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MAGAZINE FOR A PLURALITY OF REMOVABLE HARD DISK DRIVES

Technical Field

The present invention relates to a magazine for use in a library of hard disk drives.

Background of the Invention

Large scale computing devices often employ a library of removable computer memory media to provide for increased storage capability and the sharing of media by multiple hosts. In such a library, the media are shelved in storage bins for retrieval by a robotic picking apparatus or "picker." Such a picker for optical disk media is described in Dimitri et al., U.S. Patent No. 5,377,121, which is herein incorporated by reference in its entirety. Tape cassettes are another common library media. The library has at least one drive receptacle coupled to one or more host computers that may read or write to the media.

When a host requests a particular medium in the library, the picker is typically commanded to travel to the storage bin in the library where the medium is shelved, grip the medium, remove the medium from the storage bin, travel to a destination drive having input/output ("I/O") connections with the host, insert the medium into the drive, and power the drive.

A problem with these prior art libraries is that optical media provides relatively slow reading and writing, while tape media provides relatively slow random access.

In recognition of these problems, the concept of a library of hard disk drives was

developed, which is the subject of the assignee's companion application entitled LIBRARY OF HARD DISK DRIVES, U.S. application serial number 09/844,127 filed on April 26, 2001 incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. According to the concept, hard disk drives are stored in associated storage locations in the library. The robotic picker is adapted to couple and decouple a selected disk drive from a destination receptacle that is coupled to the one or more host computers requesting data.

The hard disk drive library provides the advantage of relative speed as compared to libraries employing optical or tape media. Entire hard disk drives, rather than hard disk media, are exchanged in the library to remain within the close mechanical tolerances required for efficient use of this memory element.

In a basic form of the concept, the destination receptacle provides power connections to the disk drive and I/O connections to the host computers, and the robotic picker retrieves the selected disk drive from its storage location, carries the disk drive to and inserts the disk drive into the destination receptacle. The disk drive is then powered and spins up to its operating speed. Finally, when this operating speed is reached, the data on the disk drive may be accessed by the computer.

As may be readily appreciated, all of this movement takes time, and efforts are constantly being made to decrease the time required to access memory elements in the library.

Disk drives are often virtually combined in a method known in the art as RAID ("redundant array of inexpensive disks"), to gain speed, redundancy, or both. However, the

disks in the array are physically separate and distinct from one another and are stored separately in the library, and installed into or removed from the destination backplane separately by the picker as aforescribed. Therefore, although the computer may treat the RAID array as a single disk, the time required to set up the array for use by the computer is multiplied by the number of disks in the array. Moreover, as the connections to the destination backplane must be made separately for each of the disks in the array, the reliability of connecting the array is reduced from that of a single disk.

Accordingly, there is a need for a magazine for a plurality of removable disk drives that provides for decreasing the time and increasing the reliability of loading and unloading an array of disks in a disk drive library.

Summary of the Invention

The magazine for a plurality of removable disk drives of the present invention solves the aforementioned problems and meets the aforementioned needs by providing physical and electrical support for the plurality of disk drives and a means for interconnecting the disk drives as a unit with a host computer. Preferably, the magazine also supports a connecting circuit for implementing a fibre channel arbitration loop and intelligent hub for reconfiguring the fibre channel arbitration loop if one or more of the disk drives fails.

Therefore, it is a principal object of the present invention to provide a magazine for a plurality of removable disk drives.

It is another object of the present invention to provide a magazine for a plurality of removable disk drives that provides for interconnecting the plurality of disk drives with a computer with a single connection.

It is yet another object of the present invention to provide a magazine for a plurality of removable disk drives that provides for interconnecting the plurality of disk drives as a RAID array with a computer with a single connection.

It is still another object of the present invention to provide a magazine for a plurality of removable disk drives that provides a selection mechanism supported by the magazine for altering the electrical interconnection between the disk drives and the computer.

It is a further object of the present invention to provide a magazine for a plurality of removable disk drives that provides for its transportation by a robotic picking device.

The foregoing and other objects, features and advantages of the present invention will be more readily understood upon consideration of the following detailed description of the invention, taken in conjunction with the following drawings.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Figure 1 is a pictorial illustration of a magazine for a plurality of removable disk drives according to the present invention.

Figure 2 is a pictorial schematic in side view of the magazine of Figure 1.

Figure 3 is a schematic of a prior art hub for implementing a fibre channel arbitration loop.

Figure 4 is a pictorial schematic in side view of the magazine of Figure 1 including an intelligent hub according to the present invention.

Detailed Description of a Preferred Embodiment

Referring to Figure 1, a magazine 10 for a plurality of removable disk drives 12 according to the present invention is shown in a library 8 having a rack 11 in communication with a destination receptacle or backplane 18 for interconnecting the individual disk drives and one or more host computers requesting information stored by the disk drives as is typical in the art. As shown, the rack 11 is suitably adapted to receive one or more magazines.

The magazine 10 as described herein is particularly advantageous for supporting removable hard disk drives; however, the magazine may be adapted to support other removable memory devices, including solid state memory devices, without departing from the principles of the invention.

Each of the disk drives 12 includes a connector 14 for coupling to a complementary connector 15 in the rack 11 that is for compatibility, the same as the connector employed in the destination backplane for receiving a single disk drive. The disk drives 12 are typically transported within such a library, and electrically interconnected to or disconnected from the

destination backplane by a robotic picking apparatus as is well known in the art. Accordingly, the magazine 10 is preferably also provided for similar manipulation by the robotic picking apparatus; however, this is not essential to the invention.

Turning to Figure 2, the magazine 10 includes a housing 16 which supports its own backplane 18 and a predetermined number of the disk drives 12. The back plane includes a disk drive connector 20 for each of the disk drives, for mating with the connectors 14 thereof. The disk drive connectors 20 appear to the respective disk drives 12 to be equivalent to the connector 15 of the computer. The magazine 10 also includes a module connector 22 that appears to the computer to be equivalent to the connector 14 of one of the disk drives. Intermediate the connectors 20 and the connector 22 may be a connecting circuit 24. The connecting circuit 24 may be part of the backplane 18 or may be a separate part of the magazine.

The magazine 10 provides the outstanding advantage of permitting a single connection between the host computer and the plurality of disk drives 12, increasing the reliability of making the connection as well as reducing the number of connections that need to be made to couple the disk drives to the computer.

As mentioned previously, it is often desired to combine a plurality of disk drives into a redundant array. The RAID array combines a plurality of hard disk drives to gain improved data protection, increased speed, or both. For example, according to "RAID level 0," data is broken into pieces wherein each piece is written to a different drive. This provides high speed but little redundancy. As another example, according to "RAID level 1," data sent to one drive

is duplicated on another drive. This provides high redundancy but the speed may not be increased. The software for coordinating the disk drives to operate as a redundant array is typically resident in the host computer.

The present invention is particularly suited to be used in conjunction with RAID. While an array of the hard drives 12 is treated virtually as a single disk drive by the computer, the invention provides that the array may also be treated physically as a single disk drive by either the human operator installing the magazine 10 in or removing the magazine from the rack 11, or the robotic picking apparatus performing the same task.

A preferred interface between the RAID software in the computer is the fibre channel arbitration loop, wherein the disk drives are linked together to one another in a loop configuration. The fibre channel arbitration loop need not employ optical fibers. To implement the fibre channel arbitration loop, the backplane 18 includes fibre channel SCA connectors 31.

One problem with the fibre channel arbitration loop is that if one of the disk drives fails, the loop becomes broken, and further communication with the remaining, operating disk drives in the loop is terminated. Another problem is that, to change a disk drive, it must be connected to or disconnected from two other disk drives and their associated connectors and cabling.

A solution to the first problem noted above has been to provide a connecting circuit 24 that detects a link failure and switches the failed drive out of the loop, reconnecting the loop with respect to the remaining drives. A solution to the second problem has been to provided a "hub"

30 that internally provides the connections between the disk drives, as shown in Figure 3.

Turning to Figure 4, the circuit 24 of the magazine 10 preferably includes an intelligent form of the hub 30. The intelligent hub 30 is adapted to detect a failure of one or more of the disk drives and alter the connections between the remaining, operating disk drives to maintain loop function. For example, the intelligent hub 30 includes a link failure detection mechanism 32 and link bypass switch 34.

Though the magazine 10 provides particularly advantages when implementing the fibre channel arbitration loop interface protocol, any other desired interface standard, such as SCSI, may be employed without departing from the principles of the invention.

It is to be recognized that, while a particular magazine for a plurality of removable disk drives has been shown and described as preferred, other configurations and methods could be utilized, in addition to those already mentioned, without departing from the principles of the invention.

The terms and expressions which have been employed in the foregoing specification are used therein as terms of description and not of limitation, and there is no intention of the use of such terms and expressions of excluding equivalents of the features shown and described or portions thereof, it being recognized that the scope of the invention is defined and limited only by the claims which follow.

Claims:

1. A magazine for a plurality of separately removable disk drives, wherein the disk drives include respective first connectors for electrically interconnecting any one of the disk drives and a connector for a computer, the apparatus comprising a backplane, a module connector and a housing for supporting said backplane, said module connector and the disk drives, said module connector being adapted for electrically interconnecting said backplane and the connector for the computer, said back plane including a plurality of third connectors for electrically interconnecting the respective first connectors and said backplane.

2. The magazine of claim 1, further comprising a connecting circuit electrically interconnecting said backplane and said module connector and being adapted for selectably altering the electrical interconnection therebetween.

3. The apparatus of claim 2, wherein said connecting circuit includes an intelligent hub.

4. The apparatus of claim 2, further comprising a plurality of fourth connectors corresponding to said first connectors for electrically interconnecting said backplane and said

connecting circuit.

5. The apparatus of claim 3, wherein said connecting circuit includes a fibre channel arbitration loop.

6. The apparatus of claim 5, wherein said fourth connectors are SCA connectors.

7. A method for supporting a plurality of separately removable disk drives for electrically interconnecting the disk drives with a computer, the method comprising:

electrically connecting the disk drives to a backplane;

supporting the disk drives and the backplane as a unit separate from the computer; and

electrically connecting the backplane to the computer.

8. The method of claim 7, further comprising operating the disk drives as a RAID.