occupant may navigate through a menu structure in a navigation program in order to display a desired map on an output screen.

To prevent a driver of a vehicle from interacting with these computer systems while the vehicle is in motion, a "lock out" feature can be employed. Typically, these features disable the entire computer system, thereby preventing all interaction by the driver while the vehicle is in motion. This complete disabling of the system is undesirable, however, because it bars access to all information, even that which requires only a minimal level of interaction by the driver.

Initial attempts at providing a limited level of access to information while driving have been made. For example, U.S. Pat. No. 5,949,345 to Beckert, et al., for DISPLAYING COMPUTER INFORMATION TO A DRIVER OF A VEHICLE describes a vehicle computer system that allows applications to distinguish between driving and non-driving related information, and subsequently allows the display of only driving related information while the vehicle is in motion. Unfortunately, the system completely locks out all functions not related to driving, such as displaying entertainment related media and information.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a vehicle computer system that communicates information of various types to an occupant of the vehicle even while the vehicle is in motion. The system allows a computer application to designate alternate versions of screens, or views of particular information items, for displaying on an output. The system selectively displays one of the versions during vehicle movement and the other version while the vehicle is at rest. For a particular screen, one version is preferably a full functionality version, which contains all information (e.g., full text of an Internet news story) or available actions (e.g., a fully active menu) associated with the screen, while a second version is preferably a limited functionality version containing only a summary of the information (e.g., a portion of the title of an Internet news story) or a limited number of available actions (e.g., a menu with disabled options). The limited functionality version of the screen allows for quick retrieval of visual information related to the information contained in the full functionality version of the screen without distracting the driver.

The vehicle computer system may also include a text to speech engine adapted to generate audio related to information displayed on the output of the device. A preferred embodiment of the invention displays a limited functionality version of a particular screen and automatically begins

generating audio through the text to speech engine based on the text of the full functionality version of the screen while the vehicle is in motion.

The present invention also provides a method of providing information to an occupant of a vehicle. In a preferred embodiment, the method comprises providing a vehicle computer system in accordance with the present invention, receiving input from an occupant, determining whether the vehicle is in motion, displaying an appropriate screen on the output, and automatically generating audio through the text to speech engine based on the current screen if the vehicle is in motion.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a vehicle computer system incorporating a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 2 is a schematic view of a full functionality version of an Internet news screen in accordance with the present invention.

FIG. 3 is a schematic of a limited functionality version of an Internet news screen in accordance with the present invention.

FIG. 4 is a schematic of a common screen in accordance with the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The following description of preferred embodiments of the invention provides examples of the present invention. The embodiments discussed herein are merely exemplary in nature, and are not intended to limit the scope of the invention in any manner. Rather, the description of these preferred embodiments serves to enable a person of ordinary skill in the relevant art to make and use the present invention.

FIG. 1 illustrates a vehicle computer system 10 that incorporates a preferred embodiment of the present invention. The vehicle computer system 10 can be any device capable of receiving input from an occupant of the vehicle and displaying or otherwise outputting information. Examples of vehicle computer systems suitable for use with the present invention include radios, integrated mobile phones, and integrated personal computers. The present invention is particularly well-suited for incorporation into navigational computers that allow an occupant of the vehicle to input an address or location to be mapped and displayed by the computer. Also, the present invention is particularly well-suited for incorporation into systems that interact with external computer networks, such as the Internet, to retrieve information of interest to an occupant of the vehicle, such as news stories and/or electronic mail. Other examples of vehicle computer systems include televisions, video display terminals, and entertainment systems.

The vehicle computer system 10 includes input means that allow an occupant of the vehicle to input information into the system 10. As illustrated in the figure, typical systems include various buttons 12 that allow an occupant of the vehicle to input information, such as a destination address or location, or to select a particular function of the system 10. Other suitable forms of input means include dials, switches, keyboards, and joysticks.

The system 10 also includes output means adapted to display information to an occupant of the vehicle. A suitable example of output means for use in the present invention is

a display screen **14**. The display screen **14** is preferably an LCD screen, but may comprise any suitable type of display that is capable of projecting information to one or more occupants of the vehicle.

Preferably, the input and output means of the system **10** comprise structurally distinct devices, i.e., the system **10** preferably includes an input device and a separate output device. Alternatively, the input and output means may be combined into a single device or component. For example, the system may include a touch sensitive display screen that allows the output portion of the device to also serve as an input device. Of course, a combination of these alternatives can also be employed.

The vehicle computer system **10** includes electronics **16** appropriate for the type of system. For example, a navigational computer typically includes hardware suitable for reading stored data, such as CD ROMS, as well as electronics for resolving the position of the vehicle relative to the earth, such as GPS receivers, etc. The electronics may also include modems, network interfaces, or other communicative means that allow the system **10** to interact with and retrieve information from external networks, such as the Internet.

The electronics **16** include a computer processor **18** that is capable of executing various types of software programs. Essentially any suitable computer processor can be incorporated into the system **10** of the present invention. In any given embodiment, the processor chosen will depend on the computing needs, e.g., power and speed, of the overall system. Also, the electronics **16** preferably include one or more application programs **20**. The application programs **20** preferably comprise software built into the electronics **16** of the system **10**. Alternatively, the application programs **20** may be supplied to the system **10** via some type of temporary or removable memory, such as floppy disks, CD ROMs, smart memory cards, PCMCIA cards, or hard drives.

Electronics **16** also preferably include an operating system **22** adapted to interact with the application programs **20**. The interaction between the operating system **22** and application programs **20** includes common computer functions between an operating system and a software application, such as launching application programs, controlling the visual interface of the application program, and exiting the application program.

Preferably, electronics **16** also include a text to speech engine **24**. The text to speech engine **24** preferably comprises a computer program capable of translating textual information to audio information. Preferably, the text to speech engine **24** is adapted to translate textual information into a language, such as English, understandable to an occupant of the vehicle. Also preferable, the text to speech engine **24** is adapted to receive audio input from an occupant of the vehicle and to translate such input into data that can be acted upon by an application program **20** or the operating system **22**.

To facilitate interaction between an occupant of the vehicle and the text to speech engine **24**, the vehicle computer system **10** preferably includes a microphone **26** and one or more speakers **28**. The microphone **26** is preferably positioned within the vehicle cockpit such that it is able to receive verbal commands from an occupant situated within the cockpit. Likewise, the speakers **28** are preferably positioned within the vehicle cockpit such that they are able to convey audio information to an occupant situated within the cockpit.

The application programs **20** preferably provide alternate versions of various screens or collections of visual infor-

mation. The alternate versions of the screens provide two visually distinct representations of information associated with a particular file.

The system **10** also preferably includes one or more sensors **21** capable of determining whether the vehicle is in motion. The sensors **21** are preferably associated with the axles, wheels, speedometer, parking brake or any other component of the vehicle that indicates vehicle motion or lack thereof.

In a preferred embodiment, one application program **20** comprises an Internet news retrieval program. For one or more news articles, the program provides two alternate versions of a screen associated with an article. FIG. **2** illustrates the first version, or full functionality version **30**, of the screen. As shown in the figure, the full functionality version **30** displays complete information for common features of the system, such as the clock **32**, weather summary **34**, and voice mail indicator **36**. Also, in the content window **38**, the full functionality version **30** displays the complete contents of the news article. Preferably, the full functionality version **30** displays at least the following information: a news category **40**, total number of articles in the category **42**, dateline of the story **44**, full title of the story **46**, full text of the story **48**, active scroll bar **50** for navigating through the story, active touch buttons **52** for triggering system functions, and an active directional navigator **54**.

The full functionality version **30** preferably allows access to all features and functions of the system **10**, operating system **22**, and application programs **20**. Thus, in the example shown in the figure, the occupant of the vehicle can read the entire text of the news story associated with the screen by scrolling through the text **48**, when the operating system **20** displays the full functionality version **30**.

FIG. **3** illustrates an alternate version, a limited functionality version **130**, of the screen illustrated in FIG. **2**. Like reference numbers in FIG. **3** refer to similar features illustrated in FIG. **2**.

As shown in the figure, the limited functionality version **130** displays the system functions, such as the clock **132**, the weather summary **134**, and the voice mail indicator **136**. These features are characterized by small pieces of visual information, such as digits, words or icons, that allow for quick retrieval of information. As such, these types of features are preferably included in both the full **30** and limited **130** functionality versions of the screen.

The content window **138** of the limited functionality version **130** preferably contains abbreviated or truncated versions of some of the information presented in the full functionality version. For example, the figure illustrates a limited functionality version **130** that only includes a brief category name **140** and a brief title **146**. Preferably, these items are displayed in a larger font, allowing for quick retrieval of the information displayed on the screen. As shown in the figure, the interactive features of the screen are preferable inactivated, such as the scroll bar **150**, touch button **152**, and directional navigator **154**. One or more touch button **152a** may remain active to allow the triggering of a feature that requires minimal interaction with the system, such as the text-to-speech engine.

The system also preferably includes a common screen for displaying on the output when a limited functionality version of the screen is not available. The common screen is preferably independent of the application programs, and it is particularly preferred that the operating system provide the common screen. FIG. **4** illustrates a suitable common screen **230**. Again, like reference numbers in FIG. **4** refer to similar

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