SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR MANAGING, CONVERTING AND DISPLAYING VIDEO CONTENT ON A VIDEO-ON-DEMAND PLATFORM

SPECIFICATION

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] This invention generally relates to the provision of interactive television services through cable TV infrastructure, and more particularly, to a system and method for managing, converting and displaying video content on a video-on-demand platform, and particularly, advertising displays used for drill-down navigation and displays of consumer-generated classified ads on TV.

BACKGROUND OF INVENTION

[0002] Cable television (CATV) systems are used to deliver television services to a vast majority of TV-viewing homes in the U.S. and other technologically advanced countries. The typical CATV system has a cable service provider head end equipped with video servers to transmit CATV program signals through distribution lines to local nodes and from there to TV subscriber homes. Within the subscriber homes, the CATV program signals are transmitted to one or more customer-premises TVs which are coupled to external set-top boxes for channel tuning or are equipped with internal cable channel tuners.

[0003] Current CATV set-top boxes provide various functions for channel switching and program access between subscribers and the CATV head end. The more advanced digital set-top boxes are individually addressable from the CATV head end, and also allow subscribers to input via remote control units their selection inputs for transmission on a back channel of the connecting cable to the CATV head end, thereby enabling subscribers to access interactive television services and other types of advanced digital TV services. A primary type of interactive television system is referred to generally as a "video-on-demand" (VOD) system, wherein a viewer can enter a selection choice for a video program via the remote control unit to the set-top box and have the desired video program delivered instantaneously for display on the TV. Such VOD applications can include on-demand movies, documentaries, historic sports events, TV programs, infomercials, advertisements, music videos, short-subjects, and even individual screen displays of information. VOD-based interactive television services generally allow a viewer to use the remote control to cursor through an on-screen menu and select from a variety of titles for stored video programs for individual viewing on demand. Advanced remote control units include button controls with VCR-like functions that enable the viewer to start, stop, pause, rewind, or replay a selected video program or segment. In the future, VOD-based interactive television services may be integrated

with or delivered with other advanced interactive television services, such as webpage browsing, e-mail, television purchase ("t-commerce") transactions, and multimedia delivery.

[0004] With the increasing interactive functionality and customer reach of interactive television services, advertisers and content providers are find it increasingly attractive to employ on-demand advertising, program content, and TV transactions for home viewers. VOD content delivery platforms are being designed to seamlessly and conveniently deliver a wide range of types of advertising, content, and transaction services on demand to home viewers. An example of an advanced VOD delivery platform is the N-Band (TM) system offered by Navic Systems, Inc., d/b/a Navic Networks, of Needham, MA. This is an integrated system which provides an application development platform for third party application developers to develop new VOD service applications, viewer interfaces, and ancillary interactive services for deployment on VOD channels of CATV operators in cable service areas throughout the U.S. A detailed description of the Navic N-Band system is contained in U.S. Patent Application 2002/066,106, filed on May 30, 2002, which is incorporated herein by reference.

[0005] Advanced digital set-top boxes also have the ability to collect data such as a log of channels tuned to and programs watched by the viewer. The set top box can be designed to collect and report this data automatically to the cable head end. At the head end location, the viewer data can be aggregated over many users with personally identifying data removed, and provided to advertisers and program sponsors for information in designing and targeting new ads and programs for viewer preferences, thereby resulting in increased viewership, higher viewer impressions per ad or program, and ultimately increased revenues.

[0006] Current VOD ads and program offerings are generally produced for mass audiences. It would be particularly desirable to adapt a VOD delivery platform to deliver ads, promotions, programs, and informational content by allowing viewers to navigate readily and visually to specific items of interest. Such visual navigation for content delivery would be more likely to create a satisfying viewer experience, and also to engage individual viewers in on-demand TV services and transactions. It would also be a particularly desirable to adapt a VOD delivery platform to receive uploads of user ads from individuals such as through an online network for search, navigation, and display to TV subscribers.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] In accordance with a first objective of the present invention, a video-on-demand (VOD) content delivery system for delivery templatized VOD content comprises:

(a) a VOD Application Server located at a Cable Head End which manages a Database of templates for generating templatized VOD content in response to requests for specific video content elements by viewer request signals transmitted from the TV equipment of a viewer to the Cable Head End;

(b) a Video Server for storing video content encoded as video content elements and for supplying a requested video content element in response to the VOD Application Server for delivery to the TV equipment of the viewer; and

(c) an Application Data Center for creating and storing a plurality of different templates ordered in a hierarchy for presentation of video content elements of different selected types categorized in hierarchical order, wherein a template for display of a video content element in a higher level of the hierarchy includes a link to one or more templates and video content elements in a lower level of the hierarchy, said plurality of hierarchically-ordered templates and links being stored in the Database managed by the VOD Application Server, and

wherein said VOD Application Server, in response to viewer request for a selected video content element of a higher order in the hierarchy, retrieves the corresponding template from said Database and corresponding video content element from said Video Server to provide a templatized VOD content display on the viewer's TV equipment which includes one or more links to video content elements in a lower order of hierarchy, and upon viewer request selecting a link displayed in the templatized VOD content to a video content element in the lower order of hierarchy, retrieves the corresponding template and video content element of lower order hierarchy for display on the viewer's TV equipment, thereby enabling the viewer to use drill-down navigation through TV displays of templatized VOD content.

[0008] In a preferred embodiment of the templatized VOD content delivery system, the system employs the templatized content delivery to create a User Interface for the viewer to navigate through progressively more specific template (display ad) types linked in series to reach an end subject of interest to the viewer. Referred to herein as "Drill-Down Ads", the series of progressively more specific display ad types allow the subscriber to navigate to an end subject of interest while at the same time having a unique visual experience of moving visually through a series of ads mirroring the viewer's path to the end subject of interest.

[0009] As an example involving automobile advertising, the User Interface can provide a hierarchical ordering of video display ads that starts with an Auto Maker's ad displayed with links to Model ads. The viewer can select using the remote control unit a specific Model ad which is displayed with links to more specific levels of ads, such as "Custom Packages", "Feature/Options", or "Color/Styling", etc., until it reaches an end subject of interest to the subscriber. The viewer would thus be able to navigate to specific content of interest while traversing through video ad displays of the Auto Maker, Models, Model A, Features, etc. Similarly, the viewer can navigate to specific content of interest while traversing through video ad displays of Local Dealers, Dealer A, Current Sales Promotions, etc. The templatized VOD ads are generated dynamically by searching the VOD Application database with each current request by a viewer. This enables the system to dynamically generate and display updated advertising content that remains current. For example, if the Auto Maker changes the Model types available, or if Local Dealer A changes its current sales promotions, that advertiser's ads can be updated with new content and selection options on the system database, and the new templatized ads can be generated dynamically, instead of new ads having to be filmed, produced, contracted, and installed with the cable TV company.

Many other types of ads, subjects, and other interactive TV applications can be enabled with the use of the Drill-Down Navigation method. The selections or preferences exhibited by viewer navigation paths through the Drill-Down Navigation can also be tracked, profiled, and/or targeted as feedback data to advertisers for fine-tuning Drill-Down ad designs.

[0010] In accordance with a second objective of the invention, a video-on-demand (VOD) content delivery system for managing, converting and displaying consumer-generated classified ads on TV comprises:

(a) a Content Management Website for enabling individual users to upload classified ad content on an online network connection from their remote computers, said uploaded classified ad content including associated meta data for identifying the ad content by title and topical area;

(b) a Content Screening Component for receiving the classified ad content uploaded to the Content Management Website and screening the content for objectionable text, audio, video and/or images in the content, and for rejecting said content if objectionable text, audio, video and/or images are found;

(c) a Content Feed Component for automatically transferring the classified ad content screened by the Content Screening Component with the associated meta data and supplying them to a Content Conversion Component;

(d) a Content Conversion Component for automatically converting the transferred classified ad content supplied from the Content Feed Component into a video data format compatible with the VOD content delivery system, and for automatically indexing the converted classified ad content in a Video Server database according to title and topical area as specified in the content meta data; and

(e) a VOD Application Server, operatively connected between said Content Conversion Component and a Cable Head End connected via cable connection to the TV equipment of viewers, for delivering from the Cable Head End classified ad title and topical area listings data generated from the meta data for the classified ad content to be displayed on the TV equipment of viewers to enable their searching for classified ads of interest and, in response to a viewer request signal requesting a specific classified ad of interest transmitted via the TV equipment to the Cable Head End, for retrieving the requested classified ad from the Video Server database and transmitting it to be displayed to the viewer on their TV equipment.

[0011] In a preferred TV classified ads system, individual users can upload classified ad content via their web browser, including text, audio, video and/or image files in industry-standard file formats, to the Content Management Website. The Content Screening Component is configured to parse the input for objectionable text words in text files, detect objectionable audio words in audio files, and optically recognize objectionable images in graphics or video files. The Content Feed Component automatically transmits classified ad content that has been appropriately contracted for display (paid for, and within the contracted time period) to the Content Conversion Component and the Video Server database. The VOD Application Server responds to requests input by viewers via remote control and retrieves the requested classified ads indexed by their titles and topical areas from the Video Server database to be displayed on the viewer's TV. The Content Management Website can also include functions for: (a) Account

Management of user transaction accounts; (b) Content Classification to facilitate user designation of titles and topical areas to uniquely and attractively identify their classified ads; (c) Bulletin Board for the creation and management of consumer-generated content related to announcements and other items of general interest to be displayed to viewers in subsidiary displays; and (d) Transaction Processing for the processing the payment of user fees, changes, and refunds in the use of the system.

[0018] The foregoing and other objects, features and advantages of the invention are described in further detail below in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0019] FIG. 1A is a diagram of an overall architecture for a VOD Content Delivery System in accordance with the invention, FIG. 1B shows an example of Drill-Down Ad navigation, and FIG. 1C shows an example of the templatized ad display model.

[0020] FIG. 2A is a process flow diagram of the overall architecture of a consumer-generated Classified Ad application for the VOD Content Delivery System, FIG. 2B illustrates a Content Management Website for the Classified Ad application, FIG. 2C illustrates a Content Screening Component, and FIG. 2D illustrates Content Feed and Conversion Components of the system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF INVENTION

[0021] Referring to FIG. 1A, an overall system architecture for a VOD content delivery system includes a VOD Application Server 10 located at a Cable Head End. The VOD Application Server 10 manages a Database 11 of templates and video content segments from Video Server 12 for generating templatized VOD content. The VOD content is generated in response to a viewer request signal transmitted from the Digital Set Top Box 21 of a viewer's TV equipment through the Digital Cable Television System 13 to the VOD Application Server 10 at the Cable Head End. The VOD Application Server 10 may be of the type which enables any compatibly-developed VOD applications to be loaded on and operated on the server. An example of such a VOD Application Server is the Navic N-Band(TM) server as previously described. Templates for displaying VOD content are created at an Application Data Center 30 and stored in the Database 11 for use by the operative VOD application. The templates may be designed, for example, to present video ad content displays in a logo frame, or to provide navigation buttons and viewer selection options in a frame around currently displayed video content. In the preferred embodiment described in greater detail below, the templates are used to provide navigation aids in a series of progressively more focused ad display types. A Video Content Encoder 31 is used to encode raw video feeds into formatted video content segments compatible with the VOD platform and supply them through a Video Content Distribution Network 14 to the Video Server 12.

[0022] In operation, the VOD Application Server 10 operates a VOD application for the CATV system, for example, "automobile infomercials on demand". The viewer sends a request for selected VOD content, such as to see an infomercial on a specific model type made by a specific auto manufacturer, by actuating a viewer request signal by a key press on the viewer's remote control unit transmitting an IR signal to the Set Top Box 21 that is sent on a back channel of the Digital Cable Television System 13 to the VOD Application Server 10 at the Cable Head End. In response to the signal, the VOD Application Server 10 determines the VOD content being requested and retrieves the infomercial ad display template from the Template Database 11 and video content segment from the Video Server 12, in order to generate the corresponding templatized VOD content. In the invention, the templates are of different types ordered in a hierarchy, and display of content in a template of a higher order includes links the viewer can select to content of a lower order in the hierarchy. Upon selecting a link using the remote control, the VOD Application Server 10 retrieves the template and video content of lower order and displays it to the viewer. Each successive templatized display may have further links to successively lower levels of content in the hierarchy, such that the viewer can use the series of linked templatized VOD displays as a "drill-down navigation" method to find specific end content of interest.

[0023] Referring to FIG. 1B, a preferred embodiment of the templatized VOD content delivery system is shown providing a User Interface using Drill-Down Navigation through display ads, such as for automobile infomercials. When the viewer selects a VOD application (channel), such as "Wheels-On-Demand", the viewer's TV displays a Main Menu with buttons inviting the viewer to "Select Category". The viewer can select an "Auto" category, and the TV then displays an "Auto" menu with buttons inviting the viewer to "Select Make", such as Make A, Make B, etc. When the viewer makes a selection, such as Make A, the viewer's TV displays a further menu that is a Gateway into templatized VOD content delivery which enables Drill-Down Navigation by templatized display ads. Through the Gateway, the VOD Application leaves the Menu mode and enters the Drill Down Navigation mode for successively displays of hierarchically-ordered video content which allow the viewer to navigate to progressively more focused content. In this example, the highest level of the hierarchy includes categories for Model, Local Dealer, Sales Events, and/or Inventory. When the viewer selects a category such as "Model" from the Gateway, for example, the VOD Application creates a templatized ad display showing video content generic to all models by that automaker framed in a frame which has links (buttons or choices) for a list of the specific models made by that automaker. When the viewer selects the link to a specific model, "Model A" for example, the VOD Application creates a templatized ad display showing video content for Model A, and the viewer can then choose to run a long-form infomercial of the Model A video. Alternateively, the Drill-Down Navigation can continue with further levels of specificity, such as "Custom Packages", "Options", "Colors/Stylings", etc. Similarly, the selection of the "Local Dealer" category from the Gateway can bring up a templatized ad for local dealers with links to specific local dealers in the viewer's cable service area, and a click on a specific "Dealer A" can bring up a templatized ad for Dealer A with further links to more specific content pertaining to Dealer A, such as "Current Sales Promotions", etc.

[0024] In this manner, the templatized VOD content delivery system allows the viewer to navigate to specific content of high interest to the viewer using the Drill-Down ads as a navigation tool, while at the same time having a unique visual experience of moving through a series of ads mirroring the viewer's path to the subject of interest. The templatized VOD ads are generated dynamically by searching the Content/Template database with each request by a viewer, enabling the system to display updated navigation choices and content simply by updating the database with updated links and video content. For example, if the Auto Maker changes the Model types of autos currently available, or if Local Dealer A changes its current sales promotions for autos currently available, that advertiser's ads can be updated with new, template frame navigation links and content, instead of entirely new ads or screen displays having to be shot, produced, contracted, delivered, and programmed with the cable TV company. Many other types of layered or indepth ads, subjects, and interactive TV applications can be enabled with the use of the Drill-Down Navigation method. The selections or preferences exhibited by viewer navigation paths through the Drill-Down Navigation can also be tracked, profiled, and/or targeted as feedback data to advertisers for fine-tuning Drill-Down Navigation designs.

[0025] In FIG. 1C, an example illustrates how a templatized VOD display is generated in layers. A Background screen provides a basic color, logo, or graphical theme to the display. A selected Template (display frame) appropriate to the navigation level the intended display resides on is layered on the Background. The Template typically has a frame in which defined areas are reserved for text, display image(s), and navigation links (buttons). Finally, the desired content constituted by associated Text, Image & Buttons is retrieved from the database and layered on the Template. The resulting screen display shows the combined background logo or theme, navigation frame, and text, video images, and buttons

[0026] Referring again to FIG 1A, a Tracking System 15 of conventional type can be installed at the Cable Head End to aggregate non-personal data on what channels and programs viewers watch. For the Drill Down Navigation method, the Tracking System 15 can include tracking of the navigation paths viewers use to find subjects of interest in a VOD Application. The aggregation of viewer navigation data can indicate what subjects are most popular, whether some subjects are of greater interest to viewers at certain times of day, of certain demographics, or in relation to certain products or services. The VOD Application Server 10 can export the aggregated viewer navigation data to an external Profiling System 16, such as a non-biased or unrelated firm applying profile analysis methods. The results of the Profiling System 16 can be communicated to a Targeting System 17, such as a template design firm or content production company, to fine-tune the presentation of the templatized VOD content consistent with viewer preferences or interests. The feedback from the Targeting System can be supplied as feedback to the VOD Application Server to modify the Content/Template Database 11.

[0027] Another application for the templatized VOD content delivery system can be developed to support video advertisements which link national to local market ad campaigns in "drill-down" fashion. Advertisers, both national and local, can pay for placement of their video advertisements on the system. When the

VOD Application is run, the national ads are displayed as a Gateway to linking to the local market ads. In this manner, national ads can be used to transition viewers from general interest in a product to finding specific information about the product available locally.

[0028] The templatized VOD content delivery system can also support "traffic building" videos, including music videos, that may not generate direct revenue. Once a video is encoded and registered into the system, the management and distribution of the video is conducted through software systems and automated controls. The User Interface provides the user with the ability to navigate and find desired video content. Selection of a category presents the user with a list of video titles available for playback. Categories and title lists can be generated using real-time database queries, allowing for database-driven management of content within the User Interface. The User Interface can also support a search interface which allows the user to search the video content database to generate a list of video titles with specific characteristics.

[0029] The core services and functions of the VOD content delivery system can include:
Encoding - converts videos to proper digital format for playback on cable video-on-demand systems, currently MPEG2 format
Metadata Input - allows for the input of descriptive data regarding each video
Packaging - Prepares a data package for transport consisting of the encoded video file and the metadata
Scheduling - Establishes a schedule for packages are to be delivered to cable video-on-demand systems via the transport system
Transport - Digital broadcast medium through which the packages are migrated from the central processing facility to the cable video-on-demand systems

[0028] The core services and functions of the User Interface system can include:
Development of UI "pages" - An Internet-based system is used for the composition, coding and quality assurance of the User Interface images ("pages") that are presented to the user on an interactive basis.
Category and List Presentation - The category lists and title lists presented to the user for navigation and selection can be generated and rendered real-time using database queries against the video metadata database. These lists can also be incorporated in the fully rendered graphics if real-time queries are not required or desired.
Distribution - The UI system supports a scheduling and transport subsystem separate from the video distribution system for the distribution of the UI assets and related set-top box software components to local UI servers installed at the cable head end.
User Input Device - The UI system receives user input and commands from the IR remote control used with the digital set-top box.
User Database - The UI system maintains a database of set-top box addresses that is used to identify the users of the system. This database is the seed for the Profiling Database system described below.
Targeting - The UI system is capable of changing the UI presentation to a specific user based on the information contained in the User Database and the Profiling Database.

[0029] The core services and functions of the Tracking System can include:
Consolidation of Video-On-Demand Data - The Tracking System can be made capable of ingesting and consolidating usage data provided by the cable video-on-demand systems. This may be performed through automated interfaces or "feeds", or it may be performed through the batch processing of data files delivered by the cable operators.
Consolidation of UI Data - The Tracking System can gather and consolidate data from the UI system on an automated basis. The UI system can provide data describing the user commands, behaviors, responses and requests generated by each user while using the User Interface system.
Reporting - The Tracking System can generate reports and analyses of the Video-On-Demand data and the UI data.
Web Interface - The Tracking System can include a Web interface for providing authorized users such as advertisers with access to specific reports.

[0030] The core services and functions of the Profiling System can include:
Consolidation of Profiling Data - The Profiling System can be made capable of consolidating on a continuing, automated basis all user-related data requested by advertisers or by the system operator.
Interface to Targeting System - The Profiling System can provide pertinent data as required by the Targeting System within the UI system. This data is used to reformat UI presentations based on the data values.
Interface to Targeting System - The Profiling System data can be accessed and incorporated into the Targeting System.
Support of Private and Public Data - The Profiling System can segregate and maintain as private any data gathered specifically for an advertiser for the use of that advertiser.

[0031] As another aspect of the present invention, a VOD content delivery system may be adapted to offer consumer-generated classified ads on TV. The VOD content delivery system is provided with a Content Management frontend to receive consumer input and convert it to video display ads maintained in the system database. Referring to FIG. 2A, a system for managing, converting and displaying individual consumer-generated ads on a VOD content delivery system has a Web-based Content Management System 40 for enabling an individual user to upload content from their computer via a web browser to display a consumer-generated video ad on TV. The uploaded content includes meta data for classifying the video ad by title and topical area(s). A Content Screening System 41 is used for screening the content input by the individual user, such as by performing automatic searching for objectionable text, audio, video and/or images and rejecting the content if found objectionable. A Content Feed System 42 is used to automatically transfer consumer-generated content screened through the Content Screening System 41 to a Content Conversion System 43. This system automatically converts the consumer-generated content supplied by the Content Feed System 42 into video display format compatible with the VOD content delivery system. The converted video ad is indexed by title and classified topical areas according to the meta data supplied by the user, in accordance with the indexing system maintained by the Content Management System. The VOD Content Delivery System 44 operates a Classified Ads VOD Application

in which menus for finding classified ads are navigated by viewers, and specific classified ads are delivered through the Digital Cable Television System for display as video ads on the viewer's TV equipment in response to viewer request input by remote control to the Digital Set Top Box 21, as described previously with respect to the operation of the general VOD platform.

[0032] Referring to FIG. 2B, the Web-based Content Management System 40 includes a plurality of functional components to allow consumers to create and manage their own classified ads as interactive television content, as well as pay for the distribution of their content within the digital cable television system. A Classified Management Application 50 is used to receive consumer-input content, have it screened (by the Content Screening System 41, not shown), and store it in the Classified Metadata, Image and Video Database 51. Consumer payment for running video ads is handled by the Transaction Processing Component 53. Also included in the Content Management System is an Account Management Component 55 and Account & Permissions Database 56 for management of user accounts for use of the web-based TV Classified Ads system. A Bulletin Board Ads application may be operated in parallel with the TV Classified Ads application. A Bulletin Board Management Application 54 and Database 57 enable the creation and management of consumer-generated content relating to public announcements and other items of general interest for groups, organizations or topics. The preferred VOD Content Delivery System uses templatized VOD content, and a Template Library 58 is used to store templates for both the Classified Ads and Bulletin Board Ads applications.

[0033] The Account Management Component controls the access by persons to the web-based Content Management System. The Account Management Component identifies persons accessing the system for the first time and allows these persons to register and create an account by providing an account name, password, credit card information and other information required for the payment of fees. The Account Management Component controls the access by registered users to their accounts and manages the privileges and security associated to all accounts. Persons may create accounts for the creation and management of Classified Ads. Accounts capable of accessing the Bulletin Board Management Application may also be assigned by a system administrator in the Account Management Component. Any account capable of accessing the Bulletin Board application can then create and manage bulletin board ads for the assigned bulletin boards.

[0034] The Classified Content Management System enables users to upload text, audio, video, and/or image files for classified ads in industry-standard file formats and have it converted into video display ads compatible with the VOD Content Delivery System. Classified ads are searched on the viewer's TV equipment by menus and lists indexed by title and topical areas corresponding to the metadata associated with the classified ads content. Selection of a listed item results in the display of a TV display ad containing uploaded text, images, video and/or audio. Users pay listing fees to the operator of the system for maintaining and displaying the classified ads on the digital cable television system.

[0035] Significant features of the Classified Ads Content Management System include: (a) the ability to enter descriptive data and text regarding the item; (b) uploading digital images of the item to the Content Management System; (c) uploading digital video of the item to the Content Management System; (d) uploading digital audio regarding the item to the Content Management System; (e) automated size and resolution processing of digital images uploaded to the system; (f) automated digital format conversion of digital video uploaded to the system; (g) automated digital format conversion of digital audio uploaded to the system; (h) ability for users to select an interactive television screen design (template) from a catalog of available templates; (i) ability to view on a web browser the interactive television template containing the consumer-provided content; (j) ability to save classified content in persistent memory or storage for subsequent modification; (k) ability to mark classified content as completed and ready for submission to the interactive television system; (l) ability to specify the date and time when a classified content item is to become accessible by users of the interactive television system and the data and time when a classified content item is to be removed from display on the interactive television system; (m) ability to notify the user through email or other communication system that a specific content item is scheduled to be displayed or removed from the interactive television system; (n) ability to modify and resubmit previously created classified content for display on the interactive television system; (o) ability to access viewing data generated by the Tracking System regarding access and use of specific consumer-generated content by users of the interactive television system; and (p) ability to calculate fees for classified content and submit payment of the fees using the Transaction Processing system.

[0036] As noted in (i) above, the Classified Content Management System allows the user to view the content they have composed using the templates. The templates are designed specifically for use on interactive television systems and the user is able to view on the web-interface their content as composed for presentation on television. As noted in (j) above, the Classified Content Management System allows the persistent storage of classified content; although the user is composing interactive television pages using a template system, the content is persistently stored as individual elements to simplify changes by the user and to allow the conversion of the content to different formats as required by different interactive television systems.

[0037] The Bulletin Board Content Management System provides the users of the web-based Content Management System with content creation and content management tools for the creation and maintenance of consumer-generated content related to announcements and other informational items of general interest. Bulletin Board content is displayed on the interactive television system as dedicated interactive television screens (bulletin boards), where approved groups, organizations or topics are each assigned a bulletin board for the display of their information. Bulletin Board content is displayed as list items organized within a bulletin board; selection of a list item results in the display of an interactive television screen containing or providing access to the descriptive data, text, images, video and audio regarding the item.

[0038] As an alternative, a Bulletin Board can display content as scrolling text, where the user scrolls through the text, or the text scrolls automatically. Bulletin Board accounts will pay fees determined by the operator of the system for the distribution of the bulletin board content on the interactive television system for display on the digital cable television system. Significant features of the Bulletin Board Content Management System include: (a) the ability to enter descriptive data and text regarding the item; (b) upload digital images to the content management; (c) upload digital video to the content management system; (d) upload digital audio to the content management system; (e) automated size and resolution processing of digital images uploaded to the system; (f) automated digital format conversion of digital video uploaded to the system; (g) automated digital format conversion of digital audio uploaded to the system; (h) ability for users to select an interactive television screen design (template) from a catalog of available templates; (i) ability to view on a web browser the interactive television template containing the consumer-provided bulletin board content; (j) ability to save bulletin board content in persistent memory or storage for subsequent modification; (k) ability to mark bulletin board content as completed and ready for submission to the interactive television system; (l) ability to specify the date and time when specific bulletin board content is to become accessible by users of the interactive television system and the data and time when specific bulletin board content is to be removed from display on the interactive television system; (m) ability to notify the user through email or other communication system that specific bulletin board content is scheduled to be displayed or removed from the interactive television system; (n) ability to modify and resubmit previously created bulletin board content for display on the interactive television system; (o) ability to access viewing data generated by the Tracking System regarding access and use of specific bulletin board content by users of the interactive television system; and (p) ability to calculate fees for bulletin board content and submit payment of the fees in conjunction with the Transaction Processing component.

[0039] The Transaction Processing component allows users of the Classified Content Management System and Bulletin Board Content Management System to determine and pay for any fees resulting from their use of these systems. The Transaction Processing component will allow users to pay for fees using credit cards or other supported payment methods. Significant features of the Transaction Processing component include: (a) ability to maintain business rules for use by the Transaction Processing system to determine fees based on user type and content type; (b) ability to maintain business rules for one or more payment methods for use by the Transaction Processing system in handling the settlement of fees; (c) ability to maintain business rules for user account and payment settlement conditions such as delinquency and lack-of-credit for use by the Transaction Processing system in determining user account privileges and content status; and, (d) ability to process payment of fees in real-time for payment methods that support real-time settlement.

[0040] Referring to FIG. 2C, the Content Screening System (41) is comprised of a Text Screening Application 60 which searches for objectionable words or phrases, an Image Screening Application 61 which searches for objectionable graphic images, a Video Screening Application 62 which searches for objectionable images or audio words or phrases in video segments, and an Audio Screening Application

63 which searches for objectionable words or phrases in audio segments. The Content Screening System can be used for both Classified Ads content and Bulletin Board content. Content that has been screened by the Content Screening System is then transferred to the aforementioned Classified Ads Database 51 or the Bulletin Board Content Database 57. The system also has component 64 for Editorial and Customer Service Functions for Classified Ads, and component 65 similarly for Bulletin Board content. These can each include an Email Function to send confirmations of input, reasons for rejection of posting, suggested corrections, further processing, and posting of content to consumers using the system.

[0041] Significant features of the Content Screening System include: (a) ability to maintain a library of objectionable or illegal words and phrases for use in the screening of text; (b) ability to perform automated analysis of user content text using the text library as an input and alert system administration personnel to the use of objectionable or illegal content and the use of unknown and suspect words or phrases; (c) ability to maintain a library of objectionable or illegal image elements for use in the screening of images; (d) ability to perform automated image recognition analysis against user content images using the library of image elements as an input and alert system administration personnel to the use of objectionable or illegal content; (e) ability to maintain a library of objectionable or illegal image elements for use in the screening of video; (f) ability to perform automated image recognition analysis against user content video using the library of image elements as an input and alert system administration personnel to the use of objectionable or illegal content; (g) ability to maintain a library of objectionable or illegal audio elements for use in the screening of audio; (h) ability to perform automated audio analysis against user content audio using the library of audio elements as an input and alert system administration personnel to the use of objectionable or illegal content; and (i) ability to save screened content in persistent memory or storage for subsequent processing. Content Screening is automatically performed with the Content Management System 40 during the user process of submitting and/or creating consumer-generated content or may be performed as a process subsequent to the creation of content by the user.

[0042] Referring to FIG. 2D, the Content Feed System 42 and the Content Conversion System 43 provide for the transfer of user content from the Content Screening System and conversion to video content format compatible with the VOD Content Delivery System 44. The Content Feed System 42 has a Content Selection / Date Filtering Application which selects consumer-generated content uploaded to the system that is within the dates contracted for posting and display of the content as Classified Ads or on Bulletin Boards. Content within the active date range is transferred to the Active Classified Ads Database 71A or the Active Bulletin Board Database 71B.

[0043] The Content Conversion System receives consumer-generated content in industry-standard formats or created in viewable format (HTML) on the web-based input system and converts the content into formats compatible with the VOD Content Delivery System and for display on viewers' televisions. The Content Conversion System 43 has an Image Conversion Application 72 which converts consumer-uploaded image files (in industry-standard formats such as JPEG, GIF, TIFF, BMP, PDF, PPT, etc.) into VOD content format, a Video Conversion Application 73 which converts consumer-uploaded

video files into VOD content format, and an Audio Conversion Application 74 which converts consumer-uploaded audio files into VOD content format. Content converted to VOD content format is stored in the Active Converted Classified Ads Database 75A or the Active Converted Bulletin Board Database 75B. The content is subject to a further Production Push Function 76A, 76B and stored in the Production Classified Ads Database 77A or the Production Bulletin Board Database 77B, if any presentation formatting, date stamping, template framing, or other system editing is required by the system.

[0044] Significant features of the Content Feed System include: (a) ability to select user content for submission to the Content Conversion System through the testing of appropriate parameters including the date and time information contained in the user content; (b) ability to appropriately package the elements of the user content to permit the efficient transfer of these content elements to the Content Conversion System through an Application Program Interface or other interface; (c) ability to create, maintain and execute a schedule for when the Content Feed System will execute on an automatic basis for the automatic transfer of consumer-generated content to the Content Conversion System; and, (d) ability to execute the functions of the Content Feed System on a manual basis in the presence or absence of a schedule. The Content Feed System may be able to package and distribute content to single or multiple Content Conversion Systems.

[0045] Significant features of the Content Conversion system include: (a) ability to receive content packages delivered by the Content Feed System through an Application Program Interface or other interface; (b) ability to process the elements of consumer-generated content into data, text, graphic, video and audio elements that are compatible with the interactive television system and maintain the content presentation created by the user on the web-based Content Management System; (c) ability to save reformatted content in persistent memory or storage for subsequent distribution and use by the interactive television system; and, (d) ability to inform the interactive television system that consumer-generated content is available for distribution and use. The Content Conversion System may be added as a component system of the VOD Content Delivery System, or it may be implemented as a wholly separate system that connects to the VOD Content Delivery System through an Application Program Interface or other interface. When implemented as a system that is separate from the VOD Content Delivery System, it is possible to support multiple, different interactive television systems by either (a) incorporating multiple formatting requirements into a single instance of the Content Conversion System or (b) creating multiple Content Conversion Systems, each supporting the formatting requirements for a specific interactive television system. Either implementation allows for a single instance of consumer-generated content that is created and maintained using the web-based Content Management System to be distributed and displayed on multiple, different interactive television systems with different formatting requirements.

[0046] The VOD Content Delivery System 44, as described previously, provides for the distribution of screened, converted, properly formatted consumer-generated content to viewers' televisions, typically through the use of digital set-top boxes connected to a digital cable television system capable of

supporting real-time two-way data transfer between the set-top box and the Cable Head End. Significant features of the VOD Content Delivery System include: (a) ability to receive properly formatted content from the Content Conversion System; (b) ability to distribute said content over a digital cable television system and display this content on television as an interactive television presentation; (c) ability to receive user commands generated by an infrared remote control device, keyboard or other device; (d) ability to respond to the user commands by displaying appropriate content or executing desired functionality; and, (e) ability to generate and collect data regarding the user sessions and the viewing data regarding consumer-generated content on the interactive television system and make this data accessible to the Tracking System. The VOD Content Delivery System can employ templatized VOD content delivery, as described previously with respect to FIG. 1A, enabling use of the Drill Down Navigation method in which viewers can navigate visually through classified ad hierarchical categories to specific titles or content.

[0047] The VOD Content Delivery System for the Classified Ads application can also employ the Tracking System 15 for the collection and consolidation of viewing data generated by the interactive television system and the generation of reports against this viewing data. For example, the Tracking System can track the number of viewer requests for viewing that a classified ad received in a given period and calculate billing charges accordingly. The Tracking System can make this information available to users of the Content Management System as well as to system administrative personnel performing general analysis of interactive television services and associated content. Significant features of the Tracking System include: (a) ability to access and process the data generated by the Classified Ads application; (b) ability to form summaries of the viewing data against desired parameters; (c) ability to save data, summaries and reports in persistent memory or storage for subsequent modification or access; (d) ability to make data, summaries and reports accessible by users of the web-based Content Management System, restricting the data accessible by any specific user to data regarding the content created by that user account on the Content Management System; and, (e) ability to make data, summaries and reports accessible by to system administration personnel.

[0048] It is understood that many modifications and variations may be devised given the above description of the principles of the invention. It is intended that all such modifications and variations be considered as within the spirit and scope of this invention, as defined in the following claims.

CLAIMS

1. A video-on-demand (VOD) content delivery system for a cable TV system comprising a VOD Application Server (10) located at a Cable Head End which manages a Database (11) of templates for generating templatized VOD content in response to requests for specific video content elements by viewer request signals transmitted from the TV equipment (21) of a viewer to the Cable Head End, and a Video Server (12) for storing video content encoded as video content elements and for supplying a requested video content element in response to the VOD Application Server (10) for delivery to the TV equipment of the viewer,

characterized by:

an Application Data Center (30) operable with the VOD Application Server for creating and storing a plurality of different templates ordered in a hierarchy for presentation of video content elements of different selected types categorized in hierarchical order, wherein a template for display of a video content element in a higher level of the hierarchy includes a link to one or more templates and video content elements in a lower level of the hierarchy, said plurality of hierarchically-ordered templates and links being stored in the Database (11) managed by the VOD Application Server (10),

wherein said VOD Application Server (10), in response to viewer request for a selected video content element of a higher order in the hierarchy, retrieves the corresponding template from said Database and corresponding video content element from said Video Server (12) to provide a templatized VOD content display on the viewer's TV equipment which includes one or more links to video content elements in a lower order of hierarchy, and upon viewer request selecting a link displayed in the templatized VOD content to a video content element in the lower order of hierarchy, retrieves the corresponding template and video content element of lower order hierarchy for display on the viewer's TV equipment, thereby enabling the viewer to use drill-down navigation through TV displays of templatized VOD content.

2. A VOD content delivery system according to Claim 1, wherein said templates include a plurality of different advertising templates ordered in a hierarchy for presentation of advertising elements of different selected types categorized in hierarchical order, and a templatized ad display of higher order in the hierarchy includes one or more links to templatized ad displays of lower order in the hierarchy, whereby viewers can navigate to an ad display of an end subject of interest while having an experience of moving visually through a series of ads mirroring the viewer's path to the end subject of interest.

3. A VOD content delivery system according to Claim 2, wherein the higher-order templatized ad display is configured as one type of ad display of the following group: (a) a product ad, and the lower-order templatized ad display is an ad for a local retailer of the product; (b) a product ad at a national level, and the lower-order templatized ad display is an ad for the product at a local level; (c) a classified ad category, and the lower-order templatized ad display is a specific classified ad within that category; and (d) a bulletin board topic category, and the lower-order templatized ad display is a posting within that category.

4. A VOD content delivery system according to Claim 1, wherein said system provides a viewer with menu selections for general topics of interest, and upon viewer selection of a general topic of interest, said system opens a gateway to displays of templatized VOD content having links to other video content elements of lower order in the hierarchy, whereby the viewer can enter into drill down navigation through the templatized VOD content from the gateway selected from the menu display.

5. A VOD content delivery system according to Claim 7, wherein the viewer's TV equipment includes TV display connected to a digital set top box responsive to remote control unit, and said system presents a User Interface on the viewer's TV display wherein:

(i) said User Interface displays as a first display a menu of topical areas for viewer selection using the remote control for the viewer's set top box;

(ii) upon viewer selection of a topical area by the remote control unit, said User Interface displays video content relating to the topical area with links for viewer selection to drill-down to related subtopical areas;

(iii) upon viewer selection of a subtopical area by the remote control unit, said User Interface displays video content relating to the subtopical area with links for viewer selection to drill-down to more specific topics.

6. A method of delivering templatized VOD content to a viewer's TV display comprising:

(a) maintaining a Database of templates and video content elements for generating templatized VOD content in response to a request for a specific video content element requested by the viewer, wherein said templates are ordered in a hierarchy for presentation of video content elements of different selected types categorized in hierarchical order, wherein a template for display of a video content element in a higher level of the hierarchy includes a link to one or more templates and video content elements in a lower level of the hierarchy,

(b) delivering, in response to viewer request for a selected video content element of a higher order in the hierarchy, a templatized VOD content display on the viewer's TV display which includes one or more links to video content elements in a lower order of hierarchy, and

(c) delivering, in response to viewer request selecting a link to a video content element in the lower order of hierarchy, a templatized VOD content display on the viewer's TV display corresponding to the selected video content element in the lower order of hierarchy, thereby enabling the viewer to use drill-down navigation through TV displays of templatized VOD content.

7. A method of delivering templatized VOD content according to Claim 9, wherein said templates include a plurality of different advertising templates ordered in a hierarchy for presentation of advertising elements of different selected types categorized in hierarchical order, and a templatized ad display of higher order in the hierarchy includes one or more links to templatized ad displays of lower order in the hierarchy, whereby viewers can navigate to an ad display of an end subject of interest while having an experience of moving visually through a series of ads mirroring the viewer's path to the end subject of interest.

8. A video-on-demand (VOD) content delivery system for managing, converting and displaying consumer-generated classified ads on the TV equipment of viewers in a cable TV system,

characterized by:

(a) a Content Management Website (40) for enabling individual users to upload classified ad content on an online network connection from their remote computers, said uploaded classified ad content including associated meta data for identifying the ad content by title and topical area;

(b) a Content Screening Component (41) for receiving classified ad content uploaded to the Content Management Website and screening the content for objectionable text, audio, video and/or images in the content, and for rejecting any objectionable content found;

(c) a Content Feed Component (42) for automatically transferring the classified ad content screened by the Content Screening Component with the associated meta data and supplying them to a Content Conversion Component;

(d) a Content Conversion Component (43) for automatically converting the transferred classified ad content supplied from the Content Feed Component into a video data format compatible with the VOD content delivery system, and for automatically indexing the converted classified ad content in a Video Server database according to title and topical area as specified in the content meta data; and

(e) a VOD Application Server (44) at a Cable Head End for the cable TV system, which is operatively connected between said Content Conversion Component (43) and a cable connection to the TV equipment of viewers, for delivering classified ad title and topical area listings data generated from the meta data for the classified ad content to be displayed on the TV equipment of viewers to enable their searching for classified ads of interest and, in response to a viewer request signal requesting a specific classified ad of interest transmitted via the TV equipment to the Cable Head End, for retrieving the requested classified ad from the Video Server database and transmitting it to be displayed to the viewer on their TV equipment.

9. A VOD content delivery system for consumer-generated classified ads on TV according to Claim 8, wherein the Content Screening Component is configured to detect in the consumer-generated input objectionable text words in text files, detect objectionable audio words in audio files, and optically recognize objectionable images in graphics or video files.

10. A VOD content delivery system for consumer-generated classified ads on TV according to Claim 8, wherein the Content Feed Component automatically transmits classified ad content within an active display period contracted by a user to the Content Conversion Component.

11 A VOD content delivery system for consumer-generated classified ads on TV according to Claim 8, wherein the Content Conversion Component converts classified ad content uploaded by individual users into a video content format compatible with the VOD Application Server.

12 A VOD content delivery system for consumer-generated classified ads on TV according to Claim 8, wherein the VOD Application Server manages a Database of templates ordered in a hierarchy

for presentation of classified ads of different selected types categorized in hierarchical order, wherein a template for display of a classified ad category on a higher level of the hierarchy includes a link to one or more classified ads on a lower level of the hierarchy, and wherein said VOD Application Server, in response to viewer request for a selected classified ad category on a higher order in the hierarchy, retrieves the corresponding template to provide a templatized VOD content display on the viewer's TV equipment which includes one or more links to classified ads on a lower order of hierarchy, and upon viewer request selecting a link displayed in the templatized VOD content to a classified ad in the lower order of hierarchy, retrieves the corresponding classified ad for display on the viewer's TV equipment, thereby enabling the viewer to use drill-down navigation through the classified ad displays on TV.

13. A method of delivering consumer-generated classified ads on TV comprising:

(a) enabling individual users to upload classified ad content in industry-standard file format on an online network connection from their remote computers to a Content Management Website (40), said uploaded classified ad content including associated meta data for identifying the ad content by title and topical area;

(b) screening the classified ad content automatically for any objectionable content;

(c) transferring the screened classified ad content automatically to a database for conversion to video data format;

(d) converting the transferred classified ad content automatically from the file format of the consumer-generated input to a video data format compatible with a VOD content delivery system, and automatically indexing the converted classified ad content in a VOD content database according to title and topical area as specified in the content meta data; and

(e) delivering classified ad title and topical area listings data generated from the meta data for the classified ad content to be displayed on the TV equipment of viewers to enable their searching for classified ads of interest and, in response to a viewer request signal requesting a specific classified ad of interest, transmitting the requested classified ad to be displayed on the viewer's TV equipment.

14. A method of delivering consumer-generated classified ads on TV according to Claim 13 further comprising:

(a) maintaining a database of templates and classified ads for generating templatized VOD content in response to a request by the viewer, wherein said templates are ordered in a hierarchy for presentation of classified ad displays of different selected types categorized in hierarchical order, wherein a template for classified ad display on a higher level of the hierarchy includes a link to one or more templates for classified ad displays on a lower level of the hierarchy,

(b) delivering, in response to viewer request for a selected classified ad category on a higher order in the hierarchy, the corresponding template to provide a templatized VOD content display on the viewer's TV equipment which includes one or more links to classified ads on a lower order of hierarchy, and upon viewer request selecting a link displayed in the templatized VOD content to a classified ad on the lower order of hierarchy, delivering the corresponding classified ad for display on the viewer's TV equipment, thereby enabling the viewer to use drill-down navigation through the classified ad displays on TV.