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TITLE OF INVENTION

VIRTUAL WWW SERVER FOR ENABLING A SINGLE DISPLAY
SCREEN OF A BROWSER TO BE UTILIZED TO CONCURRENTLY
DISPLAY DATA OF A PLURALITY OF FILES WHICH ARE OBTAINED
5 FROM RESPECTIVE SERVERS AND TO SEND COMMANDS TO THESE
SERVERS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of Application

The present invention relates to a method of
10 inter-server cooperation which utilizes the HTTP
protocol, for communication between WWW servers and WWW
browsers which are mutually connected via a data
communication network such as the Internet.

Description of Prior Art

15 In recent years, with the increasing popularity of
utilizing the Internet for information exchange via the
WWW (World Wide Web), various ways of transferring
information by using WWW servers and WWW browsers
(i.e., servers and browsers designed to be compatible
20 with WWW communication) have been developed.

A WWW server may store and handle various types of
information expressed as HTML (HyperText Markup
Language) files, or video data files, etc., while a WWW
browser can use the URL (Uniform Resource Locator)
25 specifying a desired file and the location (i.e.,

directory path within a specific server) where the file is held, to transfer HTML files or image data files from the WWW server to the browser via the Internet by employing the HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol). The
5 WWW browser can then translate the file into suitable form for displaying the file contents, i.e., as a page of text, or a still or moving image. A large number of WWW servers are mutually connected via the Internet, for interchange of data.

10 A user of a WWW browser can send a request for accessing a file stored at a specific WWW server by directly inputting the URL of that file, or achieving the same result by activating (i.e., "clicking on") a corresponding hypertext link appearing in a displayed
15 page of HTML data. The WWW browser responds by finding the IP (Internet Protocol) address of the server corresponding to the specified URL, and sending the request (e.g, in the form of a GET command) to the address of the WWW server, via the Internet. The
20 required file is then obtained through a communication link which is established via the Internet by the destination server and is maintained until the data transfer has been completed.

The above basic features will be described using
25 the example of two WWW servers and a WWW browser which

are shown in Fig. 16. Here, numeral 10 denotes a first
WWW server, which includes an HTTP communication section
101 for executing communication with WWW browsers via
the Internet, a request processing section 102 for
5 translating received URLs, a data acquisition section
103 for acquiring and outputting HTML or image data,
etc, in accordance with the specified URLs, and a stored
set of files 10001 which may include HTML files, still
picture or video image data files, etc. For simplicity
10 of description, only the transfer of HTML files will be
described for this example. A second WWW server,
designated by numeral 20, has the same configuration as
the WWW server 10. A WWW browser 30 includes a URL
input section 301 for inputting URLs by a user, and a
15 URL analysis section 302 for obtaining IP (Internet
Protocol) addresses of WWW servers corresponding to
URLs. The WWW browser 30 further includes a HTTP
communication section 303 which executes communication
with WWW servers via the Internet, a HTTP analysis
20 section 304 for determining how the contents of a
received file are to be displayed (after performing any
necessary data conversion processing, such as
translation from HTML to a text format in the case of an
HTML file), and a display section 305 for displaying the
25 contents of received files.

It will be assumed for example that a user inputs "HTTP://wwwA/index.html" from the URL input section 301, as a URL. The URL input section 301 transfers that input URL to the HTTP communication section 303. The
5 first field of the URL specifies the name of the server to which connection is to be made for obtaining the requested file "index.html". In this example, "wwwA" is the server name of the virtual WWW server apparatus 10. The URL analysis section 302 extracts this first field,
10 and transfers the server name together with a GET command to the HTTP communication section 303. The GET command is generated by omitting the first field of the URL, i.e. as: "GET/index.html". From the server name, the HTTP communication section 303 acquires the
15 corresponding IP address, to establish a connection to the HTTP communication section 101 of the server having that IP address, and passes the GET command to that HTTP communication section 101. The HTTP communication section 101 then passes the received GET command to the
20 request processing section 102. The request processing section 102 extracts the portion "index.html" (i.e., the name of the requested file) from the GET command, and passes this to the data acquisition section 103. The data acquisition section 103 is capable of finding the
25 directory path to the stored file "index.html", and

reads out that file and sends the file contents to the HTTP communication section 101.

Fig. 17 shows an example of an HTML file which is held at the virtual WWW server apparatus 10, which will be assumed to be the requested file, and which in this example is the "home page" of the virtual WWW server apparatus 10. The HTTP communication section 101 transfers the contents of this file to the HTTP communication section 303 of the WWW browser 30, and then breaks the connection to the WWW browser 30. The HTTP communication section 303 of the WWW browser 30 then passes the contents of that received HTML file to the HTTP analysis section 304, which analyzes the file, and notifies the display section 305 of how the file contents are to be displayed. The display section 305 then displays the file contents, i.e., as a page of text containing a static image, in this example.

Fig. 19 shows an example of how the HTML file of Fig. 17 might be displayed by the display section 305. In this example, a hypertext link can be established to the WWW server B, as indicated by the underlining of the displayed portion "To WWW Server B" in Fig. 19. If the user uses an input device to select that display portion, e.g., by "clicking" on that portion by using a mouse, then information can be obtained from the link

destination, i.e. the WWW server B. Specifically, the URL of a file corresponding to the hypertext link is passed to the URL analysis section 302, and the processing described above is executed to obtain the file from the WWW server B 20, i.e., the HTTP communication section 303 executes connection to the WWW server B 20, and receives the contents of an HTML file from the WWW server B 20. Fig. 18 shows an example of such an HTML file, whose contents constitute the home page of the WWW server B 20. When the WWW browser 30 receives this HTML file, the display contents change from the form shown in Fig. 19 to that shown in Fig. 20.

However in general, it is not possible to display information from a plurality of WWW servers on a single display screen of a WWW browser. The only exception is that it is possible to obtain and display the contents of a HTML file obtained from one WWW server while at the same time displaying an image which has been obtained as an image data file from a different server, i.e. an image data file whose URL is specified within the obtained HTML file. However it is not possible to also concurrently obtain and display the contents of an HTML file from such another server.

Furthermore, in addition to the usual manner of using a WWW server as described above, it is also

possible for a WWW browser user to send a request to a
WWW server for execution of some operation other than
"read out and send this file". Such a request can be
sent in the same way as a file transfer request, i.e. by
5 inputting a URL. In that case, inputting the URL to a
WWW browser has the effect of sending to a WWW server a
command to execute a specific program, for a purpose
such as control of the operation of some device, and to
return any data generated as a result of that execution.

10 Apart from the case of performing HTTP
communication between a WWW browser and a WWW server, it
is possible to achieve display of information from a
plurality of servers on a single display screen by using
some form of special communication protocol or program
15 (such as UDP or TCP), a plug-in, etc. However if it is
required to access communication with these servers via
the Internet by using a WWW browser which is located
within a corporation, then since such communication is
generally executed via a firewall, it would be difficult
20 to overcome the above problem by using such a special
in-house communication arrangement.

It should be understood that the term "browser" as
used herein refers to a program which is run on the
computer of a user, so that for example a phrase such as
25 "the picture displayed by the browser" in the following

description and claims actually signifies "the picture which is being presented, by operation of a browser, on the display screen of the corresponding computer system". It should similarly be understood that the
5 term "server" as used herein refers to a program which is run on a computer system, rather than to that computer system itself.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

For the above reasons, it is an objective of the
10 present invention to enable information obtained from a plurality of WWW servers to be displayed on a single display screen of a usual type of WWW browser, i.e., with the WWW servers and at least one WWW browser being connected to a communication network utilizing the HTTP
15 communication protocol such as the Internet, and to enable commands to be issued to these WWW servers by utilizing that single display screen while HTTP communication between the browser and the WWW servers is in progress. That objective is basically achieved by
20 providing a virtual WWW server apparatus, which is connected to the communication network in the same manner as an actual WWW server, and which functions in accordance with the HTTP in an essentially similar manner to an actual WWW server, but which serves an
25 intermediary between a WWW browser and a predetermined

plurality of actual WWW servers. The virtual WWW server apparatus holds a stored HTML generating procedure file which may for example contain the URLs of respective HTML files which are stored at these WWW servers. In that
5 case, when a WWW browser user uses the URL of that HTML generating procedure file to send to the virtual WWW server apparatus a request specifying the HTML generating procedure file, the virtual WWW server apparatus reads out the contents of that HTML generating
10 procedure file, uses the URLs listed therein to successively obtain the contents of the respective files from the WWW servers via the Internet, and combines these file contents with information contained in the HTML generating procedure file to thereby produce a
15 generated HTML file. The virtual WWW server apparatus then sends that HTML file via the Internet to the requesting WWW browser. When that WWW browser now handles that received generated HTML file in the same manner as any other received HTML file, the respective
20 contents of the plurality of HTML files obtained from the plurality of actual WWW servers will be displayed concurrently on a single display screen by the WWW browser. The user can thereby view these contents, and use any hyperlinks contained therein to send requests
25 for file dispatch, etc., to the actual WWW servers.

Basically, such a virtual WWW server apparatus holds a HTML generating procedure file which contains information necessary for obtaining respective HTML files from a predetermined plurality of actual WWW
5 servers via the Internet, and includes means which responds to a request sent from a WWW browser specifying that HTML generating procedure file by:

(a) reading out the HTML generating procedure file and analyzing its contents, to obtain the location
10 information for the HTML files,

(b) using that location information to successively obtain these HTML files via the network, using the HTTP protocol,

(c) combining information contained in the
15 generating procedure file and the received HTML file contents to produce a generated HTML file, and

(d) sending that generated HTML file via the network to the requesting WWW browser, using the HTTP.

More specifically according to that first aspect
20 the present invention provides, in a data communication system having at least one WWW browser which is connected via a data communication network to a plurality of WWW servers, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising

25 HTTP communication means for executing

communication between the virtual WWW server apparatus
and the WWW browser via said network,

a stored HTML generating procedure file containing
procedure information for use in generating a HTML file
5 and also containing information expressing respective
locations of a predetermined set of HTML files held at
respective ones of said WWW servers,

request processing means for detecting when a file
transfer request which specifies said HTML generating
10 procedure file is received by said HTTP communication
means,

data acquisition means for executing HTTP
communication with other ones of said plurality of WWW
servers via said network, and

15 HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a file
transfer request by reading out said HTML generating
procedure file to obtain information specifying each of
said locations of the predetermined set of HTML files,
20 successively supplying information specifying said
locations to said data acquisition means to thereby
obtain said HTML files from said WWW servers by HTTP
transfer via said network, combining respective contents
of said HTML files with said procedure information
25 contained in said HTML generating procedure file to

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produce a generated HTML file, and supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP communication means to be transferred to said WWW browser via said network,

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wherein said HTML generating procedure file
includes information expressing respective locations of
a predetermined plurality of HTML files which are held
at respective ones of said plurality of WWW servers, and
5 wherein said HTML generating means comprises means
for analyzing said HTML file contents to obtain said
location information, successively supplying said
location information for said plurality of HTML files to
said data acquisition means to thereby obtain said
10 HTML files from said WWW servers by HTTP transfer via
said network, and combining respective contents of said
HTML files with said procedure information from said
HTML generating procedure file to produce said
generated HTML file.

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In an alternative, there is provided

a data communication system having at least one
WWW (World Wide Web) browser which is connected via a
data communication network to a plurality of WWW

5 servers, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising

HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) communication
means for executing communication between the
virtual WWW server apparatus and the WWW browser via
said network,

10 a stored HTML generating procedure file
containing at least procedure information for use in
generating a HTML (HyperText Markup Language) file,

request processing means for receiving
requests sent from said WWW browser via said HTTP
15 communication means and for detecting when a file
transfer request which specifies said HTML generating
procedure file is received,

data acquisition means for executing HTTP
communication and data acquisition with other ones of
20 said plurality of WWW servers via said network,

HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a
file transfer request by reading out said HTML
generating procedure file and utilizing said procedure
25 information to produce a generated HTML file, and

- 12c -

supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP
communication means to be transferred to said WWW browser
via said network,

wherein each of said plurality of WWW servers

- 12d -

includes a video camera identified by a corresponding name and video camera operation means for controlling the supplying of video data generated by said video camera to said network, and wherein

5 said HTML generating procedure file includes picture embedding information for causing said WWW browser to activate a plug-in program for controlling said WWW browser to selectively display a plurality of video images from respective ones of said video cameras
10 in response to respective input requests which specify said video camera names, with said picture embedding information identifying said virtual WWW server apparatus as a single source of video data for use in generating each of said video images,

15 said HTML generating means comprises means for using said HTML generating procedure file contents to produce a generated HTML file containing said picture embedding information, and supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP communication means to be transferred
20 to said WWW browser via said network, and

 said request processing means comprises means for detecting that a video data transfer request which specifies one of said video camera names has been received by said HTTP communication means from said
25 WWW browser,

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and wherein said virtual WWW server apparatus
further comprises

a linkage file containing information
relating respective video camera names to corresponding
5 locations of said video camera operation means of said
WWW servers, and

camera control means for receiving from said
request processing means a video camera name which
is received with a request for video data transfer,
10 reading out the contents of said linkage file to
obtain a location of said video camera operation means
corresponding to said video camera name, sending to said
video camera operation means via said data
acquisition means and said network a request for
15 transfer of video data from a video camera corresponding
to said video camera name, and transferring said video
data from said data acquisition means to said HTTP
communication means, to be transferred via said
network to said WWW browser.

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With a second aspect of the present invention, one
5 or more of the plurality of HTML files obtained from the
plurality of actual WWW servers may be a FORM file,
i.e., a HTML file containing information delimited by
FORM tags. When such a file is received from a WWW
server by a WWW browser and analyzed, the WWW browser is
10 caused to display a message requesting that an
information item (such as a telephone number, name,
etc.) be input by the browser user. When that
information item is input to the WWW browser, it is
automatically sent back to the WWW server which
15 originated the FORM file, and processed by a program
such as a CGI (Common Gateway Interface) program which
is specified in the FORM information. The virtual WWW
server apparatus of this embodiment includes means for
analyzing the contents of each HTML file obtained from
20 the plurality of actual WWW servers to detect whether it
is a FORM file and, if so, for attaching to the FORM
contents an identifier for the WWW server which
originated that FORM file. Subsequently, when an input
information item is sent back (with the identifier
25 attached thereto) to the virtual WWW server apparatus

from the WWW browser in response to the FORM contents,
the virtual WWW server apparatus uses the identifier to
send that input information item (with the information
specifying the corresponding CGI program) to the
5 originating WWW server.

Basically, such a virtual WWW server apparatus
holds a HTML generating procedure file which contains
information necessary for obtaining respective HTML
files from a predetermined plurality of actual WWW
10 servers via the Internet, and includes means for
responding to a request sent by HTTP from a WWW browser,
specifying that HTML generating procedure file, by:

(a) reading out the HTML generating procedure file
and analyzing its contents, to obtain the location
15 information for the HTML files,

(b) using that location information to successively
obtain these HTML files via the network, using the HTTP
protocol,

(c) analyzing each of the received HTML files, to
20 detect any file which is a FORM file,

(d) for each FORM file, attaching to the FORM
information an identifier which specifies the WWW server
that originated the FORM file,

(d) using the generation procedure file contents and
25 the received HTML file contents to produce a generated

HTML file,

(e) sending that generated HTML file via the network to the requesting WWW browser, using the HTTP, and

5 (f) for each set of information which is sent back from said WWW browser in response to a FORM file, using said attached identifier to send said set of information to the WWW server corresponding to said identifier, by HTTP.

10 More specifically according to the second aspect the present invention provides, in a data communication system having at least one WWW browser which is connected via a data communication network to a plurality of actual WWW servers, a virtual WWW server
15 apparatus comprising

HTTP communication means for executing communication between the virtual WWW server apparatus and the WWW browser via said network,

a stored HTML generating procedure file containing
20 procedure information for use in generating a HTML file and also containing information expressing respective locations of a predetermined set of HTML files held at respective ones of said actual WWW servers,

request processing means for respectively detecting
25 when a file transfer request which specifies said HTML

generating procedure file or when a set of information sent in response to a FORM HTML file is received by said HTTP communication means ,

data acquisition means for executing HTTP
5 communication with said predetermined set of actual WWW servers via said network,

HTML generating means for responding to said detection by said request processing means of a file transfer request by reading out said HTML generating
10 procedure file to obtain information specifying each of said locations of the predetermined set of HTML files, successively supplying information specifying said locations to said data acquisition means to thereby obtain said HTML files from said actual WWW servers by
15 HTTP transfer via said network, analyzing each of said obtained HTML files to detect the presence of FORM HTML files, attaching to FORM information contained in each detected FORM HTML file an identifier indicative of a one of said plurality of actual WWW servers which
20 originated said FORM HTML file, combining respective contents of said HTML files with said procedure information contained in said HTML generating procedure file to produce a generated HTML file, and supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP communication
25 means to be transferred to said WWW browser via said

network, and

interface processing means for receiving each said
set of information sent from said WWW browser in
response to a FORM HTML file and detected by said
5 request processing means , for using said identifier to
control said data acquisition means to send said set of
information to said originating one of the plurality of
WWW servers, by HTTP via said network.

According to a third aspect, a virtual WWW server
10 apparatus according to the present invention can be
utilized in conjunction with a WWW browser, and a
plurality of WWW servers each provided with a video
camera connected to supply video data thereto, to enable
a user of the WWW browser to selectively display images
15 which are generated by the respective video cameras,
i.e. a remote monitoring system can be very easily
implemented, using a network such as the Internet for
data transfer. This is achieved, essentially by the
following:

20 (1) Providing, in a generated HTML file which is
produced by the virtual WWW server apparatus based on
the HTML generating procedure file contents, picture
embedding information which when received by a WWW
browser will cause that WWW browser to activate an
25 appropriate plug-in program for controlling the browser

to enable display of a plurality of video images and to respond appropriately to a user request for display of video data from one of the video cameras, and for handling data acquisition operations relating to such requests, with that picture embedding information also specifying (as a URL) the virtual WWW server apparatus as the source of video data.

(2) Providing in the virtual WWW server apparatus a linkage file which relates each video camera name to location information (i.e., a URL.) for use in sending to the corresponding WWW server a command for starting the transfer of video data from that video camera to the virtual WWW server apparatus, via the network, with the video data then being transferred by the virtual WWW server apparatus to the WWW browser.

In that way, when the plug-in has been activated, the WWW browser user need only specify a video camera name, to request acquisition of a corresponding video image. The plug-in then generates a command which is sent to the virtual WWW server apparatus together with the specified video camera name. The virtual WWW server apparatus then obtains the URL corresponding to that video camera name, and uses that URL to set up an Internet connection to acquire the the necessary video data.

It thereby becomes possible to use, for example, a single HTML EMBED tag with its SRC attribute to enable selective display of a plurality of video images from respective video cameras on a single display screen of a WWW browser, under the control of a single plug-in.

More specifically according to the third aspect the present invention provides, in a data communication system having at least one WWW browser which is connected via a data communication network to a plurality of actual WWW servers which respectively include a video camera and video camera operation means for controlling the supplying of video data generated by said video camera to said network, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising

HTTP communication means for executing communication between the virtual WWW server apparatus and the WWW browser via said network,

a stored HTML generating procedure file containing procedure information for use in generating a HTML file and also containing picture embedding information for causing said WWW browser to activate a predetermined plug-in program for controlling said WWW browser to selectively display a plurality of video images from respective ones of said video cameras in response to respective input requests which specify said video

camera names, with said picture embedding information identifying said virtual WWW server apparatus as a source of video data for use in generating each of said video images,

5 a stored camera name linkage file containing information relating respective video camera names to corresponding locations of said video camera operation means of said WWW servers,

 request processing means for respectively detecting
10 when a file transfer request which specifies said HTML generating procedure file or a video data transfer request which specifies one of said video camera names is received by said HTTP communication means from said WWW browser,

15 data acquisition means for executing communication with said plurality of WWW servers via said network,

 HTML generating means for responding to said detection by said request processing means of a file transfer request by reading out said HTML generating
20 procedure file contents and using said contents to produce a generated HTML file containing said picture embedding information, and supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP communication means to be transferred to said WWW browser via said network, and

25 camera control means for receiving from said

request processing means a video camera name which is received with a request for video data transfer, reading out the contents of said linkage file to obtain a location of said video camera operation means
5 corresponding to said video camera name, sending to said video camera operation means via said data acquisition means and said network a request for transfer of video data from a video camera corresponding to said video camera name via said network to said data acquisition
10 means, and transferring said video data from said data acquisition means to said HTTP communication means, to be transferred via said network to said WWW browser.

According to a fourth aspect, a virtual WWW server apparatus according to the present invention can be
15 utilized in conjunction with at least a first computer system having a first WWW browser and a first WWW server which is equipped with a video camera and a second computer system having a second WWW browser and a second WWW server which is also equipped with a video camera,
20 to enable interactive TV communication between the users of these WWW browsers via a data communication network. In particular this enables either of these users, when desiring to initiate interaction with another user under a condition in which the WWW browser of that other user
25 is not activated, to send a request for activation of

that WWW browser of the other user. The other user can thereby easily be notified, by the browser activation, of the desire for interaction.

This is achieved, essentially by:

5 (1) providing in the HTML generating procedure
file that is stored by the virtual WWW server apparatus,
information which (when the generated HTML file produced
by the virtual WWW server apparatus is received and
analyzed by a WWW browser) will enable the WWW browser
10 to obtain an appropriate plug-in program which has been
designed for interactive TV display operation, and to
activate that plug-in. The user of that WWW browser can
then input a request to initiate TV interaction with
another user, by sending such a request to the virtual
15 WWW server apparatus, specifying a camera name
corresponding to that other user,

 (2) providing in the virtual WWW server apparatus
a linkage file which relates each video camera name to
location information (i.e., a URL) for use in sending to
20 the corresponding WWW server a request for starting the
transfer of video data derived from the output of that
video camera to the virtual WWW server apparatus, via
the network, with the video data then being transferred
by the virtual WWW server apparatus to the requesting
25 WWW browser, and also virtual WWW server apparatus

browser activation designation means for sending to that corresponding WWW server a request for activation of the corresponding WWW browser, and

(3) arranging that when operation of a WWW browser
5 is thereby activated, the WWW browser then activates a plug-in for use in interactive TV operation.

In that way, when the plug-in of a WWW browser of a first computer system has been activated, the WWW browser user need only specify a video camera name, to
10 activate the WWW browser of a second computer system (if that browser is not currently activated), and also start to receive and display video data from the video camera of that second computer system.

In addition, such a system may be configured such
15 that the WWW browser of the second computer system responds to being activated in that manner by automatically sending to the virtual WWW server apparatus a request for transfer of video data from the video camera of the first computer system. Thus, when
20 the second WWW browser is activated in that way, it begins to display a video image from the video camera of the system which has initiated the activation.

More specifically according to the fourth aspect the present invention provides, in a data communication
25 system having a data communication network and a

plurality of computer systems each having a WWW browser and an WWW server, with the WWW server of each said computer system including browser activation means operable for activating the corresponding WWW browser, with each of said WWW servers including a video camera and video camera operation means for controlling the supplying of video data generated by said video camera to said network, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising

HTTP communication means for executing communication between the virtual WWW server apparatus and each of said WWW browsers via said network,

a stored HTML generating procedure file containing procedure information for use in generating a HTML file and also containing picture embedding information for causing a WWW browser to activate a predetermined plug-in program for controlling said WWW browser to selectively display a plurality of video images from respective ones of said video cameras in response to respective input requests which specify said video camera names, with said picture embedding information identifying said virtual WWW server apparatus as a source of video data for use in generating each of said video images,

a stored camera name linkage file containing

information relating respective video camera names, to
corresponding locations of said video camera operation
means of said WWW servers,

request processing means for respectively detecting
5 when a file transfer request which specifies said HTML
generating procedure file or which specifies a name of a
video camera located at the WWW server of a second one
of said computer systems is received by said HTTP
communication means from a first one of said WWW
10 browsers,

data acquisition means for executing communication
with said WWW servers via said network,

HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a file
15 transfer request from said first one of said WWW
browsers by reading out said HTML generating procedure
file , using the contents of said HTML generating
procedure file to produce a generated HTML file
containing said plug-in acquisition information, and
20 supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP
communication means to be transferred to said first WWW
browser via said network,

camera control means for receiving from said
request processing means said video camera name, reading
25 out the contents of said linkage file to obtain a

location of said video camera operation means
corresponding to said video camera name, sending to said
video camera operation means of the WWW server of said
second computer system, via said data acquisition means
5 and said network, a request for transfer of video data
from a video camera corresponding to said video camera
name via said network to said data acquisition means ,
and transferring said video data from said data
acquisition means to said HTTP communication means, to
10 be transferred via said network to said first WWW
browser, and

browser activation designation means controlled by
said camera control means for sending a browser
activation request to said browser activation means of
15 the second computer system via said data acquisition
means and said network,

said second WWW browser being controlled by said
browser activation means to be activated thereby and to
send to said virtual WWW server apparatus a file
20 transfer request specifying said HTML generating
procedure file, to thereby obtain from said virtual WWW
server apparatus said picture embedding information and
to activate said plug-in program.

Furthermore, said virtual WWW server apparatus may
25 comprise means for determining the network address of

said first computer system, for obtaining from said linkage file the name of said video camera of said first computer system as a video camera name corresponding to said network address, and sending said video camera name to said to said second WWW server to be thereby supplied to said second WWW browser when said second WWW browser has been activated, while said second WWW browser may comprise means functioning, following said activation of said second WWW browser, to automatically send to said virtual WWW server apparatus a request to receive video data from said video camera of said first computer system, with said request specifying said video camera name which is supplied from said second WWW server.

According to a fifth aspect, a virtual WWW server apparatus according to the present invention can be utilized in conjunction with a plurality of computer systems each having WWW browser and a WWW server which is equipped with a video camera, to enable interactive TV communication between the users of these WWW browsers via a data communication network. In particular this enables any of these users, when desiring to enter into an interactive TV session which is already in progress between the respective computer systems of two or more other users, to do so simply by executing a simple input operation to obtain and activate the necessary plug-in

program, and activating that user's video camera if it is not currently activated.

This is achieved, essentially by:

(1) providing in the HTML generating procedure
5 file that is stored by the virtual WWW server apparatus,
picture embedding information which (when a resultant
generated HTML file produced by the virtual WWW server
apparatus is received and analyzed by a WWW browser)
will cause the WWW browser to activate an appropriate
10 plug-in program which has been designed for controlling
interactive TV operation,

(2) providing in the virtual WWW server apparatus
a linkage file which relates each video camera name to
location information (i.e., a URL) for use in sending to
15 the corresponding WWW server a request for starting the
transfer of video data from that video camera to the
virtual WWW server apparatus, via the network, with the
video data then being transferred by the virtual WWW
server apparatus to the requesting WWW browser, and
20 means for establishing respective connections via the
network to all of the WWW servers whose video camera
names are registered in the linkage file, when a request
is received from any of the computer systems to initiate
an interactive TV connection to another one the computer
25 systems.

(3) configuring each of the WWW servers with means for monitoring the activation status of the corresponding video camera, and means which can respond to a request from the virtual WWW server apparatus for transfer of video data, by generating and returning a message indicative of an inactive status, if the video camera is not activated when that request is received, and

(4) providing in the virtual WWW server apparatus means for receiving each such message, and for maintaining the corresponding network connection between that WWW server and the virtual WWW server apparatus unchanged, until the corresponding video camera is activated and can then begin sending video data to the virtual WWW server apparatus via that connection.

More specifically according to the fifth aspect the present invention provides, in a data communication system having a data communication network and a plurality of computer systems each having a WWW browser and a WWW server, with the WWW server of each said computer system including a video camera, video camera operation means for controlling the supplying of video data generated by said video camera to said network, means for monitoring the operation of said video camera and means controllable for sending via said network a

message indicative of an inactive status of said video camera, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising

HTTP communication means for executing communication between the virtual WWW server apparatus and each of said WWW browsers via said network,

a stored HTML generating procedure file containing procedure information for use in generating a HTML file and also containing picture embedding information for causing a WWW browser to activate a suitable plug-in program for controlling TV interaction operation,

a stored camera name linkage file containing information relating respective video camera names to corresponding locations of said video camera operation means of said WWW servers,

request processing means for respectively detecting when a file transfer request which specifies said HTML generating procedure file or a video data transfer request which specifies a name of a video camera located at the WWW server of a second one of said computer systems is received by said HTTP communication means from a first one of said WWW browsers,

data acquisition means for executing communication with said WWW servers via said network,

HTML generating means for responding to said detection by said request processing means of a file

transfer request from said first one of said WWW
browsers by reading out said HTML generating procedure
file contents and using said contents to produce a
generated HTML file containing said picture embedding
5 information, and supplying said generated HTML file to
said HTTP communication means to be transferred to said
first WWW browser via said network,

camera control means for receiving from said
request processing means said request for video data
10 transfer and said video camera name and, if no
interactive communication is currently in progress
between any of said computer systems, reading out the
contents of said linkage file to obtain a location of
said video camera operation means corresponding to said
15 video camera name, sending to said video camera
operation means of the WWW server of said second
computer system, via said data acquisition means and
said network, a request for establishment of a
connection via said data acquisition means and said
20 network for transfer of video data from a video camera
corresponding to said video camera name, and
transferring said video data from said data acquisition
means to said HTTP communication means, to be
transferred via said network to said first WWW browser,
25 overall video data receiving means functioning, if

interactive communication is currently in progress
between a plurality of said computer systems when said
request for video data transfer and said video data name
are received, to obtain from said linkage file the
5 respective locations of said video camera operation
means of all of said plurality of computer systems other
than said second computer system, and for sending to
each of said video camera operation means respective
requests for transfer of video data from a corresponding
10 one of said video cameras and establishment of a
connection via said network and said data acquisition
means for transfer of said video data,

wherein said overall video data receiving means
responds to a message from said notification means of
15 any of said WWW servers indicating that a video camera
is currently inactivated, by holding a corresponding
connection via said network to said WWW server in an
unchanged condition until said video camera is activated
and video data therefrom can be transferred to said
20 virtual WWW server apparatus via said connection.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a general system block diagram showing a
first embodiment of a virtual WWW server apparatus
coupled for data communication via the Internet, to
25 enable respective HTML files stored at a plurality of

actual WWW servers to be displayed together on a single display screen by a WWW browser;

Fig. 2 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of an HTML generating section in the virtual WWW server apparatus embodiment of Fig. 1;

Fig. 3 shows an example of the contents of a HTML generating procedure file stored in the virtual WWW server apparatus of Fig. 1, for use in producing a generated HTML file which combines information from the HTML generating procedure file with respective information of HTML files obtained from a plurality of WWW servers;

Fig. 4 shows an example of a display picture which would be generated by a WWW browser in response to a such a generated HTML file;

Fig. 5 is a general system block diagram showing a second embodiment of a virtual WWW server apparatus coupled for data communication via the Internet, to enable respective HTML files stored at a plurality of actual WWW servers, which may include FORM files, to be displayed together on a single display screen by a WWW browser, and to enable information that is input by a WWW browser user in response to displayed FORM file contents to be correctly transferred to the originating WWW server;

Fig. 6 shows an example of a FORM HTML file which is stored at a first WWW server;

Fig. 7 shows an example of a FORM HTML file which is stored at a second WWW server;

5 Fig. 8 shows an example of a display picture produced by a WWW browser in response to a generated HTML file supplied by the virtual WWW server apparatus embodiment of Fig. 5, containing the contents of the FORM files of Figs. 6 and 7;

10 Fig. 9 is a general system block diagram showing a third embodiment of a virtual WWW server apparatus coupled for data communication via the Internet, to enable respective video images from video data produced by a plurality of video cameras controlled by respective
15 WWW servers to be displayed together on a single display screen of a WWW browser, and to enable control of operation of the respective video cameras to be executed by using that single display screen;

20 Fig. 10 shows an example of the contents of a HTML generating procedure file stored in the virtual WWW server apparatus of Fig. 9, for use in producing a generated HTML file which contains location information for a plug-in program to be used by a WWW browser when receiving video data from a plurality of WWW servers,
25 transferred from the virtual WWW server apparatus;

Fig. 11 shows an example of the contents of a linkage file which is stored in the virtual WWW server apparatus of Fig. 9, for relating respective predetermined video camera names to URLs which are utilized to send control commands to the corresponding video cameras;

Fig. 12 shows an example of a display picture which would be generated by a WWW browser which has activated a specific plug-in program in response to information contained in the generated HTML file supplied from the virtual WWW server apparatus, before the WWW browser user has input a request to receive video data from video cameras which are identified in the display picture;

Fig. 13 is an example corresponding to that of Fig. 12, after the WWW browser user has input requests to receive video data from each of the video cameras;

Fig. 14 is a general system block diagram showing a fourth embodiment of a virtual WWW server apparatus coupled for data communication via the Internet, to enable interactive TV communication between respective users of a predetermined plurality of computers each having a WWW server and a WWW browser, whereby a first user is enabled to activate the WWW browser of a second user in order to initiate interactive TV communication;

Fig. 15 is a general system block diagram showing a fifth embodiment of a virtual WWW server apparatus coupled for data communication via the Internet, to enable interactive TV communication between respective users of a plurality of computers each having a WWW browser and a WWW server connected to a video camera, whereby when interactive TV communication is initiated between any two of the users, any other user can immediately enter the interaction if desired;

Fig. 16 is a general system block diagram illustrating a prior art system for enabling HTML files stored at respective WWW servers to be supplied to a WWW browser via the Internet;

Fig. 17 shows an example of the contents of a HTML file which is stored at a first WWW server shown in Fig. 16;

Fig. 18 shows an example of the contents of a HTML file which is stored at a second WWW server shown in Fig. 16;

Fig. 19 shows an example of a display picture which would be generated by a WWW browser in response to the HTML file of Fig. 17;

Fig. 20 shows an example of a display picture which would be generated by a WWW browser in response to the HTML file of Fig. 18;

Fig. 21 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of an HTML generating section in the second virtual WWW server apparatus embodiment, shown in Fig. 5;

5 Fig. 22 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of a camera control section in the third virtual WWW server apparatus embodiment, shown in Fig. 9;

10 Fig. 23 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of a camera control section in the fourth virtual WWW server apparatus embodiment, shown in Fig. 14; and

15 Fig. 24 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of a camera control section in the fifth virtual WWW server apparatus embodiment, shown in Fig. 15.

DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

In the following, embodiments of the present invention will be described referring to the drawings.

20 It should be noted that the present invention is not limited to the configurations of these described embodiments, and that various other configurations could be envisaged, which fall within the scope claimed for the present invention.

25 First Embodiment

Fig. 1 is a general system block diagram showing a data communication system in which a virtual WWW server apparatus according to the present invention can connect via the Internet to at least one WWW browser and to a plurality of WWW servers (i.e., actual WWW servers), with one WWW browser and two WWW servers being shown in this example. It should be noted that in the following description and in the appended claims, the term "WWW server" signifies a conventional type of WWW server, as opposed to a virtual WWW server apparatus according to the present invention. In Fig. 1, the virtual WWW server apparatus 1 includes a HTTP communication section 11 for executing HTTP communication via the Internet and a request processing section 12 for processing a file transfer command when such a command, directed to the IP (Internet Protocol) address of the HTTP communication section 1, has been received by the HTTP communication section 11. The HTTP communication section 1 further includes a stored HTML generating procedure file 1001 , a HTML data generating section 13 for reading out the contents of the HTML generating procedure file 1001 when required, and for using the file contents to produce a generated HTML file, and a data acquisition section 14 for executing communication with WWW servers and for receiving data from such WWW servers. Numeral 2 denotes

a first WWW server, numeral 3 denotes a second WWW server, and 4 denotes a WWW browser. The HTTP communication section 1, WWW server A 2 and WWW server B 3 can be respectively identical to the WWW servers 10, 20 and WWW browser 30 of the prior art example of Fig. 16 described above.

The URL of the HTML generating procedure file 1001 which is stored at the HTTP communication section 1 can be input by a user in the same way as for the URL of a file stored at an actual server such as the WWW server A 2 or WWW server B 3. It will be assumed that the URL of the HTML generating procedure file 1001 held at the HTTP communication section 1 is "HTTP://www/index.html", i.e., the name of the HTML generating procedure file is "index.html". When that URL is input by the user of the WWW browser 4, a GET command which requests the HTML generating procedure file 1001 and specifies the ID address of the HTTP communication section 1 is transferred from the HTTP communication section 43 to the HTTP communication section 11 via the Internet, and a connection is established between the HTTP communication section 43 of the WWW browser 4 and the HTTP communication section 11 of the HTTP communication section 1 in the same way as for the connection of the HTTP communication sections of the virtual WWW server

apparatus 10 and WWW browser 30 of the prior art example of Fig. 16. The HTTP communication section 11 passes the received GET command to the request processing section 12, which then extracts from the command the
5 name of the file which is being requested, i.e., "index.html", and passes that file name to the HTML data generating section 13. When the HTML data generating section 13 is passed that name, this constitutes a request for the HTML data generating section 13 to read
10 out and analyze the contents of the HTML generating procedure file 1001.

Fig. 3 shows an example of the contents of the HTML generating procedure file 1001. As can be seen such an HTML generating procedure file is written as a sequence
15 of tags which are basically in accordance with the present standards for HTML, but with the addition of one new tag, i.e. the "URL" tag. Each "URL" tag indicates a command which is used to acquire an HTML file from a specific WWW server, as described in the following.

20 The processing operation of the HTML data generating section 13 will be described referring to the corresponding flow diagram of Fig. 2, in conjunction with the HTML generating procedure file example of Fig. 3. In step S1 of Fig. 2, a request for analysis of the
25 file "index.html", i.e., of the contents of the HTML

generating procedure file 1001, is received by the HTML data generating section 13 from the request processing section 12, and in step S2 the first line of that file is read in by the HTML data generating section 13. In
5 step S3, that first line is analyzed, and the first tag is found. In this example it is assumed that the first tag is "HTML". In step S4, this tag is compared with the string "URL", and if they are found to be mutually identical, operation proceeds to step S5. If not,
10 operation jumps to step S8. In the example of Fig. 3, since the first line is not identical to "URL", step S8 is then executed, in which that first line is stored in an internal buffer of the HTML data generating section 13, i.e. an internal buffer which is dedicated to
15 holding HTML data. Next, in step S9, a decision is made as to whether the final line of the file has been read. If so, then operation proceeds to step S10, while if the final line has not yet been reached, operation returns to step S2. The above operations are repeatedly
20 executed until the line

<URL="HTTP://wwWA/index.html">

is reached. Since the tag of that line is "URL", step S5 is then executed, in which that URL (i.e. "HTTP://wwWA/index.html") is passed to the data
25 acquisition section 14. The data acquisition section 14

then finds the IP address specified by that URL, and connects to the corresponding WWW server (i.e., in this case, the WWW server 2, having the name WWWA), and obtains the contents of the specified file (in this case, the file named "index.html" which is stored at the virtual WWW server apparatus 10). In step S6 the HTML data generating section 13 receives that file from the data acquisition section 14, and in step S7 the file contents are stored in the internal buffer of the HTML data generating section 13. Operation then proceeds to step S9, to judge if the final line of the HTML generating procedure file has been reached. If not, operation returns to step S3, to analyze the next line of the HTML generating procedure file, which in this case specifies the URL of a file stored at the WWW server B 20. The contents of that file are then obtained and stored in the internal buffer of the HTML data generating section 13 in the same manner as for the file from the virtual WWW server apparatus 10.

Such operations are repeated until the final line of the HTML generating procedure file is detected in step S9, whereupon in step S10 the contents of the internal buffer of the HTML data generating section 13 are passed to the HTTP communication section 11, thereby completing the processing sequence executed by the HTML

data generating section 13.

It can thus be understood that a single HTML file has thereby been generated by the HTML data generating section 13, by combining data contained in the HTML
5 generating procedure file 1001 with the contents of of the two files respectively obtained from two WWW servers, with these two files having been obtained as specified by other data contained in the HTML generating procedure file 1001, and that this HTML file has been
10 generated in response to a file transfer request from a WWW browser, specifying the URL of the HTML generating procedure file 1001.

This single HTML file which has thereby been produced by the HTML data generating section 13 is then
15 supplied to the HTTP communication section 11, to be transferred via the Internet to the HTTP communication section 43 of the WWW browser 4. That is to say, once the generated HTML file has been produced by the HTML data generating section 13 it is then handled in the
20 same manner as a file whose transfer has been requested, using the file URL, from a usual type of WWW server. After processing by the HTML analysis section 44, the contents of the received HTML file are displayed by the display section 45. Fig. 4 shows an example of the
25 resultant display image contents. As shown, the

contents of the "home page" portion of the HTML
generating procedure file 1001 stored at the virtual WWW
server apparatus 1 (i.e., the first eight lines of the
file "HTTP://www/index.html" in Fig. 3) are displayed,
5 together with those of the two files which were obtained
from the WWW server A 2 and the WWW server B 3, with
these three sets of file contents being presented on a
single display screen of the WWW browser 4.

The examples of files stored at the WWW servers 2
10 and 3 are the same as those used in describing the prior
art example of Fig. 16.

As can be understood by the above, with this
embodiment of the invention, it becomes possible to
present the contents of respective HTML data files from
15 a plurality of WWW servers concurrently on a single
display screen of a WWW browser, by using a usual form
of HTTP communication via a network such as the
Internet, while using usual types of WWW server and WWW
browser without modification. Hence, the invention has
20 great practical value.

In the above, for simplicity of description, it has
been assumed that with the first embodiment of the
invention the virtual WWW server apparatus 1 is
implemented on a computer system which is separate from
25 each of the computer systems on which the WWW servers 2

and 3 are respectively implemented. However in practice it would of course be possible to implement the virtual WWW server apparatus 1 on the same computer system as that of the WWW server 2 or the WWW server 3.

5 Furthermore, although with the above description of the embodiment the contents of the HTML generating procedure file 1001 are assumed to specify that specific HTML files are to be obtained from respective WWW servers, it would be equally possible to configure the
10 contents of the HTML generating procedure file of the virtual WWW server apparatus to include commands for designating that specific programs (such as a CGI or Servlet type of program) are to be activated at specified WWW servers. In that case, when the HTML
15 data generating section 13 reads out the contents of the HTML generating procedure file and finds the tag for such a command, it would cause that command to be sent to the specified WWW server, to thereby activate the designated program. It will be apparent that such a
20 function can be easily provided by the embodiment of Fig. 1, and that such a function will enable a user of a WWW browser to send specific operating commands such as program activation commands simultaneously to a plurality of predetermined WWW servers, simply by
25 inputting the URL of the HTML generating procedure file

1001.

Hence, this embodiment of the present invention not only enables respective HTML files from a plurality of WWW servers to be concurrently displayed on a single display screen by a WWW browser, but also enables a browser user to issue operating commands to a predetermined plurality of WWW servers by performing a single input operation at a WWW browser.

Second Embodiment

10 An HTML file can include FORM information, i.e. information enclosed between initial and final FORM tags, and such a file will be referred to in the following as a FORM file. The FORM information includes the name of an input value which is to be obtained from a user of a browser which receives the FORM file, and the name of a program such as a CGI program which is to be executed to process the input value when that value is sent back to the WWW server which issued the FORM file. When such a file is received by a WWW browser, 20 the browser displays a request for the user to supply the input value, then sends the input value (e.g., expressing the user's home address or telephone number) back to the originating WWW server together with a command for processing that input value by using the 25 program which is specified in the FORM information.

The second embodiment of the invention will be described referring to the contents of Fig. 5. This operation enables satisfactory operation when FORM files must be handled by the virtual WWW server apparatus. In
5 Fig. 5, numerals 52, 53 respectively denote a WWW server A and WWW server B. having the server names wwwA, wwwB respectively, while numeral 51 denotes a virtual WWW server apparatus and numeral 54 denotes a WWW browser. The WWW servers 52, 53 store respective HTML data files
10 which can be obtained by the virtual WWW server apparatus 51 in a similar manner to that described for the first embodiment, with at least some of these files being FORM files. It will be assumed that the contents of one such FORM file stored at the WWW server A 52 are
15 as shown in Fig. 6, while those of a file stored at the WWW server B 53 are as shown in Fig. 7. Similarly to the first embodiment, these HTML file file examples constitute the respective home pages of the WWW servers 52, 53. In each of the FORM files of Figs. 6, 7, the
20 ACTION tag in the FORM information specifies the name of a program which is to be executed by the originating WWW server to process the specified input value called "username". If such files containing FORM information were received by the virtual WWW server apparatus 1 of
25 the first embodiment of the present invention shown in

Fig. 1, from the WWW servers 2 and 3 of that embodiment,
so that the contents of Fig. 6 and Fig. 7 were received
and displayed by a usual type of WWW browser such as the
WWW browser 4 of Fig. 1, then the resultant display
5 picture would be as shown in Fig. 8. In that case if
the user enters his or her name in one of the "name"
windows and actuates the corresponding "input" or
"registration" button on the display, a command
containing the name of the CGI program that is specified
10 in the FORM file together with the input value for
"name" would be passed from the WWW browser 4 to the
HTTP communication section 1, by HTTP protocol.

Since the command contents do not contain
information specifying the WWW server which is to
15 execute the CGI program whose name is passed at that
time to the virtual WWW server apparatus together with
the input value, i.e. the program name "regname.cgi" or
"username.cgi", it would not be possible for the virtual
WWW server apparatus to determine the WWW server to
20 which that command is actually to be directed. It can
thus be understood that it would not be possible to
directly use the first embodiment of the present
invention under a condition in which FORM files may be
obtained by the virtual WWW server apparatus as part of
25 the plurality of HTML files which are sent to the WWW

browser from the virtual WWW server apparatus.

However with the second embodiment of the present invention, that problem is avoided. Specifically, it is made possible for the virtual WWW server apparatus to
5 determine which of respective WWW servers is to receive an operating command (e.g., specifying activation of a particular CGI program) that is sent back from a WWW browser to the virtual WWW server apparatus WWW server as a response to a FORM file.

10 As a result, with the second embodiment of the invention shown in Fig. 5, FORM pages from a plurality of WWW servers can be displayed at a WWW browser concurrently on a single display screen, with operating commands resulting from user input being transferred to
15 the appropriate ones of these WWW servers, to be executed.

In Fig. 5, the virtual WWW server apparatus A 51 contains a CGI processing section 515 whose function is to judge which of the WWW servers is to receive an
20 operating command requesting activation of a CGI program, which has been sent back from the WWW browser 54 in response to a FORM file. The WWW server A 52 includes a CGI processing section 524, for executing a CGI program specified by such an operating command,
25 while the WWW server B 53 similarly includes a CGI

processing section 534. The WWW browser 54 includes a
FORM input section 546, which processes input values
which are supplied by the browser user in reply to FORM
information displayed by the display section 45. It
5 will be assumed that with this embodiment, the FORM
input section 546 generates a GET command containing
such an input value, as described in the following.

The remaining portions of the embodiment of Fig. 5
are identical to those of the first embodiment of Fig. 1
10 described above.

In the same way as described for the embodiment of
Fig. 1, when the user of the WWW browser 54 inputs the
URL of the HTML generating procedure file 1001, so that
the request processing section 12 of the virtual WWW
15 server apparatus 51 detects that a request for that file
has been sent, the HTML data generating section 13
responds by reading out the HTML generating procedure
file 1001 and analyzing the contents, and thereby
obtains from the WWW server A 52 and WWW server B 53
20 respective HTML files whose URLs are listed within the
HTML generating procedure file 1001. However instead of
simply inserting the contents of each of these obtained
files into the HTML file which is to be generated and
sent to the WWW browser 54 as described for the first
25 embodiment, the HTML data generating section 13 first

analyzes the contents of each of the files obtained from the WWW server A 52 and WWW server B 53 to detect the presence of any FORM tags. That is to say, when the HTML file shown in Fig. 6 is received from the WWW server A 52, the HTML data generating section 13 successively checks the lines of that file until the line headed by the initial FORM tag is found. When that line is detected, the HTML data generating section 13 modifies its contents by adding information for identifying the server which originated that FORM file. Thus in the case of the FORM file shown in Fig. 6, since the originating server is named wwwA, the line:

`<FORM METHOD=post ACTION="regname.cgi">`

would be changed to:

`<FORM METHOD=post ACTION="/wwwA/regname.cgi">`

The resultant modified FORM file is inserted into the HTML file which is being generated by the HTML data generating section 13, and the same operation is then performed for the FORM file which is obtained from the WWW server B 53, with the server identification information in this case being "/wwwB/".

When the HTML file thus generated by the HTML data generating section 13 is completed, it is sent via the HTTP communication section 11 to the WWW browser 54. When that generated HTML file is received by the WWW

browser 54, the resultant display which is generated at the WWW browser 54 will be as shown in Fig. 8. It can thus be understood that this embodiment enables FORM information from FORM HTML files respectively held at a plurality of WWW servers to be presented on a single display screen of a WWW browser.

In this example, each of the FORM files requires that the browser user supplies his or her name as the input value to be sent back to the originating WWW server. When a user of the WWW browser 54 types a name value into one of the name windows of the displayed picture shown in Fig. 8, and then activates the corresponding one of the registration buttons (i.e. which are respectively labelled as "registration" and "input"), the FORM input section 546 of the WWW browser 54 uses the ACTION portion of the corresponding FORM information (i.e. "ACTION="/wwwA/regname.cgi") and the "username" value which has been input by the user, to generate a GET command in the HTTP protocol which includes the name of the WWW server which originated the corresponding FORM file, such as :

"GET/wwwA/regname.cgi?username=John Jones"

That command is then passed by the WWW browser 54 and virtual WWW server apparatus 51 via the Internet to the virtual WWW server apparatus 51. The request

processing section 12 examines each input command which is received by the request processing section 12, and recognizes that this is not an HTML file acquisition request, and so passes the command to the CGI processing
5 section 515. The CGI processing section 515 then obtains the name of the WWW server to which the GET command contents are to be sent, from the header field of the command. In this case, the the name wwwA of the WWW server A 52 is obtained. When that WWW server name
10 has been obtained, the CGI processing section 515 deletes the header field (/wwwA) of the modified GET command, then passes the WWW server name that has been obtained, to the data acquisition section 14, together with a value expressing the GET command with the header
15 field removed, i.e. passes the value:

"GET/regname.cgi?username=John Jones"

The data acquisition section 14 then establishes a connection to the WWW server A 52 and sends that GET command to the WWW server A 52. In response, the CGI
20 processing section 524 of the WWW server A 52 executes the cgi program "regname.cgi" to process the input value which has been sent from the browser, and returns a result. That result is then sent via the HTTP communication section 21 of the WWW server A 52 to the
25 data acquisition section 14 of the virtual WWW server

apparatus 51, which passes the result to the CGI processing section 515. The CGI processing section 515 then transfers the result via the HTTP communication section 11 to the WWW browser 54, and the result (such as information confirming that the input value has been correctly received by the originating WWW servers) is then displayed by the WWW browser 54.

A similar sequence of operations occurs if the user inputs a FORM response which is directed to the WWW server B 53.

The successive operations executed by the HTML generating section of this embodiment are shown in the flow diagram of Fig. 21, which illustrates how each line of a received HTML file is examined to determine whether the line contains URL or FORM information, with server identification information being added in step S8 if the line is found to begin with a FORM tag.

As can be understood from the above, with this embodiment of the present invention, when FORM HTML files are to be obtained from the respective ones of the plurality of WWW servers and combined with contents of the HTML generation procedure file 1001 to form a single generated HTML file which is sent to the WWW browser 54, operation commands and input values sent from the WWW browser in response to the resultant plurality of sets

of displayed FORM information will be correctly allocated to the appropriate WWW servers, while a single display screen can be utilized for displaying the FORM information and for input operations. Hence the practical value of this embodiment is substantial.

Third Embodiment

It is possible to specify, within an HTML file, that the displayed file contents are to include an embedded video image. This is done by including in the HTML file a tag whose contents specify picture embedding information, including information specifying a source of video data for producing the video image (e.g., as the URL of such a source). For example, the HTML EMBED tag, followed by the SRC attribute which specifies the video data source, may be used for that purpose. When a WWW browser receives and analyzes such a HTML file, it responds by activating a corresponding control program, for

- (a) handling a stream of video data which is acquired for producing the video image, when necessary,
- (b) enabling a user to request display of the video image (i.e., by generating a corresponding icon which can be "clicked on" by the user to make such a request), and
- (c) responding to such a request by sending to the

specified video data source a command for acquiring the video data.

Such a control program can be stored locally at the WWW browser, i.e. as a plug-in, or may be a "helper" program which is located separately from the WWW browser, however for simplicity of description, the term "plug-in" is used in the following description and the appended claims as a general term for such a control program.

10 In the prior art, it has been necessary to use a separate plug-in for each embedded picture which is to be displayed. Thus when it is required to receive video data from a plurality of WWW servers, it is accordingly necessary to activate a plurality of plug-ins
15 concurrently, and this imposes a substantial load upon the browser resources. However with the third embodiment of the present invention, it becomes possible to concurrently receive video data from a plurality of WWW servers by using a single plug-in, and display the
20 resultant video images on a single display screen,

With this embodiment, shown in Fig. 9, a plurality of WWW servers can transfer live video data from respective video cameras (or previously recorded video data) via the Internet, and a WWW browser can enabled to
25 receive and handle all of the streams of video data from

the WWW servers and generate respective displayed video images, by using a single plug-in. Numeral 91 denotes a virtual WWW server apparatus for enabling such a capability, while numerals 92, 93 respectively denote first and second WWW servers, assigned the names wwwA and wwwB respectively, each of which can transmit video data via the Internet, generated by respective video cameras which have been assigned predetermined camera names. Numeral 94 denotes a WWW browser which is capable of receiving these video data. The virtual WWW server apparatus 91 includes a camera control section 916 for receiving respective streams of video data produced by the video cameras and acquired via respective Internet connections from the corresponding WWW servers, for multiplexing these video data streams, and sending the resultant multiplexed video data to the HTTP communication section 11 to be transferred via the Internet to the WWW browser 94. The camera control section 916 also serves to receive video camera control operating commands sent from the WWW browser 94, and transfer these operating commands via respective Internet connections to the appropriate ones of the WWW servers. The virtual WWW server apparatus 91 further includes a stored camera name-URL linkage file which relates respective video camera names to corresponding

URLs that can be utilized to send operating commands for controlling the respective video cameras, thereby eliminating the need for the WWW browser to be aware of the respective URLs corresponding to the video camera names when it relays such operating commands from the WWW browser 94 to the video cameras. A request processing section 12 of the virtual WWW server apparatus 91 can discriminate between received file transfer requests and received operating commands, in the same way as described for the request processing section 12 of Fig. 5.

The WWW server A 92 includes a data acquisition section 23 for acquiring video data from a video camera 2002, and a camera operation section 925 for controlling the starting and stopping of acquisition of video data from the video camera 2002. The WWW server B 93 similarly includes a data acquisition section 33, a camera operation section 935 and a video camera 3002.

In addition to the usual browser features, the WWW browser 94 includes a camera operation designation section 947 which is controlled by the activated plug-in such as to enable the user to utilize the display section 45 to input operating commands (i.e., by clicking on corresponding icons) for controlling each of the video cameras, which might for example include

commands for activating the cameras, panning the cameras
in a desired direction, etc. The WWW browser 94 further
includes a video acquisition section 948 which
functions, when the plug-in has been activated, to
5 receive from the HTTP communication section 43 video
data which have been sent from the virtual WWW server
apparatus 91, to demultiplex the respective streams of
video data derived from the video cameras 2002 and 3002,
and convert the video data to a form in which it can be
10 displayed by that browser. The remaining configuration
of this embodiment is identical to that of the prior art
example or the first embodiment of the present
invention.

In the same way as for the first embodiment of the
15 present invention, when the user of the WWW browser 94
inputs the URL of the HTML generating procedure file
1001, the contents of that file are read out by the HTML
data generating section 13. It will be assumed that the
contents of the HTML generating procedure file 1001 of
20 this embodiment are as shown in Fig. 10, with the EMBED
tag being used to specify embedded picture information.
Since in this example the HTML generating procedure file
1001 does not contain any URL tags, the contents of that
HTML file are sent directly to the HTTP communication
25 section 43 of the WWW browser 94 from the HTTP

communication section 11 of the virtual WWW server apparatus 91 via the Internet, to be analyzed by the HTML analysis section 44. When the HTML analysis section 44 finds the EMBED tag in that received file, with the SRC attribute of that tag specifying a particular video data source (i.e., a location to which a command can be sent for controlling the acquisition of video data) as a URL, it activates a plug-in which has been predetermined as corresponding to these EMBED tag contents. Fig. 12 shows an example of the display picture which appears at the WWW browser 94 after this plug-in has been activated. It will be assumed that the two video cameras 2002, 3002 are provided at a house, i.e., located at the front entrance and in the childrens' room respectively, with these video cameras having been assigned the names "camera1" and "camera2", and with corresponding video camera ON/OFF control icons which are displayed by the display section 45 being designated by numerals 950, 951 in Fig. 12. When the user clicks on the house entrance video camera icon 950, the camera operation designation section 947 detects this and responds by generating a GET command which specifies starting of acquiring video data from the output signal of the video camera having the name "camera1". When that command is generated, a field

"/command/" is inserted as the header field of the command, so that the command will be recognized as an operation request by the virtual WWW server apparatus 91. Hence the GET command will take the form:

5 GET/command/cameral.view

That GET command is transferred by the HTTP communication section 43 and the HTTP communication section 11 via the Internet to the virtual WWW server apparatus 91, and when the request processing section 12 receives the command it recognizes this as being a video camera operation command, and passes the command to the camera control section 916. The camera control section 916 then reads out the camera name-URL linkage file, and uses the file contents and the specified video camera name (cameral) which is contained in the received GET command to obtain the URL corresponding to that video camera.

Fig. 11 shows an example of the contents of the camera name-URL linkage file. This file links each video camera name to a corresponding URL, so that for example the URL of cameral (i.e. the URL which is to be used for sending operating commands to the corresponding video camera) can be obtained as "HTTP://wwwA/cameral". From that URL, the name of the WWW server to which connection is to be established can be obtained, and a

command for requesting acquisition of video data from
the output signal of video camera 2002 of the WWW server
A 92 is thereby generated by the camera control section
916 as "GET/camera.vew". That command, and the obtained
5 WWW server name "wwwA" are then passed to the data
acquisition section 14. A connection is then
established to the WWW server A 92 by the data
acquisition section 14, and that GET command is sent via
the HTTP communication section 21 of the WWW server A 92
10 to the request processing section 22. The request
processing section 22 responds to this command by
notifying the camera operation section 925 to execute a
control operation for initiating the supplying of an
output video signal signal from the video camera 2002 to
15 the data acquisition section 23, and by notifying the
data acquisition section 23 to begin to acquire video
data from the video signal and to transfer the video
data to the HTTP communication section 21. The video
data are thereby transferred via the Internet connection
20 and the data acquisition section 14 to the camera
control section 916 of the virtual WWW server apparatus
91. The camera control section 916 passes the video
data to the HTTP communication section 11, after
assigning to the data the type "CONTENTS". The HTTP
25 communication section 11 then transfers the resultant

video data to the HTTP communication section 43 of the
WWW browser 94. The HTTP communication section 43
passes the video data to the video acquisition section
948, which converts the received video data into a form
5 which can be displayed by that browser, and the
resultant converted video data are supplied to the
display section 45, with a corresponding video image
being then displayed.

In a similar manner, if the childrens' room is
10 selected, then a video image from the video camera 3002
of the WWW server B 93 will be displayed by the WWW
browser 94. Fig. 13 shows an example of two such video
images being displayed. When such concurrent display of
two video images is executed, the aforementioned
15 multiplexing and demultiplexing operations are performed
on the video data derived from the video cameras 2002,
3002.

The successive operations executed by the request
processing section 12 and camera control section 916 of
20 this embodiment are shown in the flow diagram of Fig.
22.

In addition to such a basic control operation of
switching on a video camera to receive video data
thereby, this embodiment can easily be modified to
25 enable other forms of camera control to be performed by

the user of the WWW browser 94, by generating suitable commands in a similar manner to that described above. For example, it can be predetermined that an "lpan" command for a camera is a pan head control command, which produces panning of a specified video camera to the left. That is, such panning control can be performed for the video camera 2002, which is assigned the name "camera1", by causing the browser to send to the virtual WWW server apparatus 91 the command:

10 GET/command/camera1.lpan

The virtual WWW server apparatus 91 is thereby notified that pan head control is to be applied to the the video camera 2002 such as to pan that camera to the left. That is to say, the command will be transferred to the camera control section 916 of the virtual WWW server apparatus 91 to the camera control section 916, with the URL corresponding to the video camera 2002 then being obtained in the same manner as described for the "camera1.vew" command, so that a command "GET/camera1.lpan" is sent to the request processing section 22 of the WWW server A 92. The request processing section 22 responds by directing the camera operation section 925 to execute control operations for panning the video camera 2002 to the left.

25 The plug-in that is activated in response to the

EMBED tag shown in Fig. 10 could be configured to display one or more panning control icons such as arrow symbols beside each of the video camera icons shown in Fig. 12, so that for example the user can click on an
5 arrow icon to thereby cause the camera operation designation section 947 to generate and send to the virtual WWW server apparatus the appropriate camera operation command.

Thus with this embodiment of the present invention,
10 as described above, it becomes possible for a browser to concurrently display respective video images from a plurality of video cameras controlled by respective WWW servers, by using only a single plug-in, rather than having to concurrently operate a plurality of plug-ins.
15 Hence, the load imposed on the browser resources is reduced.

Furthermore, since accessing can be executed by using camera names, if a user must perform manual input to designate a specific video camera rather than
20 selecting a displayed icon, it is made unnecessary for the user to specify a URL for the selected video camera.

Furthermore it will be understood from the above description that this embodiment makes it possible for each of a plurality of video cameras located at
25 respectively different WWW servers to be controlled from

a WWW browser by using a single display screen, since various types of commands for separately controlling the operation of each of the video cameras can be input by a user, for example by utilizing icons which are generated
5 by the plug-in on that single display screen.

It will be further understood that this embodiment makes it possible to provide a command for use in confirming the connection status of all of the video cameras of the system. Such a command can be configured
10 as a GET command for obtaining video data, which is directed to all of the video cameras, and which is automatically executed immediately after the plug-in is activated. In that case, if all of the video cameras are correctly connected, then all of the corresponding
15 video images will be displayed.

Although this embodiment has been described for the case of live video data being transferred from video cameras, similar effects can of course be obtained for the case of accessing recorded video data.

20 Fourth Embodiment

By using the third embodiment of the present invention to arrange that video data from a plurality of WWW servers can be displayed on a single display screen of a WWW browser, it becomes possible for a group of
25 individuals to easily configure a simple interactive TV

system. That is to say, a computer system such as the computer system A of Fig. 14 which provides both WWW browser and WWW server functions can be installed at the respective homes of these individuals, with each
5 computer system connected to the Internet. However since all of the WWW browsers of these individuals may not be continuously in operation, there would be occasions with such a system when it would not be possible to begin interaction with another user, if the user's WWW browser
10 is not currently activated. With the fourth embodiment of the present invention which is described in the following, if such an interactive TV system has been set up, and if a first one of the users of that system inputs to his or her WWW browser a request for acquiring
15 acquire video data from the video camera at the home of a second one of the users, whose WWW browser is not currently in operation, then:

(a) acquisition of the requested video data, provided by the WWW server of the second user, will be
20 started as described for the third embodiment of the present invention, while in addition

(b) the WWW browser of the second user will be automatically activated, while in addition, video data from the video camera of the first user will be
25 transferred and displayed by the WWW browser of the

second user.

In the description of this and subsequent embodiments, it should be understood that although only the transfer of video data is described, transfer of
5 accompanying audio data (which is of course necessary in a practical interactive TV system) is also performed in a similar manner, however details are omitted, for brevity of description.

Fig. 14 shows the system configuration of the
10 fourth embodiment, for implementing such automatic browser activation. In Fig. 14, a computer system A includes a WWW browser A and a WWW server A 142, while a computer system B includes a WWW server B 143 and a WWW browser B 145. The configuration of the WWW browser B
15 145 is identical to that of the WWW browser A. The WWW server A includes, in addition to the components of the virtual WWW server apparatus 91 of the third embodiment described above, a browser activation designation section 1417 for designating activation of a browser.
20 The WWW server B 143 of the computer system B includes a browser activation section 1436 for executing automatic activation of the WWW browser B 145 of that computer system B. The remaining parts of this embodiment are identical to those of the third embodiment of the
25 present invention described above.

Initially, in the same way as for the third embodiment of the present invention, the user of the WWW browser A inputs the URL of the HTML generating procedure file 1001 of the WWW server A, to thereby transfer to the WWW browser the generated HTML file containing the aforementioned picture embedding information, with the corresponding plug-in being thereby activated by the WWW browser 144, whereby a display picture that can be basically similar to that shown in Fig. 13 will be displayed by the display section 45. In that condition, the user can input a request to begin acquisition of video data from the output signal of the video camera 3002 of the WWW server B 143, e.g. by clicking on a corresponding icon representing that video camera, which is being displayed by the display section 45 through the operation of the plug-in. Assuming that the video camera 3002 has been assigned the camera name "camera2", a corresponding GET command will thereby be generated by the HTTP communication section 43 of the WWW browser A as:

GET/command/camera2.vew.

An Internet connection will thereby be established between the HTTP communication section 43 and the HTTP communication section 11 of the WWW server A. When such a command is received, the receiving server will

also obtain the IP address of the computer to which a connection has been set up. In this case, the HTTP communication section 11 obtains the IP address of the computer system A and passes that address together with the above GET command to the request processing section 12. Since this is a video camera control command, the request processing section 12 passes that command together with the IP address of the computer system A to the camera control section 916. The camera control section 916 then establishes an Internet connection via the data acquisition section 14 to the WWW server B 143, to send a command via the HTTP communication section 31 and request processing section 32 to the camera operation section 935 of the WWW server B 143 for acquisition of video data from the video camera 3002. The video data then begins to be sent back via that connection to the camera control section 916, in the same way as described for the third embodiment above. The camera control section 916 transfers the received video data to the HTTP communication section 11, and also passes the name (wwwB) of the WWW server B 143 and the IP address of the computer system A to the browser activation designation section 1417.

The browser activation designation section 1417 obtains from the IP address of the computer system A the

corresponding WWW server name (i.e. wwwA), and uses that name as a key for obtaining the name (cameral) of the video camera which is located at the wwwA server 142, by referring to the contents of the camera name-URL linkage file. The obtained name is that assigned to the camera whose video data are to be displayed by the WWW browser B 145 when the WWW browser B 145 is automatically activated. The browser activation designation section 1417 then generates a browser activation command as a GET command utilizing that camera name (such as "GET/command/cameral.autoexec"), and passes the server name (wwwB) of the WWW server B 143 together with that GET command to the data acquisition section 14, for transfer to the WWW server B 143 via the Internet and the HTTP communication section 31.

When the browser activation command is received by the WWW server B 143, it is supplied by the request processing section 32 to the camera operation section 935. The camera operation section 935 sends a request for browser activation together with the camera name (cameral) which is contained in the browser activation command, to the browser activation section 1436. The browser activation section 1436 then activates the WWW browser B 145 by generating a command which also specifies that when the WWW browser 145 is activated it

will immediately generate a data transfer request for the HTML generating procedure file 1001 of the virtual WWW server apparatus 141, so that an Internet connection will thereby be established to the the WWW server A, in order to acquire the generated HTML file that is produced by the HTML data generating section 13. If for example the program which is executed by the computer B to implement the functions of the WWW browser B 145 is named "netscape.exe", the WWW server B 143 could achieve the desired activation and initial operation of the WWW browser B 145 by supplying to the operating system of computer B (specifying the appropriate directory path) a command such as:

"netscape HTTP://www/index.html".

The WWW browser B 145 will thereby be activated and the contents of the HTML file generated by the HTML data generating section 13 acquired by the browser. The contents of that file are then used to acquire and activate the requisite plug-in for use in interactive TV operation, in the same way as described for the WWW browser A, whereupon the display screen of the WWW browser B 145 will display a suitable picture for interactive TV operation. This can be basically similar to that shown in Fig. 12 for the preceding embodiment, i.e. with a plurality of respectively named frames being

formed, within which video images from respective ones of the video cameras of the users of the interactive TV system will be displayed.

The plug-in then receives from the browser
5 activation section 1436 the name of the camera whose video image is to be displayed by the WWW browser B 145 at that time, i.e., "camera1", and generates a command for requesting that acquisition of video data from the output of that video camera is to be started. That
10 command is sent from the HTTP communication section of that browser via the network and the HTTP communication section 11 to the camera control section 916 of the WWW server A, which then obtains from the camera name-URL linkage file the URL corresponding to the camera name
15 "camera1", The camera control section 916 thereby sends a command to the camera operation section 925 of the WWW server A 142, via the network and HTTP communication section 21 of that WWW server, for acquisition of video data from the video camera 2002 and transfer of the
20 video data, and supplies the video data received thereby to the WWW browser B 145.

As a result, the video data from the video camera 2002 of the WWW server A 142 will automatically begin to be displayed by the WWW browser B 145, when the WWW
25 browser B 145 is activated by the WWW server B 143.

The successive operations executed by the request processing section 12 and camera control section 916 of this embodiment are shown in the flow diagram of Fig. 23.

5 Hence, with this embodiment of the present invention, when a first user inputs to his or her WWW browser a request for acquiring video data from a video camera which is located at the home of a second user, whose WWW browser is not currently activated, the WWW
10 browser at the home of the second user will be automatically activated. In addition, video data from the video camera of the first user will then automatically start to be displayed by the WWW browser at the home of the second user. Thus, such WWW browsers
15 can be utilized to form an interactive TV system without the need for users of the system to perform any special input operations.

To simplify the drawing, the WWW server A 142 of this embodiment is not shown as including a browser
20 activation section. However in practice the system would be configured such that the WWW browser A is automatically activated when the video camera 2002 of the WWW server A 142 is accessed from the WWW browser B 145, in the same way as for the WWW server B 143 and WWW
25 browser B 145.

It should be noted that although the WWW server A is shown as being separate from the computer systems 146 and 147 of this embodiment, it would be possible to implement the functions of the WWW server A on either of these computer systems.

Fifth Embodiment

When a plurality of individuals are executing mutual TV interaction, it is possible that some other individual may desire to join in the interaction which is in progress. However in that case, the video image from the video camera of that individual who wishes to join the interaction will not be displayed to the individuals who are already executing TV interaction. In such a case, it is necessary for the person who wishes to join the interaction to utilize some method of communication with the other individuals, to request that the video data from his or her camera be displayed. However with this embodiment of the present invention, when a user wishing to join a TV interaction which is in progress switches on power to the user's video camera, and activates the requisite plug-in as described previously, the user can then immediately enter that interactive TV session.

Fig. 15 is a system configuration example for this embodiment. With this example the computer systems of

three users, and a virtual WWW server apparatus, are respectively connected to the Internet. This embodiment differs from the third embodiment of the present invention described above in the following respects. A
5 virtual WWW server apparatus 151 includes a overall video data receiving section 1518 for establishing Internet connections to receive video data from all of the video cameras of the interactive TV system.

A WWW server A 152, implemented in a computer
10 system 159 together with a WWW browser 157, includes a camera status monitoring section 1528 for monitoring the power ON/OFF status of the video camera 2002, and for notifying that status to the camera operation section 1925. A status notification section 1527 of the server
15 152, when requested by the camera operation section 1925, sends a message to the virtual WWW server apparatus 151 notifying that the video camera 2002 is not currently activated. A WWW server B 153 is implemented within a computer system 160 together with a
20 WWW browser 158, and similarly includes a status notification section 1537 and camera status monitoring section 1538 for a video camera 3002.

A WWW browser C 154 is implemented within a computer system C 155, together with a WWW server C 156,
25 with the server configuration being identical to that of

servers 152, 153, i.e., with a video camera being controlled by that server.

It will be assumed that the user of the WWW browser C 154 first requests the user of the browser
5 corresponding to the WWW server A 152 to start an interactive TV session, so that the video camera 2002 and the video camera of the WWW server 156 corresponding to the WWW browser C 154 are both activated.

In that condition, if the user of the WWW browser C
10 154 after activating the appropriate plug-in for TV interaction (i.e. by inputting the URL of the HTML generating procedure file 1001 of the WWW server A, as for the preceding embodiment) inputs a request to receive video data from the video camera 2002 located at
15 the WWW server A 152, then a corresponding GET command which specifies the name "camera1" of the video camera 2002 is generated and transferred via the HTTP communication section 43, the HTTP communication section 11, and the request processing section 12 to the camera
20 control section 916, thereby establishing an Internet connection between the HTTP communication section 11 and HTTP communication section 43. The camera control section 916 then reads out the contents of the camera name-URL linkage file, and uses the received camera name
25 "camera1" to obtain from that file the URL of that video

camera (more specifically, the URL for use in sending a camera operating command to the camera operation section 1925 for acquisition of video data) and uses that URL to establish an Internet connection to the WWW server A 152
5 and to start to obtain video data from the video camera 2002.

At that time, the camera control section 916 also obtains from the camera name-URL linkage file the corresponding URLs for all of the other video cameras of
10 the interactive TV system. Assuming that power is then being supplied to the video camera 3002, the camera status monitoring section 1528 detects that condition and notifies the camera operation section 1925. The camera operation section 1925 accordingly sends a
15 request to the data acquisition section 23, to initiate acquiring and transferring the video data generated by the video camera 2002 via the HTTP communication section 21 and the data acquisition section 14 to the camera control section 916, which passes the received video
20 data to the HTTP communication section 11. The camera control section 916 also passes the URLs of the other video cameras to the overall video data receiving section 1518, to thereby designate transfer of
25 the video cameras of the interactive TV system to the

WWW browser C 154. The overall video data receiving section 1518 then establishes respective connections via the data acquisition section 14 and the Internet to all of the other WWW servers (i.e., in this example to the WWW server B 153) and sends requests to their respective camera control sections for transmission of video camera images. If the video camera of such a WWW server is currently in operation at that time, then the corresponding video data will immediately start to be transferred, via the corresponding connection that has been established through the Internet by the overall video data receiving section 1518, to the camera control section 916.

Thus at that time, if one or more video cameras of the interactive TV system other than the video camera 2002 are currently activated, the camera control section 916 executes multiplexing of the stream of video data from the video camera 2002 which it receives directly from the data acquisition section 14 with the respective streams of video data which are obtained from the other video cameras via the connections established by the overall video data receiving section 1518. The multiplexed stream of video data is transferred by the camera control section 916 via the HTTP communication section 11 and HTTP communication section 43 to the WWW

browser C 154, to be demultiplexed and displayed by that browser (under the control of the plug-in) as a set of respective video images from the various video cameras.

5 However if it is assumed that in this example, power is not being applied to the video camera 3002 when the connection to the WWW server B 153 is established by the overall video data receiving section 1518, then the camera status monitoring section 1538 will notify the
10 camera operation section 1935 of this "camera power OFF" condition, In that case, the camera operation section 1935 responds by sending a request to the status notification section 1537 to notify the virtual WWW server apparatus 151 of this condition. The status
15 notification section 1537 then inputs a message to the data acquisition section 33 (to be transferred to the overall video data receiving section 1518 via the Internet connection that has already been established by the overall video data receiving section 1518 for
20 transferring video data from the video camera 3002) notifying that power has not yet been switched on to the video camera 3002. When the overall video data receiving section 1518 receives that notification, it establishes a waiting condition for the connection via
25 the Internet between the overall video data receiving

section 1518 and the WWW server B 153, i.e. with the connection being held unchanged. In that condition, if the user of the WWW browser corresponding to the WWW server B 153 subsequently decides to enter the

5 interactive TV session, the user can simply activate the necessary plug-in (as described above) and switch on power to the video camera 3002. The video data from the video camera 3002 of the WWW server B 153 then begins to be acquired by the data acquisition section 33, received

10 by the overall video data receiving section 1518 via that connection and supplied to the camera control section 916.

That is to say, when the video camera 3002 is switched on, the camera status monitoring section 1538

15 notifies the camera operation section 1935 of that change in status, whereupon the camera operation section 1935 requests the data acquisition section 33 to begin acquiring video data from the video camera 3002 and sending the video data via the Internet connection that

20 has been held in the waiting condition as described above, to the overall video data receiving section 1518, and hence to be multiplexed with the video data data flow from the video camera 2002 and sent to the WWW browser C 154, to be displayed by the display section

25 45.

Hence at this stage, two video images are being displayed by the display section 45 of the WWW browser C 154, from the video camera 2002 and video camera 3002 respectively.

5 The successive operations executed by the request processing section 12 and camera control section 916 of this embodiment are shown in the flow diagram of Fig. 24.

 It can thus be understood that with this
10 embodiment, once an interactive TV session has been initiated between two or more users, any other user can immediately start to participate in the session by switching on power to the corresponding video camera and performing a simple input operation.

15 It is possible that while the aforementioned waiting state of an Internet connection has been established by the overall video data receiving section 1518, the connection may be broken. For example if a firewall is established between the virtual WWW server
20 apparatus 151 and the WWW server B 153, then if transmission/reception of data between these via an Internet connection is halted for longer than a predetermined interval, the connection between these will be automatically broken. In such a case, the
25 camera control section 916 recognizes that the condition

of having Internet connections established to all of the servers of the interactive TV system no longer exists. The camera control section 916 then again reads out the camera name-URL linkage file, to obtain the URLs of the various video cameras, and supplies these to the overall video data receiving section 1518 which thereby uses the requisite URL to re-establish the connection which has been broken.

It can thus be understood that this embodiment is applicable to interaction between computer systems which utilize firewall protection.

As can be understood from the above, with the present invention the following results are achieved. Firstly, the invention enables concurrent display of the contents of a plurality of files acquired from respective WWW servers via a network such as the Internet and enables and operating commands to be issued based on the displayed file contents, by using a single display screen, using prior art types of WWW servers and browsers and without the need to alter the HTTP communication method.

Secondly, when one or more of the files acquired from the plurality of WWW servers is a HTML FORM file, it is made possible to send responses to the contents of the FORM files to the respective WWW servers which

originated these files, using the single display screen.

Thirdly, it becomes possible for a WWW browser to display video data from a plurality of video cameras controlled by respective WWW servers, for a purpose such as remote monitoring, by using a single plug-in, so that the load on the browser is reduced by comparison with prior art arrangements for implementing such a system.

Fourthly, it becomes possible to easily implement a simple interactive TV system in which a first user can cause automatic activation of the WWW browser of a second user by the action of sending to the WWW server of the second user a request for acquisition of video data from the video camera of the second user, while at the same time causing video data from the video camera of the first user to be displayed by the newly activated WWW browser, thereby notifying the second user to begin the interaction.

Fifthly, it becomes possible it becomes possible to easily implement a simple interactive TV system in which a user can immediately enter into an interaction which is currently in progress between two or more other users, by the action of the first user switching on power to a video camera, with video data from that camera being thereby immediately displayed by the WWW browsers of the other users. Hence it becomes possible

for a user to easily join an interaction which is in progress, without performing any special types of operation.

It should be noted that the scope of the present invention is not limited to the contents of the
5 embodiments described above. In particular, rather than providing only a single HTML generating procedure file at the virtual WWW server apparatus, it would be possible to provide a plurality of such HTML generating
10 procedure files, having respectively different URLs. In that case, the virtual WWW server apparatus could for example be used to implement a plurality of remote monitoring systems, etc., each of which could be accessed from a WWW browser by inputting the URL of the
15 appropriate HTML generating procedure file.

Also, in the described embodiments, a predetermined camera name is assumed to be utilized when a request is sent from a browser for acquisition of video data derived from the output of a video camera that is
20 controlled by a server. However if it is known that only a single video camera will be provided at each server, then it would be possible to omit the use of camera names and to identify only the appropriate server, when such a request is sent.

25 Furthermore it would be possible to combine certain

features of a described embodiment, such as the automatic browser activation function of the fourth embodiment, with those of other embodiments.

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WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. In a data communication system having at least one
WWW (World Wide Web) browser which is connected via a
data communication network to a plurality of WWW
5 servers, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising
HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) communication
means for executing communication between the
virtual WWW server apparatus and the WWW browser via
said network,
10 a stored HTML generating procedure file
containing at least procedure information for use in
generating a HTML (HyperText Markup Language) file,
request processing means for receiving
requests sent from said WWW browser via said HTTP
15 communication means and for detecting when a file
transfer request which specifies said HTML generating
procedure file is received,
data acquisition means for executing HTTP
communication and data acquisition with other ones of
20 said plurality of WWW servers via said network,
HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a
file transfer request by reading out said HTML
generating procedure file and utilizing said procedure
25 information to produce a generated HTML file, and

supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP
communication means to be transferred to said WWW
browser via said network,

wherein said HTML generating procedure file
5 includes information expressing respective locations of
a predetermined plurality of HTML files which are held
at respective ones of said plurality of WWW servers, and
wherein said HTML generating means comprises means
for analyzing said HTML file contents to obtain said
10 location information, successively supplying said
location information for said plurality of HTML files to
said data acquisition means to thereby obtain said
HTML files from said WWW servers by HTTP transfer via
said network, and combining respective contents of said
15 HTML files with said procedure information from said
HTML generating procedure file to produce said
generated HTML file.

2. The virtual WWW server apparatus according to claim
1, wherein

20 said request processing section includes means
for detecting that a set of information sent in response
to a FORM HTML file has been received by said HTTP

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communication means from said WWW browser, and

said HTML generating means comprises means for
analyzing each of said plurality of HTML files to detect
the presence of FORM HTML files, attaching to FORM

5 information contained in a detected FORM HTML file an
identifier indicative of a one of said plurality of
actual WWW servers which originated said FORM HTML file,
combining respective contents of said HTML files with
said procedure information contained in said HTML
10 generating procedure file to produce said generated HTML
file, and supplying said generated HTML file to said
HTTP communication means to be transferred to said
WWW browser via said network,

and wherein said virtual WWW server apparatus
15 further comprises interface processing means for
receiving each said set of information sent from said
WWW browser in response to a FORM HTML file and detected
by said request processing means, and for using
said identifier to control said data acquisition means
20 to send said set of information to said originating
one of the plurality of WWW servers, by HTTP via said
network.

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3. A data communication system having at least one
WWW (World Wide Web) browser which is connected via a
data communication network to a plurality of WWW
5 servers, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising
HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) communication
means for executing communication between the
virtual WWW server apparatus and the WWW browser via
said network,
10 a stored HTML generating procedure file
containing at least procedure information for use in
generating a HTML (HyperText Markup Language) file,
request processing means for receiving
requests sent from said WWW browser via said HTTP
15 communication means and for detecting when a file
transfer request which specifies said HTML generating
procedure file is received,
data acquisition means for executing HTTP
communication and data acquisition with other ones of
20 said plurality of WWW servers via said network,
HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a
file transfer request by reading out said HTML
generating procedure file and utilizing said procedure
25 information to produce a generated HTML file, and
wherein each of said plurality of WWW servers

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includes a video camera identified by a corresponding name and video camera operation means for controlling the supplying of video data generated by said video camera to said network, and wherein

5 said HTML generating procedure file includes picture embedding information for causing said WWW browser to activate a plug-in program for controlling said WWW browser to selectively display a plurality of video images from respective ones of said video cameras
10 in response to respective input requests which specify said video camera names, with said picture embedding information identifying said virtual WWW server apparatus as a single source of video data for use in generating each of said video images,

15 said HTML generating means comprises means for using said HTML generating procedure file contents to produce a generated HTML file containing said picture embedding information, and supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP communication means to be transferred
20 to said WWW browser via said network, and

 said request processing means comprises means for detecting that a video data transfer request which specifies one of said video camera names has been received by said HTTP communication means from said
25 WWW browser,

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and wherein said virtual WWW server apparatus
further comprises

a linkage file containing information
relating respective video camera names to corresponding
5 locations of said video camera operation means of said
WWW servers, and

camera control means for receiving from said
request processing means a video camera name which
is received with a request for video data transfer,
10 reading out the contents of said linkage file to
obtain a location of said video camera operation means
corresponding to said video camera name, sending to said
video camera operation means via said data
acquisition means and said network a request for
15 transfer of video data from a video camera corresponding
to said video camera name, and transferring said video
data from said data acquisition means to said HTTP
communication means, to be transferred via said
network to said WWW browser.

20

4. In a data communication system having at least one
WWW (World Wide Web) browser which is connected via a
data communication network to a plurality of WWW
servers, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising

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HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) communication

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means for executing communication between the
virtual WWW server apparatus and the WWW browser via
said network,

a stored HTML generating procedure file
5 containing procedure information for use in generating a
HTML (HyperText Markup Language) file and also
containing information expressing respective locations
of a predetermined set of HTML files held at respective
ones of said WWW servers,

10 request processing means for detecting when a
file transfer request which specifies said HTML
generating procedure file is received by said HTTP
communication means,

data acquisition means for executing HTTP
15 communication with other ones of said plurality of WWW
servers via said network, and

HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a file
transfer request by reading out said HTML generating
20 procedure file to obtain information specifying each of
said locations of the predetermined set of HTML files,
successively supplying information specifying said
locations to said data acquisition means to thereby
obtain said HTML files from said WWW servers by HTTP
25 transfer via said network, combining respective contents

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of said HTML files with said procedure information
contained in said HTML generating procedure file (1001)
to produce a generated HTML file, and supplying said
generated HTML file to said HTTP communication means
5 (11) to be transferred to said WWW browser via said
network.

5. The virtual WWW server apparatus according to
claim 4, wherein

10 said request processing section includes means
for detecting that a set of information sent in response
to a FORM HTML file has been received by said HTTP
communication means from said WWW browser, and
said HTML generating means comprises means for
15 analyzing each of said plurality of HTML files to detect
the presence of FORM HTML files, attaching to FORM
information contained in a detected FORM HTML file an
identifier indicative of a one of said plurality of
actual WWW servers which originated said FORM HTML file,
20 combining respective contents of said HTML files with
said procedure information contained in said HTML
generating procedure file to produce said generated HTML
file, and supplying said generated HTML file to said
HTTP communication means to be transferred to said
25 WWW browser via said network,

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and wherein said virtual WWW server apparatus
further comprises interface processing means for
receiving each said set of information sent from said
WWW browser in response to a FORM HTML file and detected
5 by said request processing means, and for using
said identifier to control said data acquisition means
6. to send said set of information to said originating
one of the plurality of WWW servers, by HTTP via said
network.

10

In a data communication system having at least one
WWW (World Wide Web) browser which is connected via a
data communication network to a plurality of WWW
servers, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising
15 HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) communication
means for executing communication between the
virtual WWW server apparatus and the WWW browser via
said network,

a stored HTML (HyperText Markup Language) data
20 generating file containing procedure information
for use in generating a HTML file and also containing
information expressing respective locations of a
predetermined set of HTML files held at respective ones
of said actual WWW servers,

25 request processing means for respectively

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detecting when a file transfer request which specifies
said HTML generating procedure file or when a set of
information sent in response to a FORM HTML file is
received by said HTTP communication means,

5 data acquisition means for executing HTTP
communication with said predetermined set of actual WWW
servers via said network,

 HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a file
10 transfer request by reading out said HTML generating
procedure file to obtain information specifying
each of said locations of the predetermined set of HTML
files, successively supplying information specifying
said locations to said data acquisition means to
15 thereby obtain said HTML files from said actual WWW
servers by HTTP transfer via said network, analyzing
each of said obtained HTML files to detect the presence
of FORM HTML files, attaching to FORM information
contained in each detected FORM HTML file an identifier
20 indicative of a one of said plurality of actual WWW
servers which originated said FORM HTML file, combining
respective contents of said HTML files with said
procedure information contained in said HTML generating
procedure file to produce a generated HTML file, and
25 supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP

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communication means to be transferred to said WWW
browser via said network, and

interface processing means for receiving each
said set of information sent from said WWW browser in
5 response to a FORM HTML file and detected by said
request processing means, for using said identifier
to control said data acquisition means to send said
set of information to said originating one of the
plurality of WWW servers, by HTTP via said network.

10

7. In a data communication system having at least one
WWW (World Wide Web) browser which is connected via a
data communication network to a plurality of WWW servers
which respectively include a video camera and video
15 camera operation means for controlling the supplying of
video data generated by said video camera to said
network, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising

HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) communication
means for executing communication between the
20 virtual WWW server apparatus and the WWW browser via
said network,

a stored HTML generating procedure file
containing procedure information for use in generating a
HTML file and also containing picture embedding
25 information for causing said WWW browser to activate a

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predetermined plug-in program for controlling said WWW
browser to selectively display a plurality of video
images from respective ones of said video cameras in
response to respective input requests which specify said
5 video camera names, with said picture embedding
information identifying said virtual WWW server
apparatus as a single source of video data for use in
generating each of said video images,

a linkage file containing information
10 relating respective video camera names to corresponding
locations of said video camera operation means of said
WWW servers,

request processing means for respectively
detecting when a file transfer request which specifies
15 said HTML generating procedure file or a video data
transfer request which specifies one of said video
camera names is received by said HTTP communication
means from said WWW browser,

data acquisition means for executing
20 communication with said plurality of WWW servers via
said network,

HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a file
transfer request by reading out said HTML generating
25 procedure file contents and using said contents to

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produce a generated HTML file containing said picture embedding information, and supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP communication means to be transferred to said WWW browser via said network, and

5 camera control means for receiving from said request processing means a video camera name which is received with a request for video data transfer, reading out the contents of said linkage file (1002) to obtain a location of said video camera operation means
10 corresponding to said video camera name, sending to said video camera operation means via said data acquisition means and said network a request for transfer of video data from a video camera corresponding to said video camera name via said network to said data
15 acquisition means, and transferring said video data from said data acquisition means to said HTTP communication means, to be transferred via said network to said WWW browser.

20 8. In a data communication system having a data communication network and at least two computer systems each having a WWW (World Wide Web) browser and a WWW server, with the WWW server of each said computer system including browser activation means operable for
25 activating the corresponding WWW browser, with each of

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said WWW servers including a video camera and
video camera operation means for controlling the
supplying of video data generated by said video camera
to said network, a virtual WWW server apparatus

5 comprising

HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) communication
means for executing communication between the
virtual WWW server apparatus and each of said WWW
browsers via said network,

10 a stored HTML (HyperText Markup Language) data
generating file containing procedure information
for use in generating a HTML file and also containing
picture embedding information for causing said WWW
browser to activate a predetermined plug-in program for
15 controlling said WWW browser to selectively display a
plurality of video images from respective ones of said
video cameras in response to respective input requests
which specify said video camera names, with said picture
embedding information identifying said virtual WWW
20 server apparatus as a single source of video data for
use in generating each of said video images,

a stored camera name linkage file containing
information relating respective video camera names, to
corresponding locations of said video camera operation
25 means of said WWW servers,

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request processing means for respectively
detecting when a file transfer request which specifies
said HTML generating procedure file or which specifies a
name of a video camera located at the WWW server of a
5 second one of said computer systems is received by said
HTTP communication means from a first one of said
WWW browsers,

data acquisition means for executing
communication with said WWW servers via said network,

10 HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a
file transfer request from said first one of said WWW
browsers by reading out said HTML generating procedure
file, using the contents of said HTML generating
15 procedure file to produce a generated HTML file
containing said plug-in location information, and
supplying said generated HTML file to said HTTP
communication means to be transferred to said first
WWW browser via said network,

20 camera control means for receiving from said
request processing means said video camera name,
reading out the contents of said linkage file to
obtain a location of said video camera operation means
corresponding to said video camera name, sending to said
25 video camera operation means of the WWW server of

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said second computer system, via said data acquisition means and said network, a request for transfer of video data from a video camera corresponding to said video camera name via said network to said data acquisition means, and transferring said video data from said data acquisition means to said HTTP communication means, to be transferred via said network to said first WWW browser, and browser activation designation means controlled by said camera control means for sending a browser activation request to said browser activation means of the second computer system via said data acquisition means and said network, said second WWW browser being controlled by said browser activation means to be activated thereby and to send to said virtual WWW server apparatus a file transfer request specifying said HTML generating procedure file, to thereby obtain from said virtual WWW server apparatus said picture embedding information and to obtain and activate said plug-in program.

9. In a data communication system having a data communication network and a plurality of three or more computer systems each having a WWW (World Wide Web) browser and a WWW server, with the WWW server of each

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said computer system including a video camera, video
camera operation means for controlling the supplying of
video data generated by said video camera to said
network, means (camera status monitoring section)

5 for monitoring the operation of said video camera and
means controllable for sending via said network a
message indicative of an inactive status of said video
camera, a virtual WWW server apparatus comprising

HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) communication
10 means for executing communication between the
virtual WWW server apparatus and each of said WWW
browsers via said network,

a stored HTML (HyperText Markup Language) data
generating file containing procedure information
15 for use in generating a HTML file and also containing
picture embedding information for causing said WWW
browser to activate a predetermined plug-in program for
controlling said WWW browser to selectively display a
plurality of video images from respective ones of said
20 video cameras in response to respective input requests
which specify said video camera names, with said picture
embedding information identifying said virtual WWW
server apparatus as a single source of video data for
use in generating said video images,

25 a stored camera name linkage file containing

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information relating respective video camera names to
corresponding locations of said video camera operation
means of said WWW servers,

request processing means for respectively
5 detecting when a file transfer request which specifies
said HTML generating procedure file or a video data
transfer request which specifies a name of a video
camera located at the WWW server of a second one of said
computer systems is received by said HTTP communication
10 means from a first one of said WWW browsers,

data acquisition means for executing
communication with said WWW servers via said network,

HTML generating means for responding to said
detection by said request processing means of a
15 file transfer request from said first one of said WWW
browsers by reading out said HTML generating procedure
file contents and using said contents to produce
a generated HTML file containing said picture embedding
information, and supplying said generated HTML file to
20 said HTTP communication means to be transferred to
said first WWW browser via said network,

camera control means for receiving from said
request processing means said request for video
data transfer and said video camera name and, if no
25 interactive communication is currently in progress

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between any of said computer systems, reading out the
contents of said linkage file to obtain a
location of said video camera operation means
corresponding to said video camera name, sending to said
5 video camera operation means of the WWW server of
said second computer system, via said data acquisition
means and said network, a request for establishment
of a connection via said data acquisition means and said
network for transfer of video data from a video camera
10 corresponding to said video camera name, and
transferring said video data from said data acquisition
means to said HTTP communication means, to be
transferred via said network to said first WWW browser,
overall video data receiving means
15 functioning, if interactive communication is currently
in progress between a plurality of said computer systems
when said request for video data transfer and said video
data name are received, to obtain from said linkage file
the respective locations of said video camera
20 operation means of all of said plurality of computer
systems other than said second computer system, and for
sending to each of said video camera operation means
respective requests for transfer of video data from a
corresponding one of said video cameras and
25 establishment of a connection via said network and said

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data acquisition means for transfer of said video
data,

wherein said overall video data receiving means

responds to a message from said notification

5 means of any of said WWW servers indicating that
a video camera is currently inactivated, by holding a
corresponding connection via said network to said WWW
server in an unchanged condition until said video camera
is activated and video data therefrom can be transferred
10 to said virtual WWW server apparatus via said
connection.

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