



(19) **United States**

(12) **Patent Application Publication**
Shar et al.

(10) **Pub. No.: US 2008/0280663 A1**

(43) **Pub. Date: Nov. 13, 2008**

(54) **ON-LINE GAMING TOURNAMENT**

(52) **U.S. Cl. 463/10; 463/1**

(76) Inventors: **Gary Shar**, Las Vegas, NV (US);
John Patrick Solmes, Las Vegas,
NV (US); **Terry Debono**, Las
Vegas, NV (US)

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method and information processing system for allowing a plurality of users to compete against one another via a network in at least one game. The method includes providing at least one virtual environment comprising at least one game tournament for a game of skill and chance. The game tournament includes a plurality of hierarchical rounds that include at least a first round and a second round. A registration service is provided to a plurality of users for registering to participate in the game tournament. Each user in the plurality of users is assigned an entry into the first round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants. The registration service is configured for allowing at least one user in the plurality of users to register an unlimited number times wherein the one user is assigned a separate entry into the first round for each registration by the one user.

Correspondence Address:

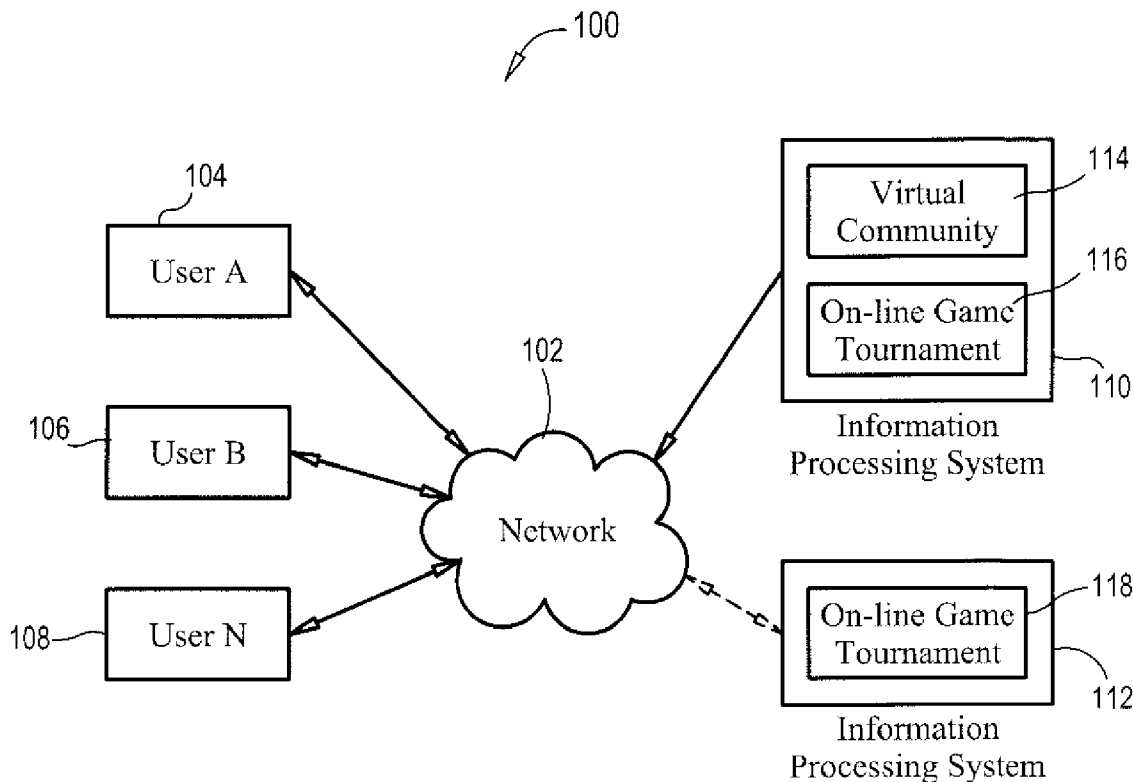
PAUL D. BIANCO
Fleit Gibbons Gutman Bongini & Bianco PL
21355 EAST DIXIE HIGHWAY, SUITE 115
MIAMI, FL 33180 (US)

(21) Appl. No.: **11/746,195**

(22) Filed: **May 9, 2007**

Publication Classification

(51) **Int. Cl.**
A63F 9/24 (2006.01)



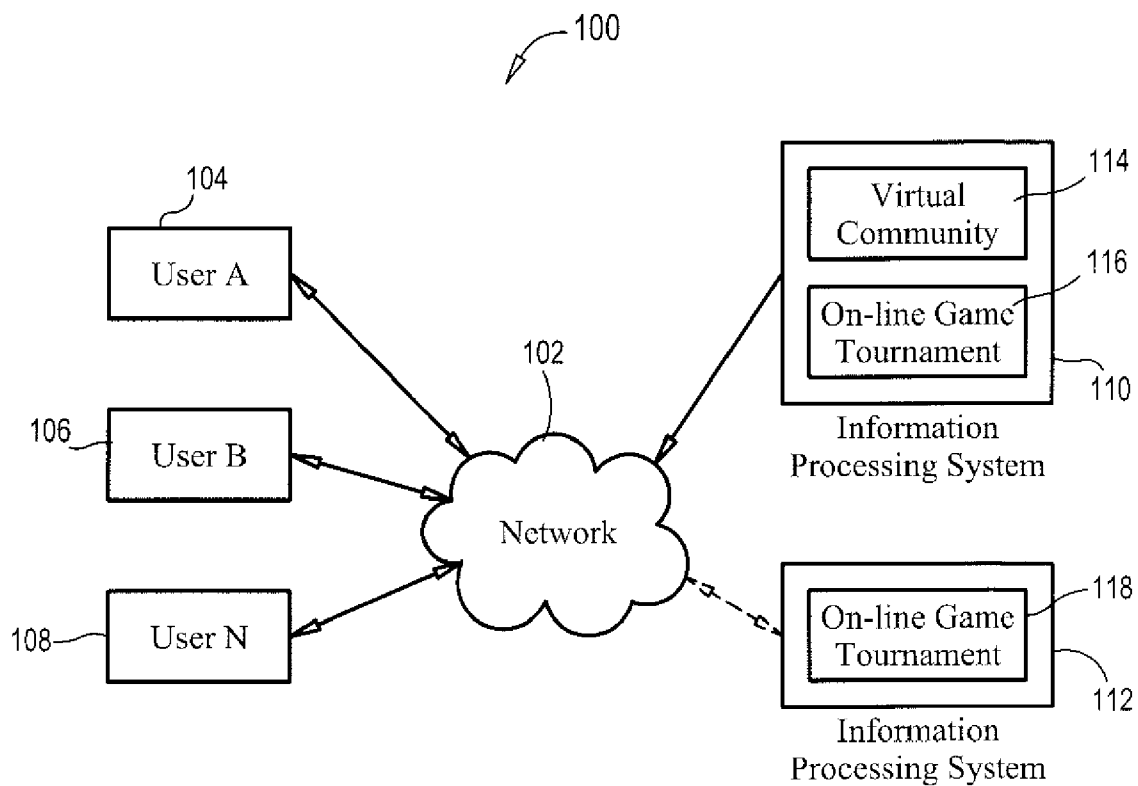


FIG. 1

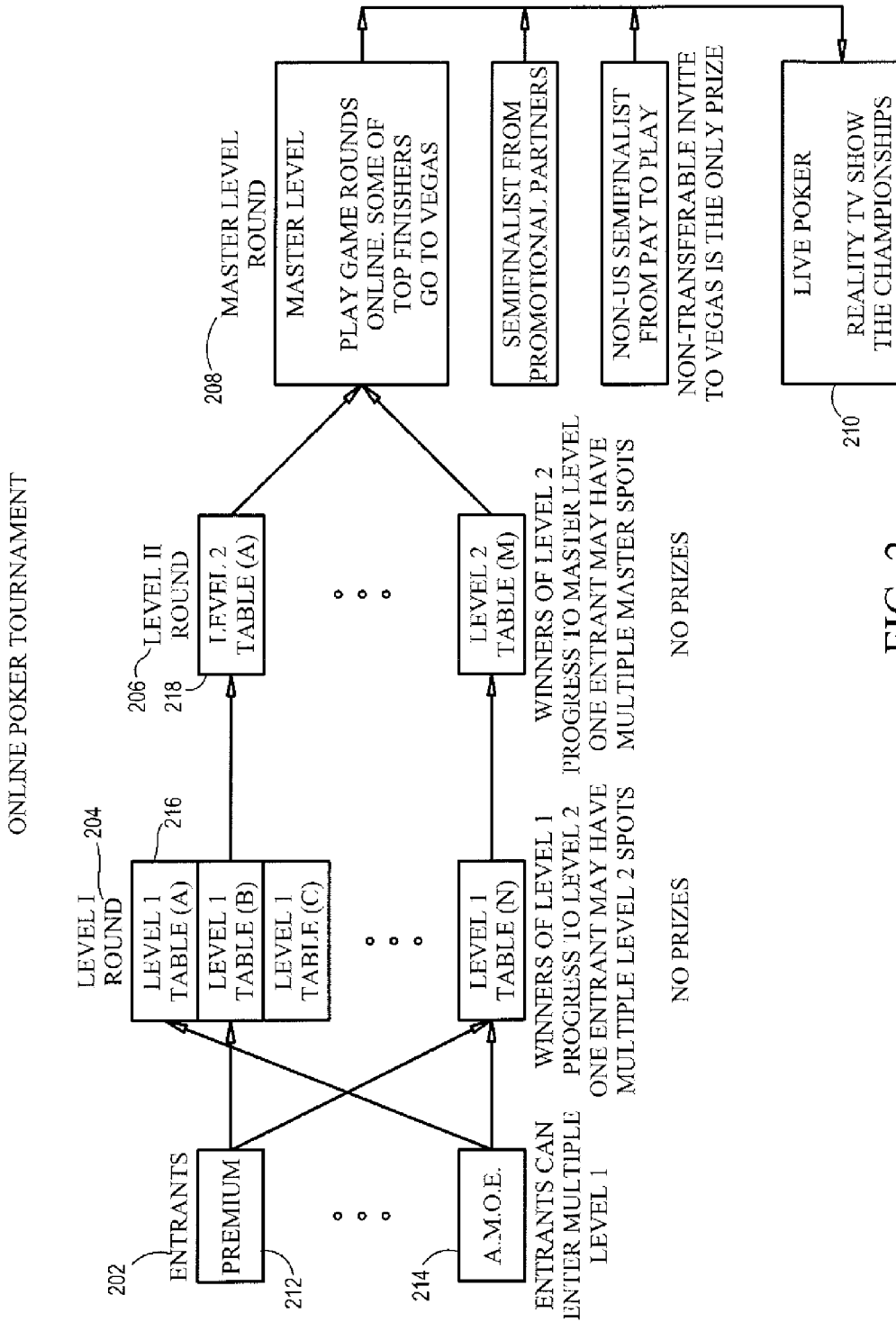


FIG. 2

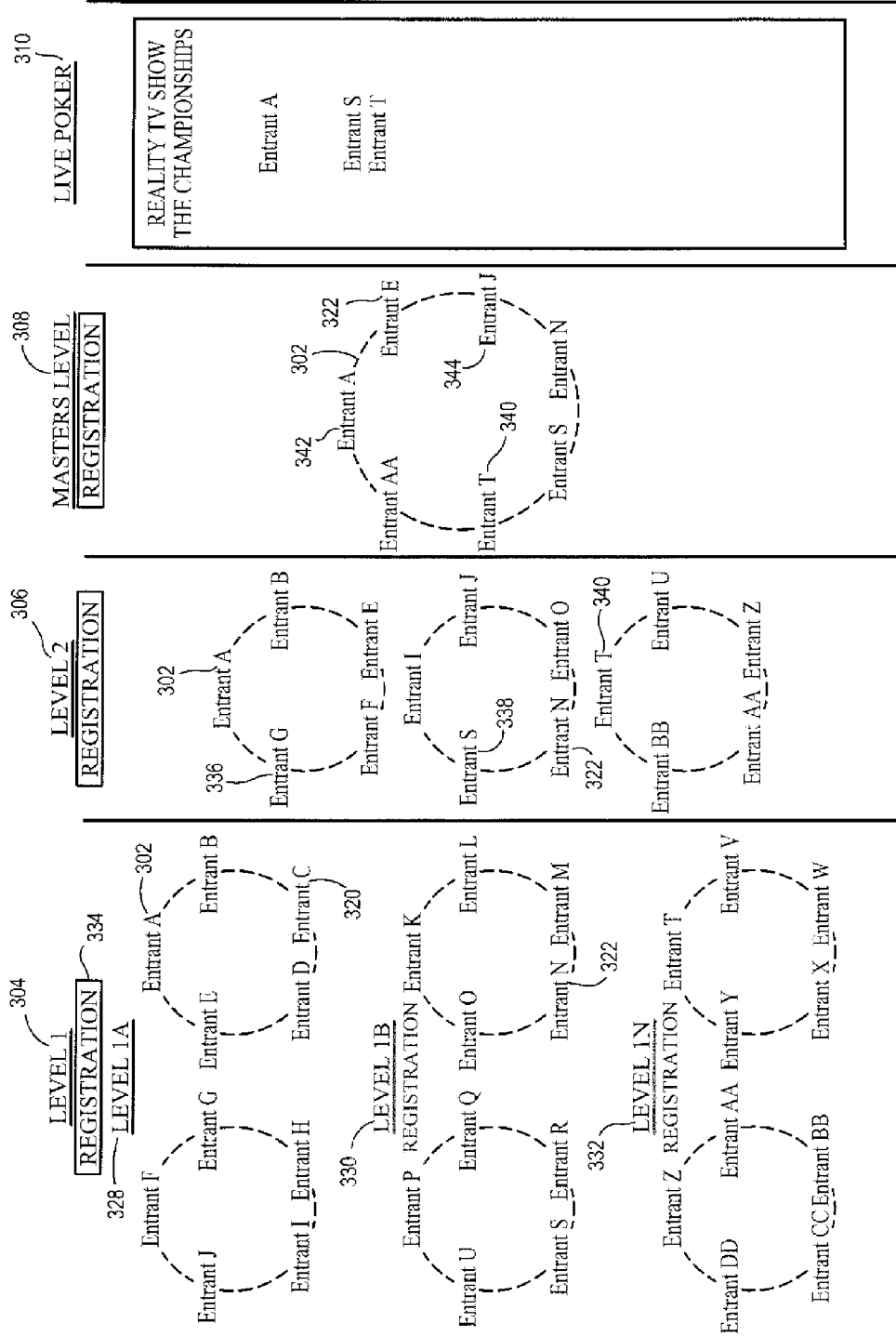


FIG. 3

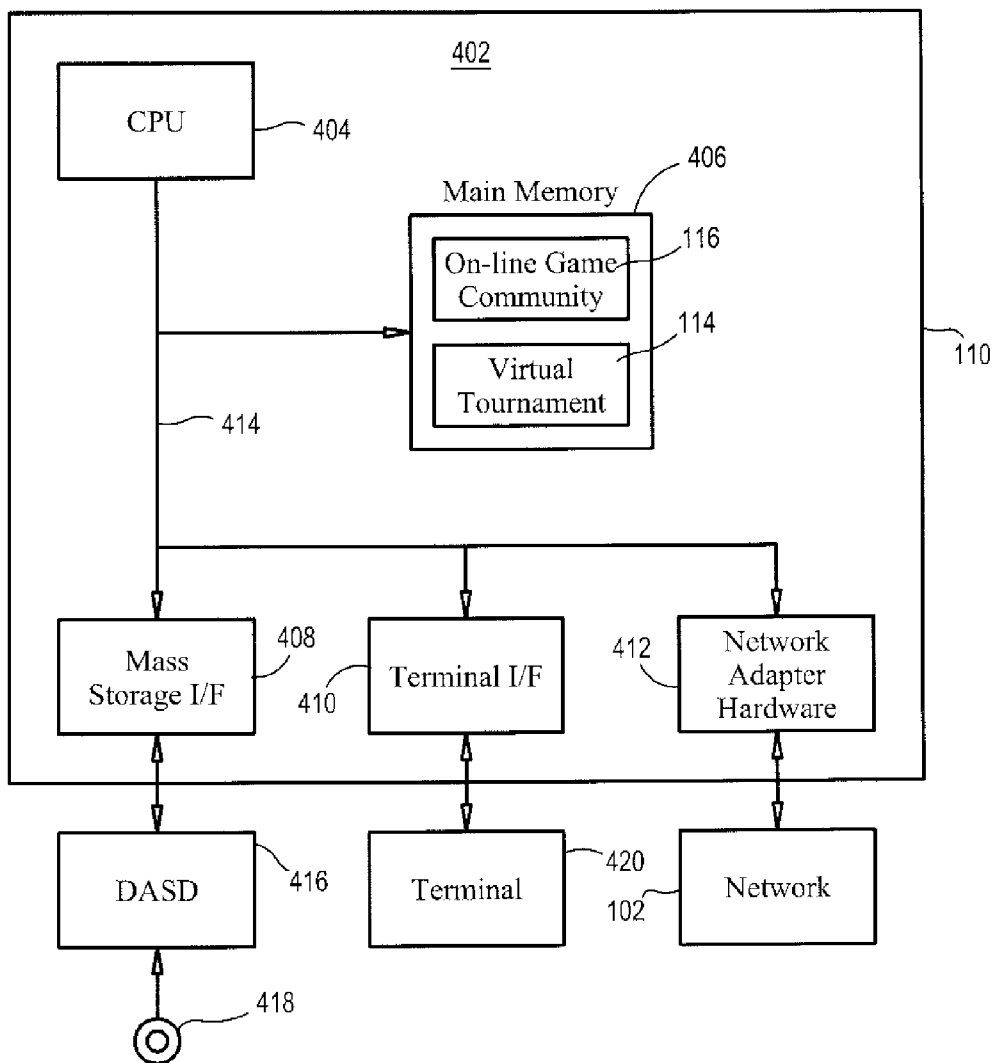


FIG. 4

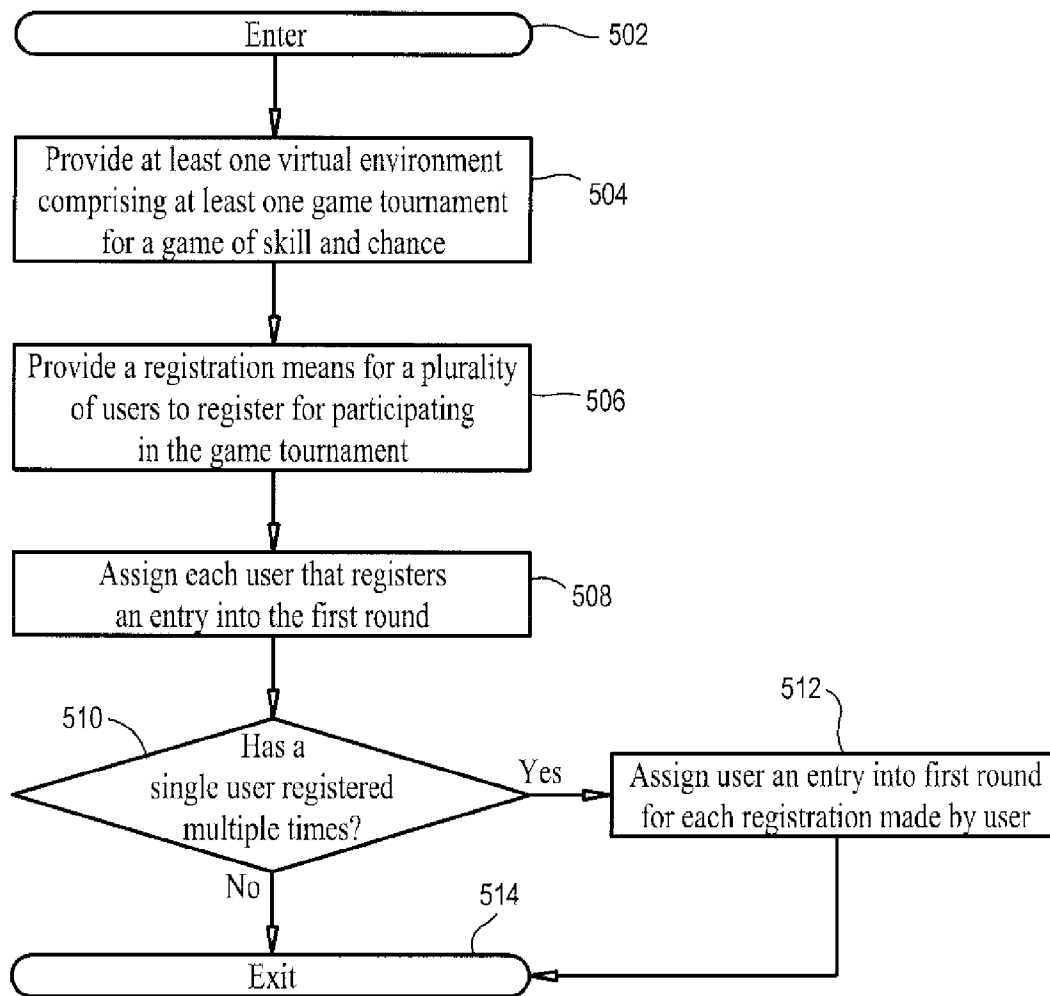


FIG. 5

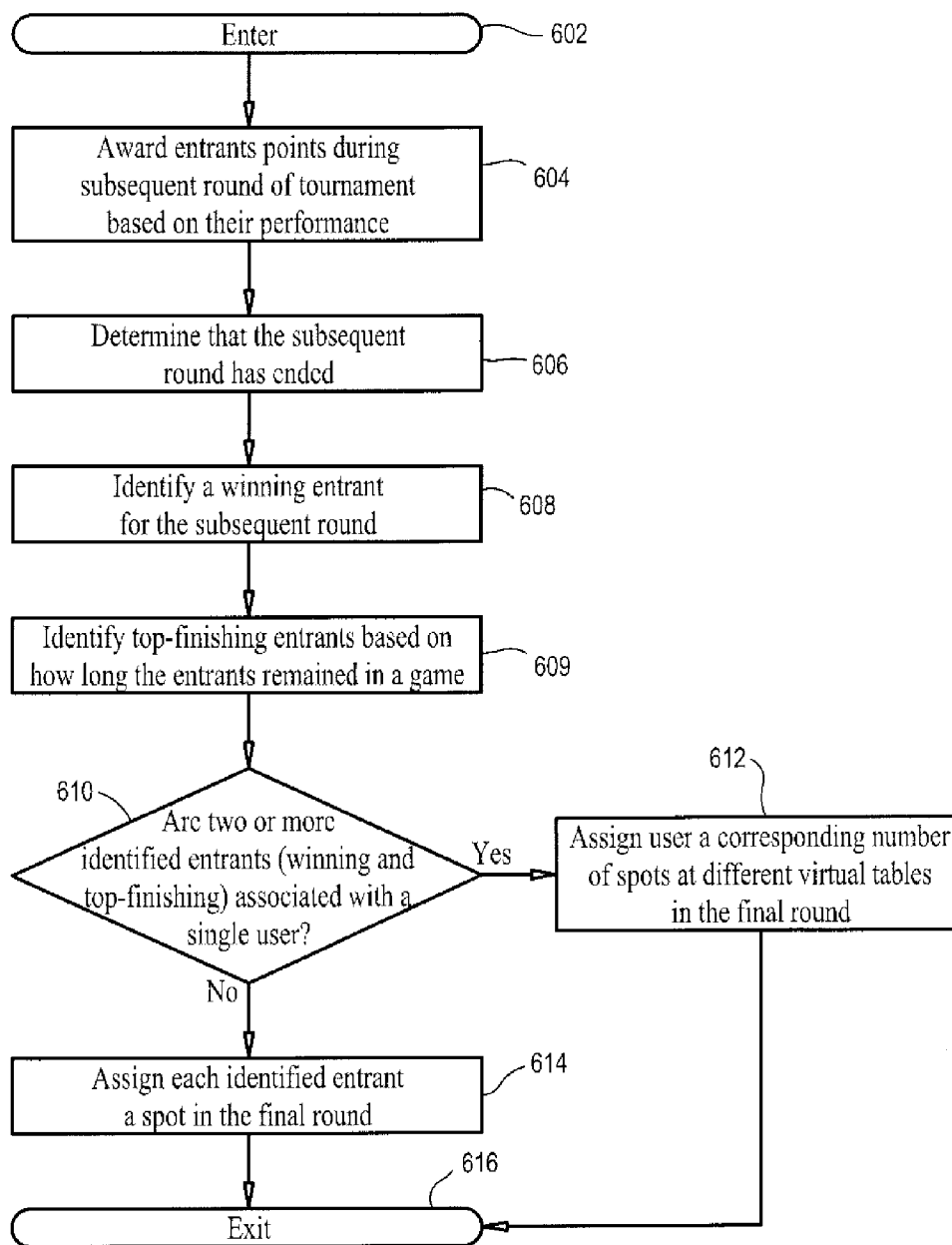


FIG. 6

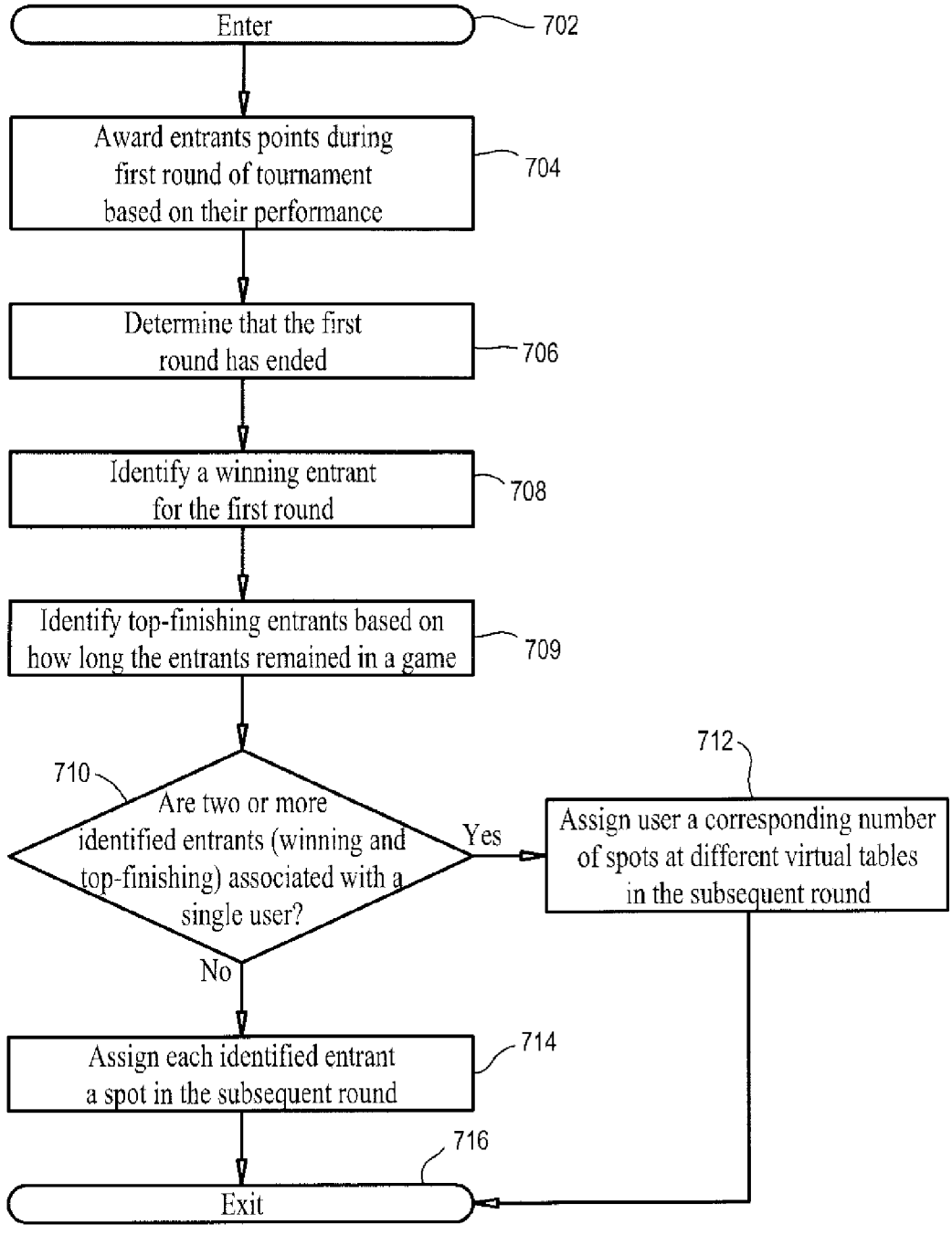


FIG. 7

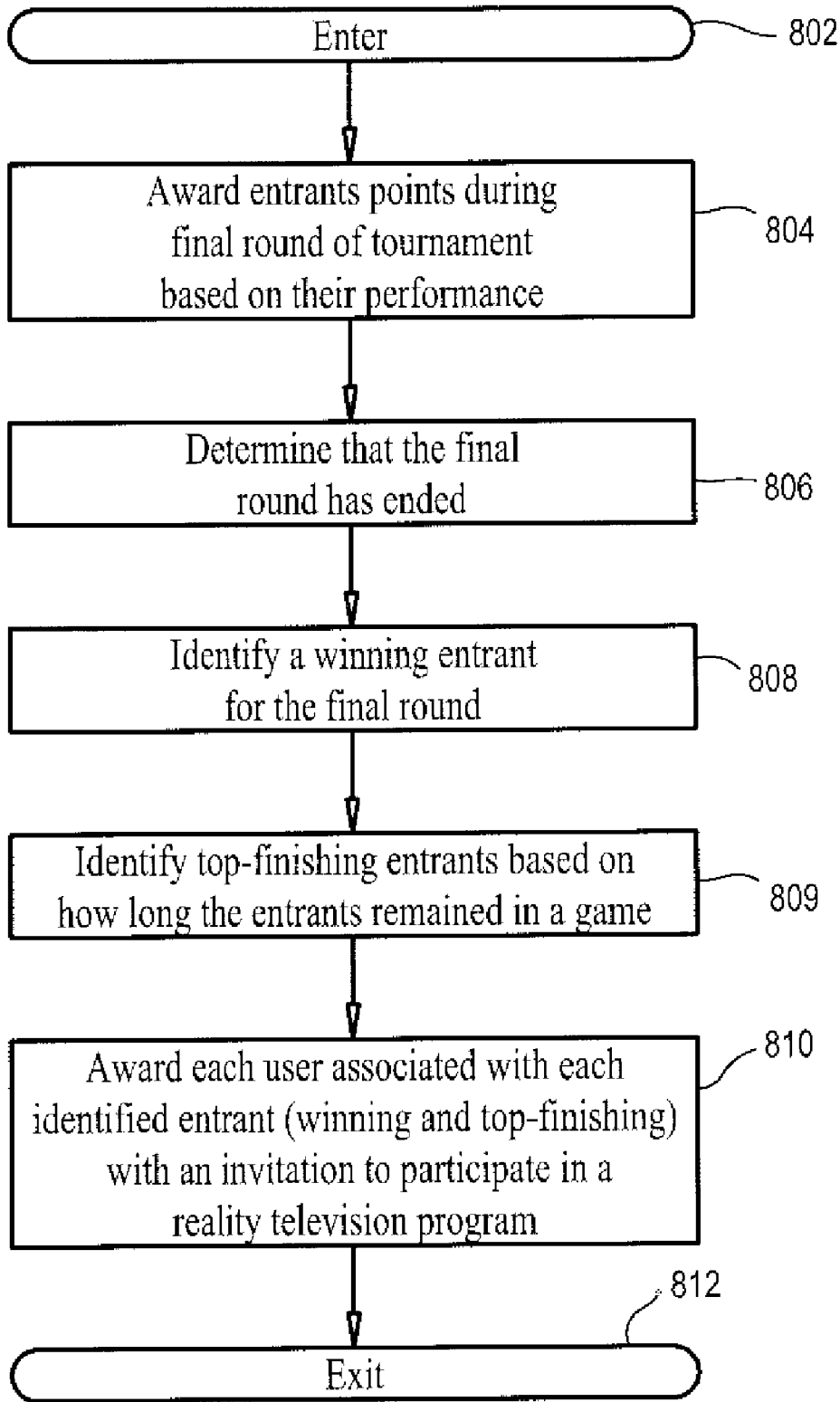


FIG. 8

ON-LINE GAMING TOURNAMENT

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention generally relates to the field of on-line gaming tournaments, and more particularly relates to providing a multi-tiered on-line gaming tournament.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] On-line gaming has become very popular over the recent years. One example of on-line gaming is on-line poker, which has developed into one of the most widely played on-line games. Although on-line poker provides entertainment to many people, it also provides many legal concerns. For example, users from different states and countries can access an on-line poker site. However, each state (or country) can have different laws regarding gambling, thereby making it difficult to comply to each state's laws.

[0003] Another problem with current on-line gaming sites is they are limited to only a virtual environment. Stated differently, on-line poker tournaments, for example, are held and when a winner is declared the tournament is over. Current on-line gaming sites do not offer a reality experience such as a winning an invitation to participate on a reality television program.

[0004] Therefore a need exists to overcome the problems with the prior art as discussed above.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0005] Briefly, in accordance with the present invention, disclosed is a method and information processing system for allowing a plurality of users to compete against one another via a network in at least one game. The method includes providing at least one virtual environment comprising at least one game tournament for a game of skill and chance. The game tournament includes a plurality of hierarchical rounds that include at least a first round and a second round. A registration service is provided to a plurality of users for registering to participate in the game tournament. Each user in the plurality of users is assigned an entry into the first round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants. The registration service is configured for allowing at least one user in the plurality of users to register an unlimited number times wherein the one user is assigned a separate entry into the first round for each registration by the one user.

[0006] In another embodiment, another method for allowing a plurality of users to compete against one another via a network in at least one game of skill and chance is disclosed. The method includes providing at least one virtual environment comprising at least one game tournament for a game of skill and chance. The game tournament includes a plurality of hierarchical rounds that include at least a first round, at least one subsequent round, and a final round. A registration service is provided to a plurality of users for registering to participate in the game tournament. Each user in the plurality of users is assigned an entry into the first round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants. The registration service is configured for allowing at least one user in the plurality of users to register multiple times so that the one user is assigned a separate entry into the first round for each registration by the one user.

[0007] A subset of the plurality of Entrants is advanced from the first round to the subsequent round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants for the subsequent round. The subset

of the plurality of Entrants includes a winning Entrant that has accumulated all possible points for the first and at least one Entrant that remained in the first round longer than at least one other Entrant. A subset of the plurality of Entrants for the subsequent round is advanced to the final round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants for the final round. The subset of the plurality of Entrants includes a winning Entrant that has accumulated all possible points for the subsequent and at least one Entrant that remained in the subsequent round longer than at least one other Entrant. A subset of the plurality of Entrants for the final round is awarded a non-monetary prize of participating in a reality television shown. The subset of the plurality of Entrants includes a winning Entrant that has accumulated all possible points for the final round and at least one Entrant that remained in the final round longer than at least one other Entrant.

[0008] In another embodiment, an information processing system adapted to allow a plurality of users to compete against one another via a network in at least one game is disclosed. The information processing system includes a memory and a processor communicatively coupled to the memory. The information processing system also includes at least one virtual environment comprising at least one game tournament for a game of skill and chance. The game tournament includes a plurality of hierarchical rounds that include at least a first round and a second round. A registration service that is provided to a plurality of users for registering to participate in the game tournament. Each user in the plurality of users is assigned an entry into the first round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants. The registration service is configured for allowing at least one user in the plurality of users to register an unlimited number of times so that the one user is assigned a separate entry into the first round for each registration by the one user.

[0009] One of the advantages of the present invention is that an on-line gaming tournament is provided that allows multiple users to participate in a reality television program. The on-line gaming tournament allows a single user to have multiple entries into a first level round. Top-finishing Entrants in the first level round are able to advance to a subsequent round.

[0010] Multiple Entrants from the same game and/or multiple games (if the level comprises multiple tournaments) within the first level round may advance to the subsequent round. Multiple Entrants from the subsequent level are then advanced to a Masters round. As with the first level round, multiple Entrants from the same game and/or multiple games (if the level comprises multiple tournaments) within the subsequent round may advance to the Masters round. Users associated with top-finishing Entrants are awarded substantially the same non-monetary such as an invitation to participate in a reality television program.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] The accompanying figures where like reference numerals refer to identical or functionally similar elements throughout the separate views, and which together with the detailed description below are incorporated in and form part of the specification, serve to further illustrate various embodiments and to explain various principles and advantages all in accordance with the present invention.

[0012] FIG. 1 is block diagram illustrating an exemplary system according to an embodiment of the present invention;

[0013] FIG. 2 is a functional block diagram illustrating a multi-tiered on-line gaming tournament according to an embodiment of the present invention;

[0014] FIG. 3 is a block diagram illustrating multiple Entrants advancing to subsequent rounds in the on-line gaming tournament according to an embodiment of the present invention;

[0015] FIG. 4 is a block diagram illustrating a information processing system according to an embodiment of the present invention;

[0016] FIG. 5 is an operational flow diagram illustrating a process of providing an on-line gaming tournament according to an embodiment of the present invention;

[0017] FIG. 6 is an operational flow diagram illustrating a process of advancing one or more Entrants from a first level round of the on-line gaming tournament to a subsequent round according to an embodiment of the present invention;

[0018] FIG. 7 is an operational flow diagram illustrating a process of advancing one or more Entrants from a subsequent round in an on-line gaming tournament to a Masters round in the on-line gaming tournament according to an embodiment of the present invention; and

[0019] FIG. 8 is an operational flow diagram illustrating a process of awarding a user an invitation to participate in a reality television program based according to an embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0020] As required, detailed embodiments of the present invention are disclosed herein; however, it is to be understood that the disclosed embodiments are merely examples of the invention, which can be embodied in various forms. Therefore, specific structural and functional details disclosed herein are not to be interpreted as limiting, but merely as a basis for the claims and as a representative basis for teaching one skilled in the art to variously employ the present invention in virtually any appropriately detailed structure. Further, the terms and phrases used herein are not intended to be limiting; but rather, to provide an understandable description of the invention.

[0021] The terms “a” or “an”, as used herein, are defined as one or more than one. The term plurality, as used herein, is defined as two or more than two. The term another, as used herein, is defined as at least a second or more. The terms including and/or having, as used herein, are defined as comprising (i.e., open language). The term coupled, as used herein, is defined as connected, although not necessarily directly, and not necessarily mechanically.

[0022] Exemplary Network

[0023] According to an embodiment of the present invention, as shown in FIG. 1, an exemplary system 100 for providing on-line gaming servers is shown. FIG. 1 shows a network 102 that connects user systems 104, 106, 108 to various servers 110, 112. The network 102 can comprise various networking technologies such as wired, wireless, IrDA, and the like. The user systems 104, 106, 108 can include personal computers, cellular phones, smart phones, personal digital assistants, gaming systems, and the like.

[0024] In one embodiment, one or more of the server systems 110, 112 provide a virtual community 114 for members with a shared interest in gaming. The virtual community 114 can comprise regular members and premium members. Premium members pay a time-based subscription fee such as a monthly fee to receive additional benefits. The additional

benefits can include complimentary merchandise, coupons, exclusive chat rooms, and other exclusive content providing real value in the form of products and services such as clothing, video/music downloads, travel discounts, and the like for the membership fee.

[0025] The virtual community 114 provides an on-line meeting place for members such as user A 104, user B 106, and user N 108 to interact and compete with other members in various games of skill and chance. For example, members can play against one another in different types games such as poker games, blackjack, roulette, chess, and the like. However, games such as blackjack and roulette are not configured to have players compete directly against one another; instead they compete against the house. Therefore, members can have profiles associated with them that track a member's progress for each type of game. In this embodiment, members can indirectly compete against one another as they play individual based games. For example, user A 104 can subscribe to a roulette group. As user A 104 plays roulette games, user A's progress is recorded in his/her profile.

[0026] Information such as games won, games lost, total points, total virtual money, and the like can be recorded. A leader board for the roulette group can be setup to track which of the roulette group members are at the top of various categories. As can be seen, this is one example of how members can compete against one another in individual-based games. It should be noted that the present invention is not limited to gaming (chance type) games any type of game is applicable to the present invention, such as games of skill like Chess.

[0027] Other aspects of the virtual community 114 include hosting various tournaments for one or more games of skill or chance utilizing promotions, contests, sweepstakes, and the like. For example, one or more of the servers 110, 112 can host on-line game tournaments 116, 118 such as a poker tournament. In one embodiment, an on-line poker tournament 116 is hosted that provides a one or more winning players and a plurality of top finishing players to appear as finalists on a reality television show such as a televised poker game or tournament. Therefore, a game tournament can comprise two stages, an on-line stage and a televised stage.

[0028] The On-line Stage, in one embodiment, is based on an on-line poker tournament conducted through one or more online poker sites, which can be hosted by one or more of the servers 110, 112. The online poker tournaments, in one embodiment, are structured in a plurality of levels or rounds. One non-limiting example is illustrated in FIG. 2. FIG. 2 shows one implementation of the On-line Stage where three levels are used. Entrants 202 enter in Level 1 204 where a given number of top-finishing Entrants in the Level 1 round advance to a Level 2 round 206. Each of the Level 1 round 204 and Level 2 round 206 includes a plurality of corresponding games or “tables”. For example, each game in a Level 1 round 204 and Level 2 round 206 can be limited to a number of Entrants.

[0029] Therefore, if there are 1000 Entrants for the Level 1 round 204, a plurality of games or virtual tables are created. FIG. 2 shows the Level 1 and Level 2 rounds 204, 206 including a plurality of virtual tables such as Level 1 Table (A) 216 and Level 2 Table (A) 218, respectively. In one embodiment, each level 204, 206 comprises multiple tournaments. In this embodiment, a single user can be associated with a single Entrant registered in the multiple tournaments. However, in another embodiment, a plurality of Entrants from each virtual table in a tournament can be associated with a single user.

Also, Entrants may be required to play more than one game per round **204**, **206**, **208** before the top-finishers are determined for advancement to subsequent rounds.

[0030] A given number of top-finishing Entrants in the Level **2** round advance to a Masters round **208**, where one or more top finishing players receive an invitation to the Televised Stage **210**. It should be noted that the term "Entrant" refers to a reserved "seat" in a level. For example, in one embodiment, a single user can be assigned multiple "seats" in a level of the tournament, but may only have one seat in each tournament in a level. In other words, if a level comprises twenty tournaments, a single user can be associated with multiple Entrants, but may only register once for each of the twenty tournaments. An Entrant, in one embodiment, gains entry to a Level **2** **206** or Masters Tournament **208** by winning previous levels. However it is important to note that an individual Entrant **202**, regardless of the method of entry can win multiple spots in each of the Level **1** rounds **204**, the Level **2** rounds **206**, and Masters rounds **208**. In one embodiment, two different methods of entry can be used by a user **104**, **106**, **108** to gain entry to a Level **1** round **204**.

[0031] For example, all premium members **212** of the virtual community **114** may enter Level **1** rounds **204**. Additionally, an Alternative Method of Entry (A.M.O.E) **214** can be used by a potential participant. One example of an A.M.O.E is a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope (S.A.S.E). The A.M.O.E participant **214** sends in registration information to receive an access code for a single entry for a Level **1** round **204**. Participants may submit as many S.A.S.E's as they choose and receive as many access codes for Level **1** rounds **204**, but each code is only good for one entry in a Level **1** round **204**.

[0032] In one embodiment, there is not a limit to the number of Level **1** rounds **204** that can be entered by either the premium members **212** or the A.M.O.E **214** participants. Each Entrant that places as a top-finisher in a Level **1** round **204** is awarded an entry to a corresponding Level **2** round **206**. Likewise, each Entrant that places as a top-finisher in of the Level **2** round **206** is awarded an entry to a corresponding Masters Level round **208**. All Entrants are treated alike during the poker play, regardless of the means of entry used. Accordingly, it is possible for a member to win multiple entries to each subsequent level. Stated differently, Entrant A and Entrant AA in FIG. **3** is the same member and they have earned two spots in Level **2** and subsequently earned two seats in the Masters Level.

[0033] However, as discussed in greater detail below, if multiple Entrants are associated with a single user and advance to the Masters Level comprising a single tournament only one Entrant associated with the user is assigned a seat. It should be noted that this is only one embodiment and depending on the game configuration, rules, and the like, a single user can also have multiple Entrants in a single tournament or even at the same virtual table. If the Masters Level comprises multiple tournaments a single user can have multiple Entrants at same/different tables in each tournament, a single Entrant per tournament, and the like.

[0034] In one embodiment, top finishers in the poker rounds are determined by a point in time during game play when an Entrant lost all of his/her points. Stated differently, top-finishers are determined by how long an Entrant stayed in a game. For example, a set number of points are assigned to each Entrant at the beginning of the Level **1** round **204**. Points can be used like chips to bet during the poker games, but are

not redeemable for cash. Entrants are awarded points during game play that can represent chips. During game play Entrants "bet" points and the Entrant with the best hand (in a poker example) wins the points in the current pot. Therefore, Entrants can win and lose points during a game. When an Entrant loses all of his/her points the Entrant can no longer play in the game. The Entrant who has won all of the other players' points at the end of the game is deemed the winner of that particular game. In one embodiment, the various poker games within a round **204**, **206**, **208** can end either by a single Entrant winning all of the Entrants' points at the table or Entrants forfeiting. Top-finishing Entrants are determined from all of the Entrants who did not win. For example, the last five Entrants to lose all of their points can be considered the top five finishing Entrants.

[0035] As discussed above, the prize awarded in the Masters Level round **208** is a non-transferable invitation to participate in a reality television show. No prizes such as cash, cash-equivalents, notes, or prizes that have inherent and/or immediate value are disbursed. Multiple Entrants can be top-finishing Entrants in the Masters Level round **208**, but if a single user is associated with two or more of the winning Entrants only a single invitation to participate in the reality television show is awarded to the user. In another embodiment, the Masters Level round **208** can be considered a semi-finalist round where the final round is the Television stage **210**. In one embodiment, additional semifinalists can be awarded the invitation to participate in the reality television show. For example, FIG. **2** shows semifinalists from promotional partners or non-U.S. semifinalists being awarded the invitation to participate in the reality television show. It should be noted that the value of the semi-finalist prizes, the (e.g., trip to Las Vegas, participation in the finalist selection events for the reality television show) is fixed and does not depend on the number of points accumulated, the number of players, or any other variable related to the game. Semi-finalists who accumulate more points than other semi-finalists do not win larger prizes. In other words, every user that is a top-finisher in the Masters Level round **208** is awarded the same non-monetary prize.

[0036] The Televised Stage **210**, in one embodiment, is a sequence of reality television programs entitled, for example, "The Championships." The potential top prize in "The Championships" is a substantial monetary and merchandise prize. The finalists play casino games and participate in other activities at a Las Vegas licensed casino. At the end of each show the finalists vote to eliminate one of the contestants. In the penultimate episode, the two remaining finalists go head-to-head in a game such as poker, with the winner advancing. On the final show, the remaining finalist has a chance to play all-or-nothing for a substantial monetary and merchandise prize, or can take a lesser prize.

[0037] Each episode can include an opportunity for viewers to vote on an aspect of the show via text message, telephone, the internet, or the like. Voting also enters the viewer into a sweepstakes. The finalists for "The Championships", which can be any given number but 10 is used for this example, are chosen from among a plurality of semi-finalists (the top-finishers of the Masters Level rounds **208**). Each of the semi-finalists is provided with an all expense paid trip to Las Vegas for an invitational poker tournament and other activities. The winner of the invitational poker tournament becomes one of the given number of finalists such as 10, with the other remaining finalists selected subjectively by judges based on

personality, talent, appearance, charisma or other factors as displayed during the finalist event.

[0038] In one embodiment, a given number of the semifinalists for “The Championships,” are from the Online-Stage offered in the United States as discussed above. Another given number of semifinalists is chosen by promotional partners in their own promotions. In another embodiment, semifinalists chosen by promotional partners are smaller than the number of the semi-finalists from the U.S. Online-Stage. In still another embodiment, the Las Vegas casino where the television program is to be filmed can also choose a number of semifinalists. Additional semifinalists can also be selected from a non-U.S. pay-to-play poker tournament offered where legal outside the United States. A series of electronic filters can be used to ensure that only non-U.S. Entrants are able to enter the pay-to-play poker tournament.

[0039] FIG. 3 shows one example of multiple Entrants advancing to subsequent rounds of the On-line stage. It should be noted that FIG. 3 only shows three rounds for the On-Line Stage as an illustrative example. One or more rounds can be added or removed. FIG. 3 shows the Level 1 round 304, Level 2 round 306, Masters round 308, and the Television Stage 310. The Level 1 round 304 and the Level 2 round 306 each comprise a plurality of games shown as tables in FIG. 3. For example, the Level 1 round 304 comprises six virtual tables 320 each comprising five Entrants 302. FIG. 3 also shows that a level such as Level 1 304 can comprise of multiple tournaments such as Level 1A 328, Level 1B 330, Level 1N 332, and the like.

[0040] As discussed above, a single user can be associated with multiple Entrants. For example, Entrant A 302 and Entrant N 322 can be associated with a single user. As can be seen from FIG. 3 although these Entrants 302, 322 are associated with the same user, they are registered in different tournaments in the Level 1 round 304. Entrant A 302 is registered in a Level 1A tournament 328 and Entrant N 322 is registered in a Level 1B tournament 322. A registration mechanism 334 is associated with each Level round 304, 306, 308 for facilitating and managing Entrant registration for each tournament within a Level round 304, 306, 308.

[0041] Although one embodiment of the present invention allows a user to be associated with multiple Entrants, which are each in a separate and distinct tournament within a level, the present invention is not limited by this embodiment. For example, depending on how a game is configured, rules set by the administrators of the game, and the like, a user can be associated with multiple Entrants in the same tournament of a round or at the same virtual table 320.

[0042] At the end of the Level 1 tournament 328, 330, 332, the Entrant who has won all of the other Entrant’s points in that tournament is deemed the winner of that particular tournament. Each of the winning Entrants are then assigned a seat in a subsequent such as the Level 2 round 306. In one embodiment, a given number of top-finishing Entrants (that can be a different number for each tournament) are also assigned seats in the subsequent round. For example, the Level 2 round 204, which can also comprise multiple tournaments, comprises three virtual tables 320 each comprising a winning Entrant from the previous Level round. In this example, Entrant G 336, Entrant S 338, and Entrant T 340 were all winning Entrants in their respective Level 1 tournaments 328, 330, 332. In the example of FIG. 3 each of these winning Entrants is seated at separate tables 302, however, in one embodiment, this is not required. It should also be noted that the number of

virtual tables 320 and Entrants shown in FIG. 3 are only illustrative and do not limit the present invention in any way.

[0043] In another embodiment, a final tournament for each Level comprising multiple tournaments can be held within the particular Level round. For example, each of the winning Entrants from the Level 1 tournaments 328, 330, 332 can play a Final Level 1 tournament to determine the overall winner for the Level 1 round 304. The winning Entrant and a given number of top-finishing Entrants are then assigned a seat in the subsequent round.

[0044] As discussed above, if a single user is associated with multiple winning Entrants, each of the winning Entrants is assigned a seat at a different virtual table in the subsequent Level round. For example, a single user can be associated with two or more of Entrant T 340, Entrant S 338, and Entrant G 336. Therefore, in one embodiment, the Entrants associated with the single user are seated at different virtual tables 302. These virtual tables 302 can be in different tournaments, as discussed above, or can be in the same tournament. If a game is configured to hold a Final Level tournament for a Level round and two or more Entrants associated with a single user advance to the Final Level tournament, only one Entrant is given a seat. However, depending on the game or game configuration, multiple Entrants associated with a single user can be sat at the same virtual table.

[0045] The above examples are applicable to each subsequent Level round, their associated tournaments, and the Masters Level round 308. Depending on the game configuration, a single winning Entrant and a given number of top-finishing Entrants are assigned a seat in a Master Level round 308. Alternatively, if a Level round comprises multiple tournaments, multiple winning Entrants and multiple sets of top-finishing Entrants can be assigned seats in the Master Level Round 308. For example, FIG. 3 shows a Masters Level round 308 including a virtual table 302 comprising a plurality of Entrants. These Entrants can comprise the winning Entrant from each tournament of the previous Level round and a given number of top-finishing Entrants. For example, Entrant A 342, Entrant J 344, and Entrant T 340 can all be winning Entrants from respective tournaments in the previous Level round. The remaining Entrants can all be top-finishing Entrants.

[0046] However, the Master Level round 308 can also comprise a single winning Entrant from a Final tournament in the previous round as discussed above. The Master Level round 308 can also comprise multiple tournaments wherein each tournament yields a winner and top-finishers. Alternatively, the Master Level 308 can comprise a single virtual table as shown in FIG. 3 or a single tournament with multiple virtual tables 302. A single winning Entrant or multiple winning Entrants (depending on how the game is configured) is then determined along with a given number of top-finishing Entrants. The users associated with the identified Entrants are then awarded the same non-monetary prize, e.g., an invitation to participate in a reality television program as discussed above. For example, FIG. 3 shows a Live Poker round 310 comprising a plurality of Entrants.

[0047] If a user is associated with multiple winning Entrants, top-finishing Entrants, or a combination thereof, a single non-monetary prize is awarded to the user. In one embodiment, if a user is associated with multiple winning Entrants, top-finishing Entrants, or a combination thereof, only one of those Entrants is considered for the non-monetary prize. In one embodiment, a number of other Entrants corre-

sponding to the number of Entrants associated with the single user that were not considered for the non-monetary prize are selected to receive the non-monetary prize.

[0048] Example of Information Processing System Hardware to Host Online Poker

[0049] FIG. 4 is a block diagram illustrating a detailed view of the information processing system 110 according to an embodiment of the present invention. The information processing system 110, in one embodiment, is based upon a suitably configured processing system adapted to implement the exemplary embodiment of the present invention. Any suitably configured processing system is similarly able to be used as the information processing system 110 by embodiments of the present invention, for example, a personal computer, workstation, or the like.

[0050] The information processing system 110 includes a computer 402. The computer 402 has a processor 404 that is communicatively connected to a main memory 406 (e.g., volatile memory), non-volatile storage interface 408, a terminal interface 410, and a network adapter hardware 412. A system bus 414 interconnects these system components. The non-volatile storage interface 408 is used to connect mass storage devices, such as data storage device 416 to the information processing system 106. One specific type of data storage device is a computer readable medium such as a CD drive, which may be used to store data to and read data from a CD or DVD 418 or floppy diskette (not shown). Another type of data storage device is a data storage device configured to support, for example, NTFS type file system operations.

[0051] The main memory 406, in one embodiment, includes the virtual community 114 and on-line game tournament 116, both of which have been discussed above in greater detail. In one embodiment, the information processing system 110 utilizes conventional virtual addressing mechanisms to allow programs to behave as if they have access to a large, single storage entity, referred to herein as a computer system memory, instead of access to multiple, smaller storage entities such as the main memory 406 and data storage device 416. Note that the term "computer system memory" is used herein to generically refer to the entire virtual memory of the information processing system 110.

[0052] Although only one CPU 404 is illustrated for computer 402, computer systems with multiple CPUs can be used equally effectively. Embodiments of the present invention further incorporate interfaces that each includes separate, fully programmed microprocessors that are used to off-load processing from the CPU 404. Terminal interface 410 is used to directly connect one or more terminals 420 to computer 402 to provide a user interface to the computer 402. These terminals 420, which are able to be non-intelligent or fully programmable workstations, are used to allow system administrators and users to communicate with the thin client. The terminal 420 is also able to consist of user interface and peripheral devices that are connected to computer 402 and controlled by terminal interface hardware included in the terminal I/F 410 that includes video adapters and interfaces for keyboards, pointing devices, and the like.

[0053] An operating system (not shown), according to an embodiment, can be included in the main memory 406 and is a suitable multitasking operating system such as the Linux, UNIX, Windows XP, and Windows Server 2003 operating system. Embodiments of the present invention are able to use any other suitable operating system, or kernel, or other suitable control software. Some embodiments of the present

invention utilize architectures, such as an object oriented framework mechanism, that allows instructions of the components of operating system (not shown) to be executed on any processor located within the client. The network adapter hardware 412 is used to provide an interface to the network 402. Embodiments of the present invention are able to be adapted to work with any data communications connections including present day analog and/or digital techniques or via a future networking mechanism.

[0054] Although the exemplary embodiments of the present invention are described in the context of a fully functional computer system, those skilled in the art will appreciate that embodiments are capable of being distributed as a program product via floppy disk, e.g. floppy disk 418, CD ROM, or other form of recordable media, or via any type of electronic transmission mechanism.

[0055] Process of Providing an On-line Game Tournament

[0056] FIG. 5 is an operational flow diagram illustrating a process of providing an on-line game tournament for the On-line Stage discussed above. The operational flow diagram of FIG. 5 begins at step 502 and flows directly to step 504. A virtual community 114, at step 504, is provided that comprises at least one game tournament 116 for a game of skill and chance. A registration means, at step 506, is provided to a plurality of users 104 for participating in the game tournament 116. For example, premium members are able to sign up on-line for the game tournament 116. Alternative Methods Of Entry are also provided to non-premium members such as using a Self Addressable Stamped Envelope.

[0057] Each user 104, at step 508, that has registered is assigned an entry into the first round 204. A single user, at step 510, is analyzed to determine if he/she has registered multiple times. If the result of this determination is positive, the user, at step 512, 104 is assigned an entry into the game tournament 116 for each registration made by the user 104. However, in one embodiment, a limited number of seats at a virtual table 320 may exist. In this embodiment, an Entrant is only assigned a seat(s) if there is room at the virtual table 320. Furthermore, but not required, a user that has registered multiple times is only assigned a single seat per tournament within a level, as discussed above. The control flow then exits at step 514. If the result of this determination is negative, the control flow then exits at step 514.

[0058] Process of Advancing Entrants from a First Round to a Subsequent Round

[0059] FIG. 6 is an operational flow diagram illustrating a process of advancing one or more Entrants from the Level 1 round 204 to a subsequent round 206. The control flow of FIG. 6 begins at step 602 and flows directly to step 604. Each Entrant, at step 604, is awarded one or more points during the Level 1 round 204 based on the performance of the Entrant. For example, a user is awarded points based on the pot size won during a game. The Level 1 round 204, at step 606, is determined to have ended. A winning Entrant for the first round, at step 608, is identified. Top-finishing Entrants, at step 609, are identified based on how long the Entrants remained in the game. If the Level comprises multiple tournaments, a winning Entrant and top-finishing Entrants for each tournament or a Final level tournament are determined.

[0060] The identified Entrants, at step 610, are analyzed to determine if two or more of the Entrants are associated with a single user. If the result of this determination is positive, the user, at step 612, is assigned a corresponding number of spots seated at different virtual tables 320 (either in separate tour-

naments or the same tournament) in the subsequent round **206**. The control flow then exits at step **614**. It should be noted that Entrants associated with a single user are not limited to being seated at different virtual tables **320**. Stated differently, Entrants associated with a single user can be seated at the same virtual table. If the result of this determination is negative, the user associated with the Entrant, at step **616**, is assigned a single spot in the subsequent round **206**. The control flow then exits at step **616**.

[0061] Process of Advancing Entrants from a Subsequent Round to a Masters Round

[0062] FIG. 7 is an operational flow diagram illustrating a process of advancing one or more Entrants from the subsequent round **206** to a Masters round **208**. The control flow of FIG. 7 begins at step **702** and flows directly to step **704**. Each Entrant, at step **704**, is awarded one or more points during the subsequent round **206** based on the performance of the Entrant. For example, a user is awarded points based on the pot size won during a game. The subsequent round **206**, at step **706**, is determined to have ended. A winning Entrant for the subsequent round, at step **708**, is identified. Top-finishing Entrants, at step **709**, are identified based on how long the Entrants remained in the game.

[0063] The identified Entrants, at step **710**, are analyzed to determine if two or more of the Entrants are associated with a single user. If the result of this determination is positive, the user, at step **712**, is assigned a corresponding number of spots seated at different virtual tables **320** in the Masters round **208**. It should be noted that the discussions regarding multiple tournaments, multiple Entrants associated with a single user, and the like also apply to the Master Level round **208**. The control flow then exits at step **716**. It should be noted that Entrants associated with a single user are not limited to being seated at different virtual tables **320**. Stated differently, Entrants associated with a single user can be seated at the same virtual table **320**. If the result of this determination is negative, the user associated with the Entrant, at step **714**, is assigned a single spot in the Masters round **208**. The control flow then exits at step **716**.

[0064] Process of Awarding a User an Invitation to Participate in a Reality Television Program

[0065] FIG. 8 is an operational flow diagram illustrating a process of awarding a user an invitation to participate in a reality television program. The control flow of FIG. 8 begins at step **802** and flows directly to step **804**. Each Entrant, at step **804**, is awarded one or more points during the Masters round **208** based on the performance of the Entrant. For example, a user is awarded points based on the pot size won during a game. The Masters round **208**, at step **806**, is determined to have ended. A winning Entrant for the Masters round, at step **808**, is identified. Top-finishing Entrants, at step **809**, are identified based on how long the Entrants remained in the game. If the Masters round **208** comprises multiple tournaments, multiple winning Entrants and multiple sets of top-finishing Entrants can be identified.

[0066] Each user associated with the identified Entrants is awarded with substantially the same non-monetary prize such as an invitation to participate in a reality television program. In one embodiment, a user is only awarded a single non-monetary prize no matter how many Entrants associated with the user are top finishers in the Masters round. However, in another embodiment, a user can be awarded a given number of non-monetary prizes corresponding to the number of

Entrants associated with the user that are top finishers in the Masters round. The control flow then exits at step **812**.

[0067] Non-Limiting Examples

[0068] Although specific embodiments of the invention have been disclosed, those having ordinary skill in the art will understand that changes can be made to the specific embodiments without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. The scope of the invention is not to be restricted, therefore, to the specific embodiments, and it is intended that the appended claims cover any and all such applications, modifications, and embodiments within the scope of the present invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of allowing a plurality of users to compete against one another via a network in at least one game, the method on at least one information processing system comprising:

providing at least one virtual environment comprising at least one game tournament for a game of skill and chance, wherein the game tournament includes a plurality of hierarchical rounds, wherein the plurality of hierarchical rounds include at least a first round and a second round; and

providing a registration service to a plurality of users for registering to participate in the game tournament, wherein each user in the plurality of users is assigned an entry into the first round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants, and wherein the registration service is configured for allowing at least one user in the plurality of users to register an unlimited number of times wherein that the one user is assigned a separate entry into the first round for each registration by the one user.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the game tournament is a poker tournament.

3. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

advancing a given number of the Entrants from the first round to the second round.

4. The method of claim 3, wherein a plurality of the Entrants in the given number of Entrants is associated with a single user, wherein the single user is awarded a number of separate entries into the second round equal to a number of Entrants associated with the single user in the plurality of Entrants in the given number of Entrants.

5. The method of claim 3, wherein the given number of Entrants comprises one winning Entrant that has accumulated all possible points in the first round.

6. The method of claim 3, wherein the given number of Entrants comprises at least one Entrant that remained in the first round longer than at least one other Entrant and has failed to win the first round.

7. The method of claim 3, wherein the advancing further comprises:

awarding a plurality of Entrants that includes at least one winning Entrant that has accumulated all possible points in the second round and at least one Entrant that remained in the second round longer than at least one other Entrant a substantially identical non-monetary prize.

8. The method of claim 7, wherein if more than one Entrant in the plurality of Entrants is associated with a single user, only one non-monetary prize is awarded to the single user.

9. The method of claim 7, wherein the substantially identical non-monetary prize is an invitation to participate in a reality television program.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein the virtual environment is at least one website.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein the virtual environment is associated with an on-line gaming community.

12. The method of claim 11, wherein at least one user in the plurality of users is a fee-based member of the online-gaming.

13. The method of claim 1, wherein the providing the registration service further comprises:
providing an alternative method of entry that is non-fee based to at least one user for registering to participate in the game tournament.

14. The method of claim 13, further comprising:
receiving at least one self-addressed stamped envelope as the alternative method of entry from the at least one user;
and
assigning a separate entry into the first round associated with the user for each self-addressed stamped envelope received from the user.

15. A method of allowing a plurality of users to compete against one another via a network in at least one game of skill and chance, the method on at least one information processing system comprising:

providing at least one virtual environment comprising at least one game tournament for a game of skill and chance, wherein the game tournament includes a plurality of hierarchical rounds, wherein the plurality of hierarchical rounds include at least a first round, at least one subsequent round, and a final round;

providing a registration service to a plurality of users for registering to participate in the game tournament, wherein each user in the plurality of users is assigned an entry into the first round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants, and wherein the registration service is configured for allowing at least one user in the plurality of users to register an unlimited number of times wherein the one user is assigned a separate entry into the first round for each registration by the one user;

advancing a subset of the plurality of Entrants from the first round to the subsequent round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants for the subsequent round, wherein the subset of the plurality of Entrants includes a winning Entrant that has accumulated all possible points for the first and at least one Entrant that remained in the first round longer than at least one other Entrant;

advancing a subset of the plurality of Entrants for the subsequent round to the final round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants for the final round, wherein the subset of the plurality of Entrants for the subsequent round have includes a winning Entrant that has accumulated all possible points for the subsequent round and at least one Entrant that remained in the subsequent round longer than at least one other Entrant; and

awarding a subset of the plurality of Entrants for the final round a non-monetary prize of participating in a reality television shown, wherein, the subset of the plurality of Entrants for the final round includes a winning Entrant that has accumulated all possible points for the final

round and at least one Entrant that remained in the final round longer than at least one other Entrant.

16. An information processing system adapted to allow a plurality of users to compete against one another via a network in at least one game, the information processing system comprising:

a memory;
a processor communicatively coupled to the memory;
at least one virtual environment comprising at least one game tournament for a game of skill and chance, wherein the game tournament includes a plurality of hierarchical rounds, wherein the plurality of hierarchical rounds include at least a first round and a second round;
and

a registration service that is provided to a plurality of users for registering to participate in the game tournament, wherein each user in the plurality of users is assigned an entry into the first round thereby resulting in a plurality of Entrants, and wherein the registration service is configured for allowing at least one user in the plurality of users to register an unlimited number of times wherein the one user is assigned a separate entry into the first round for each registration by the one user.

17. The information processing system of claim 16, the on-line gaming tournament is adapted to:

advancing a given number of the Entrants from the first round to the second round, wherein a plurality of the Entrants in the given number of Entrants is associated with a single user, wherein the single user is awarded a number of separate entries into the second round equal to a number of Entrants associated with the single user in the plurality of Entrants in the given number of Entrants.

18. The information processing system of claim 17, wherein if the second round is a final round of the game tournament,

awarding a plurality of Entrants that includes at least one winning Entrant that has accumulated all possible points in the second round and at least one Entrant that remained in the second round longer than at least one other Entrant a substantially identical non-monetary prize.

19. The information processing system of claim 18, wherein the substantially identical non-monetary prize is an invitation to participate in a reality television program.

20. The information processing system of claim 16, wherein the registration service is adapted to:

providing an alternative method of entry that is non-fee based to at least one user for registering to participate in the game tournament;

receiving at least one self-addressed stamped envelope as the alternative method of entry from the at least one user; and

assigning a separate entry into the first round associated with the user for each self-addressed stamped envelope received from the user.

* * * * *