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**(58) Field of Classification Search**

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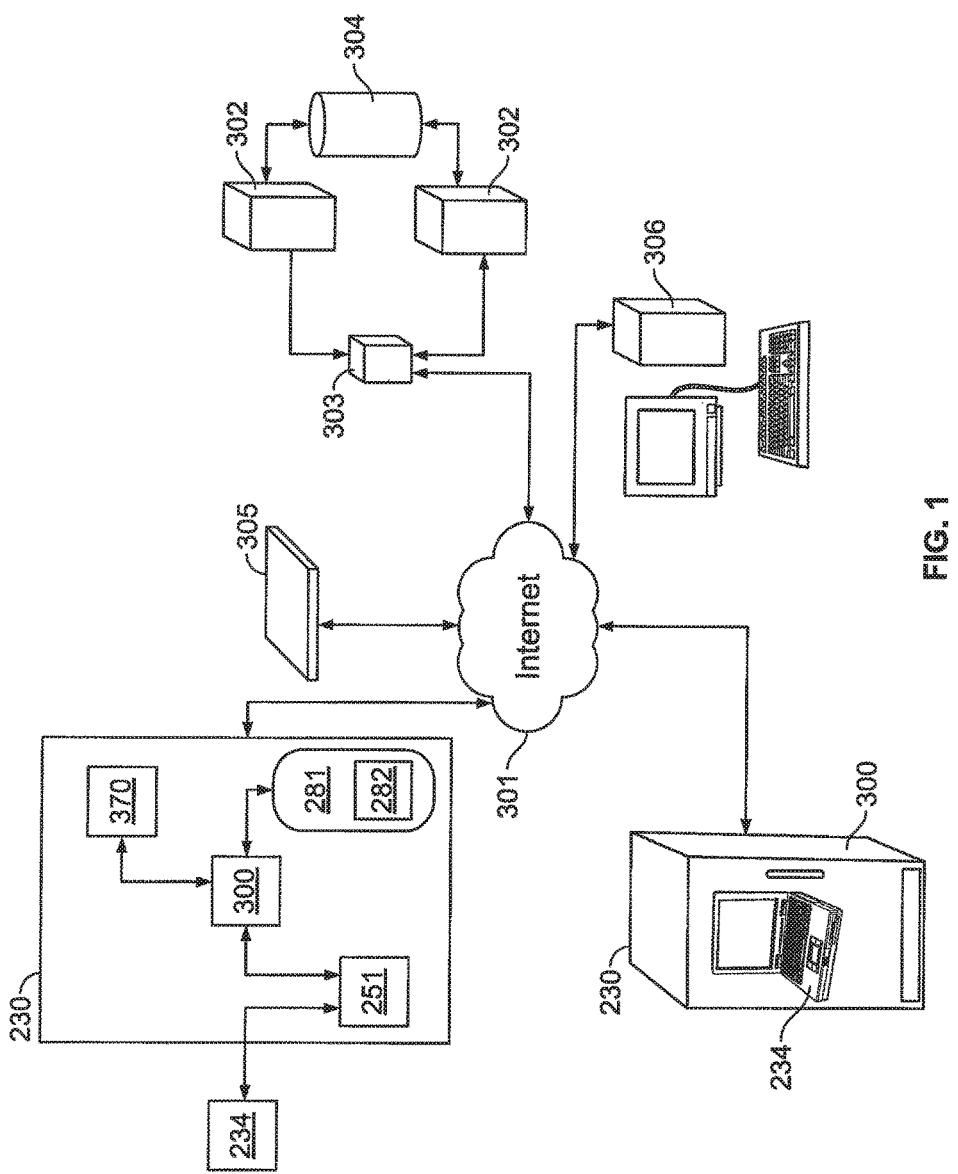


FIG. 1

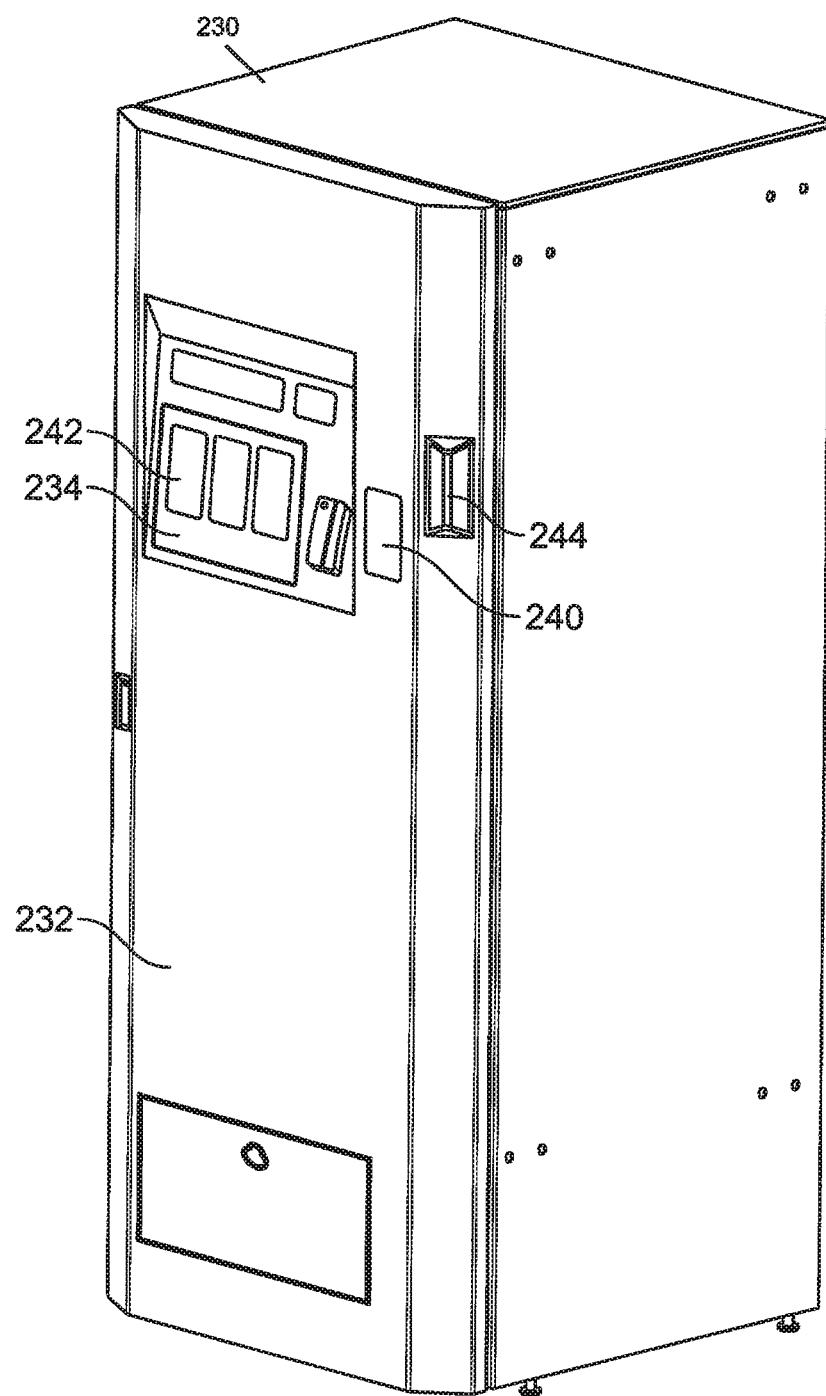


FIG. 2

FIG. 3

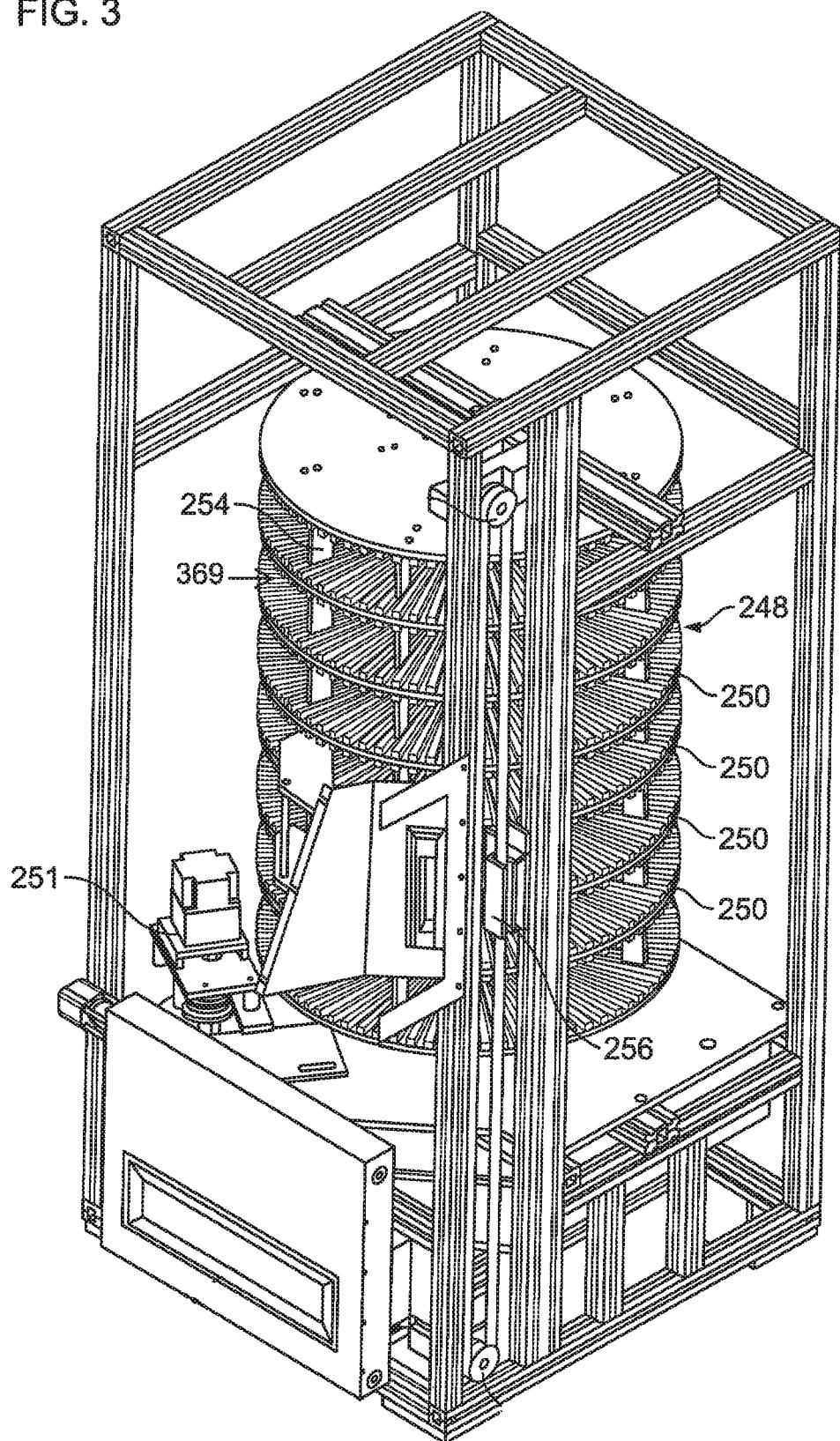
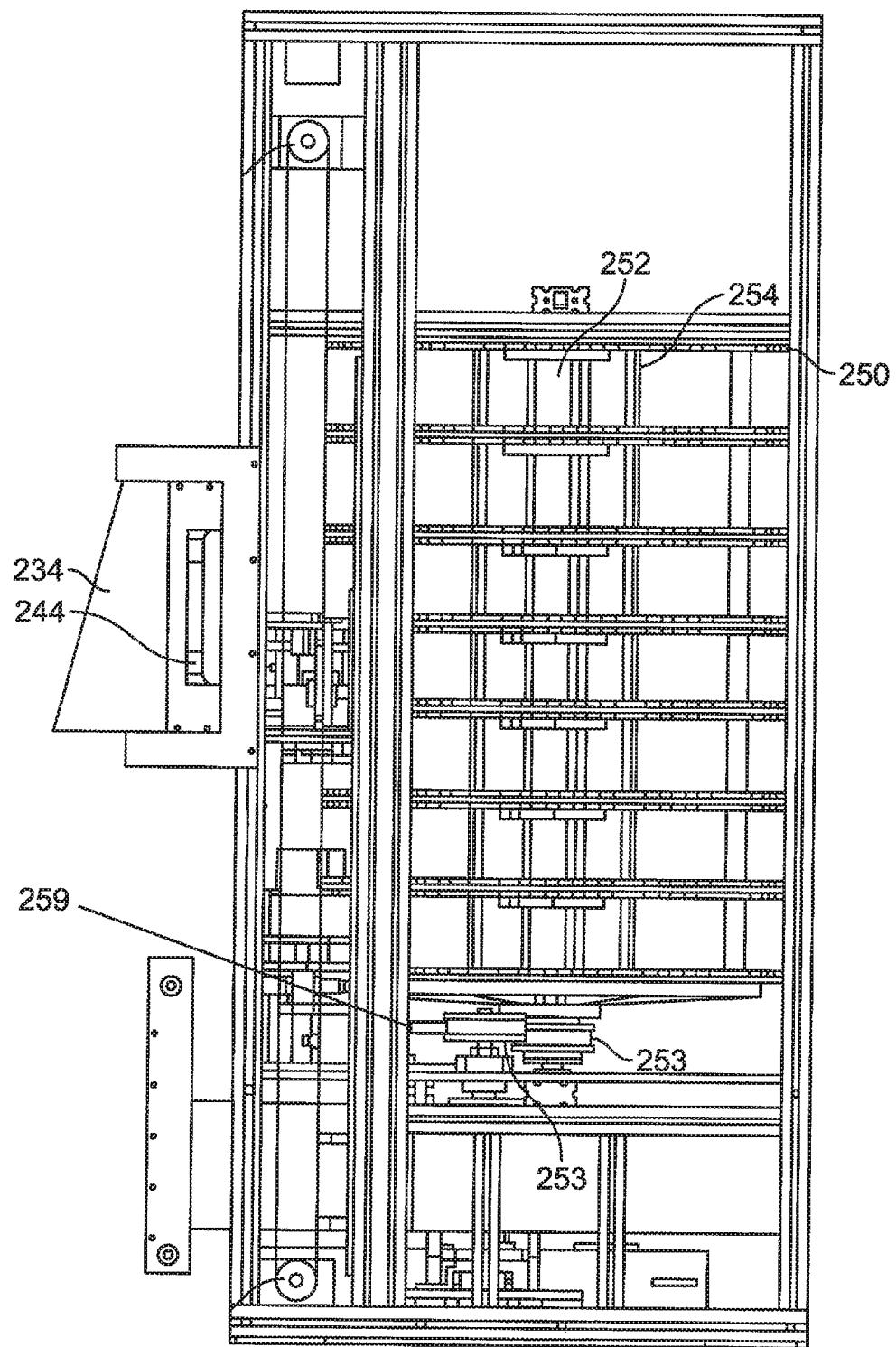


FIG. 4



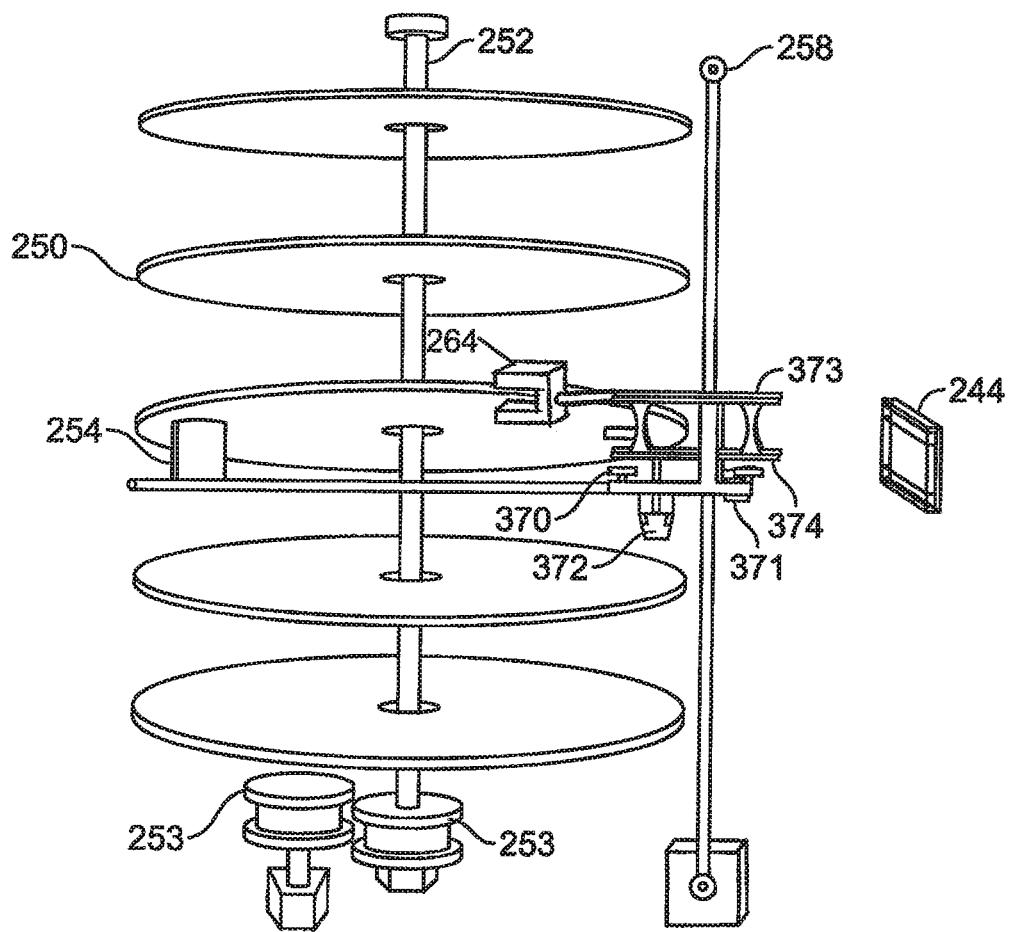


FIG. 5

FIG. 6

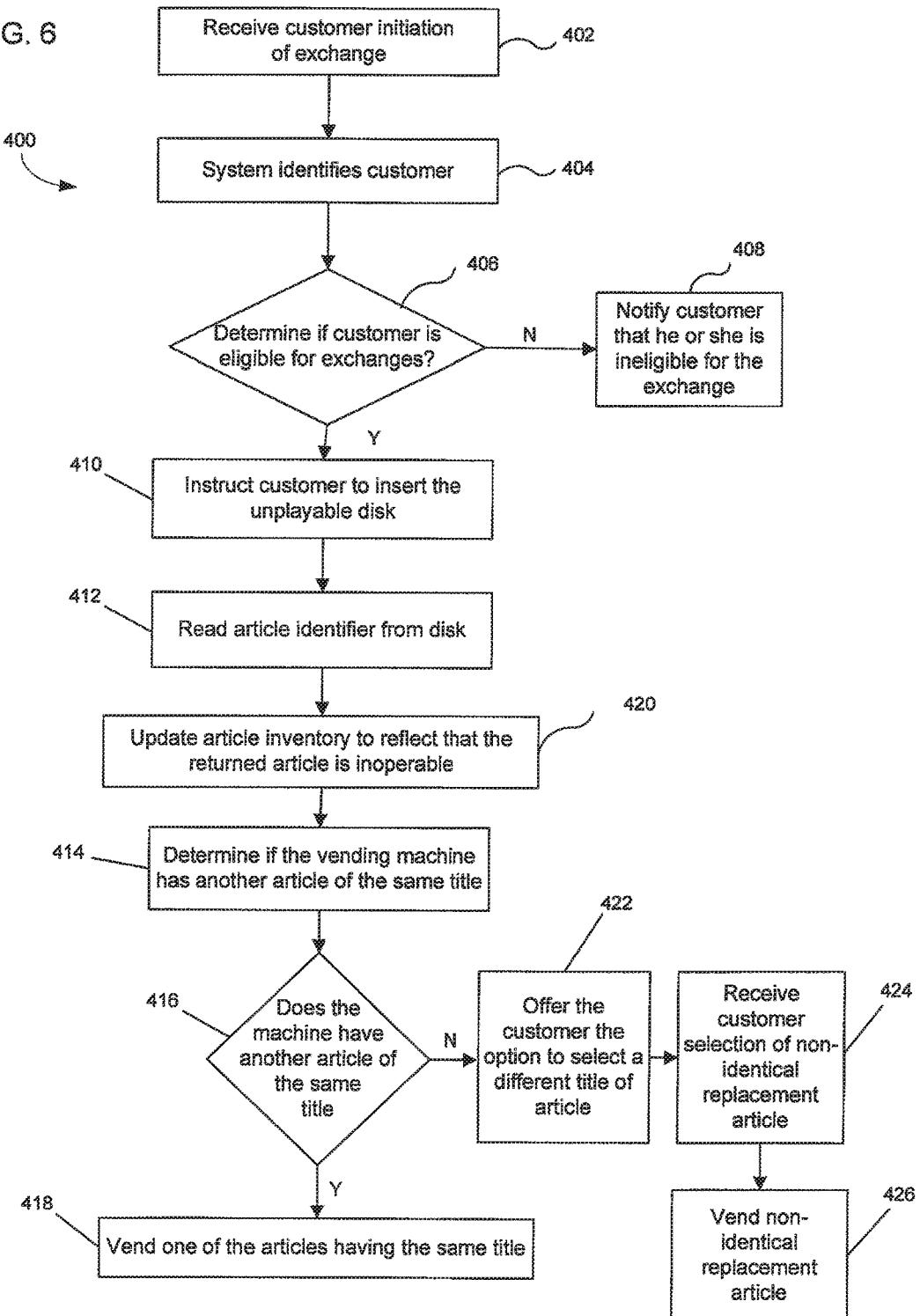


FIG. 7

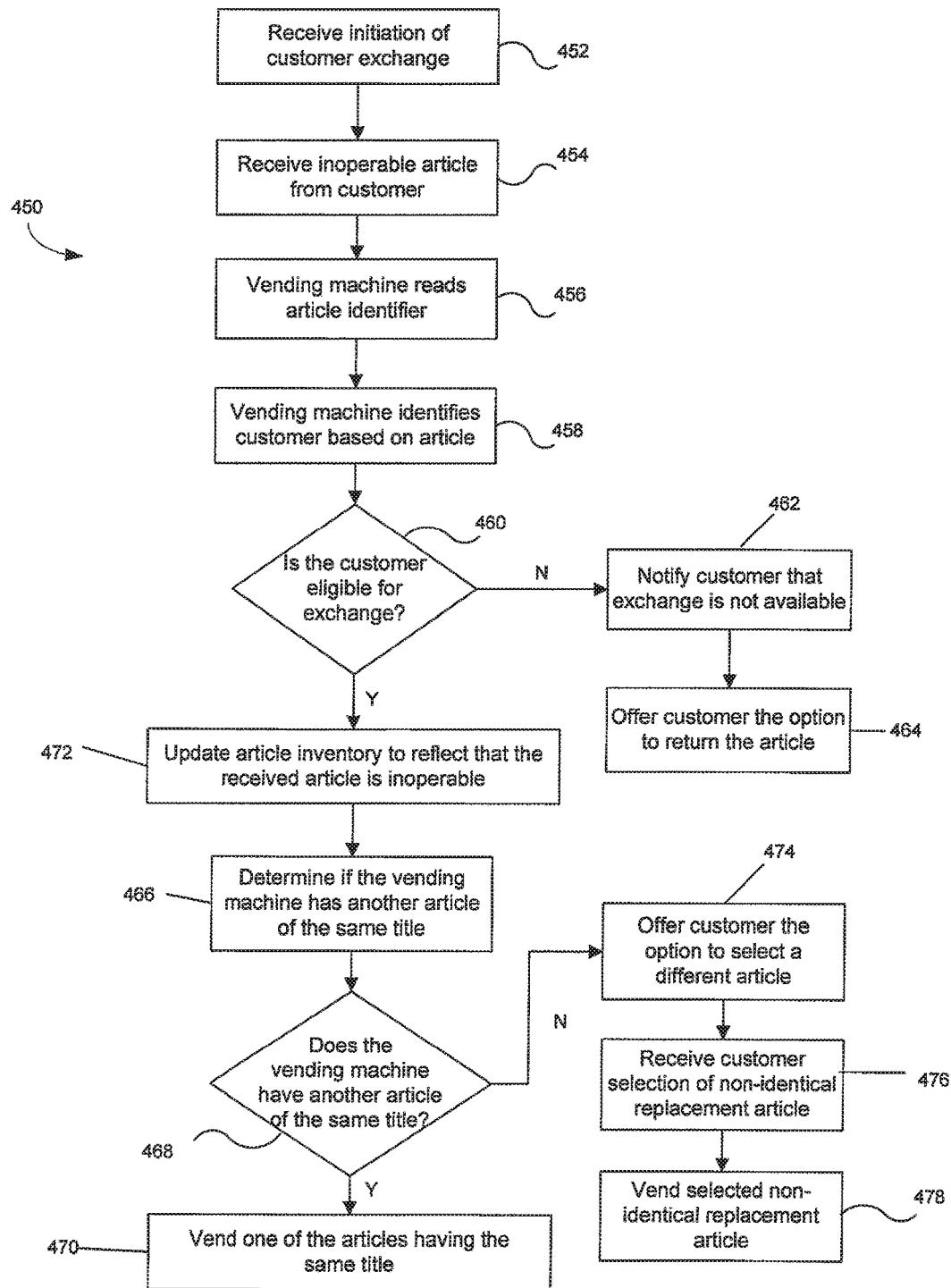
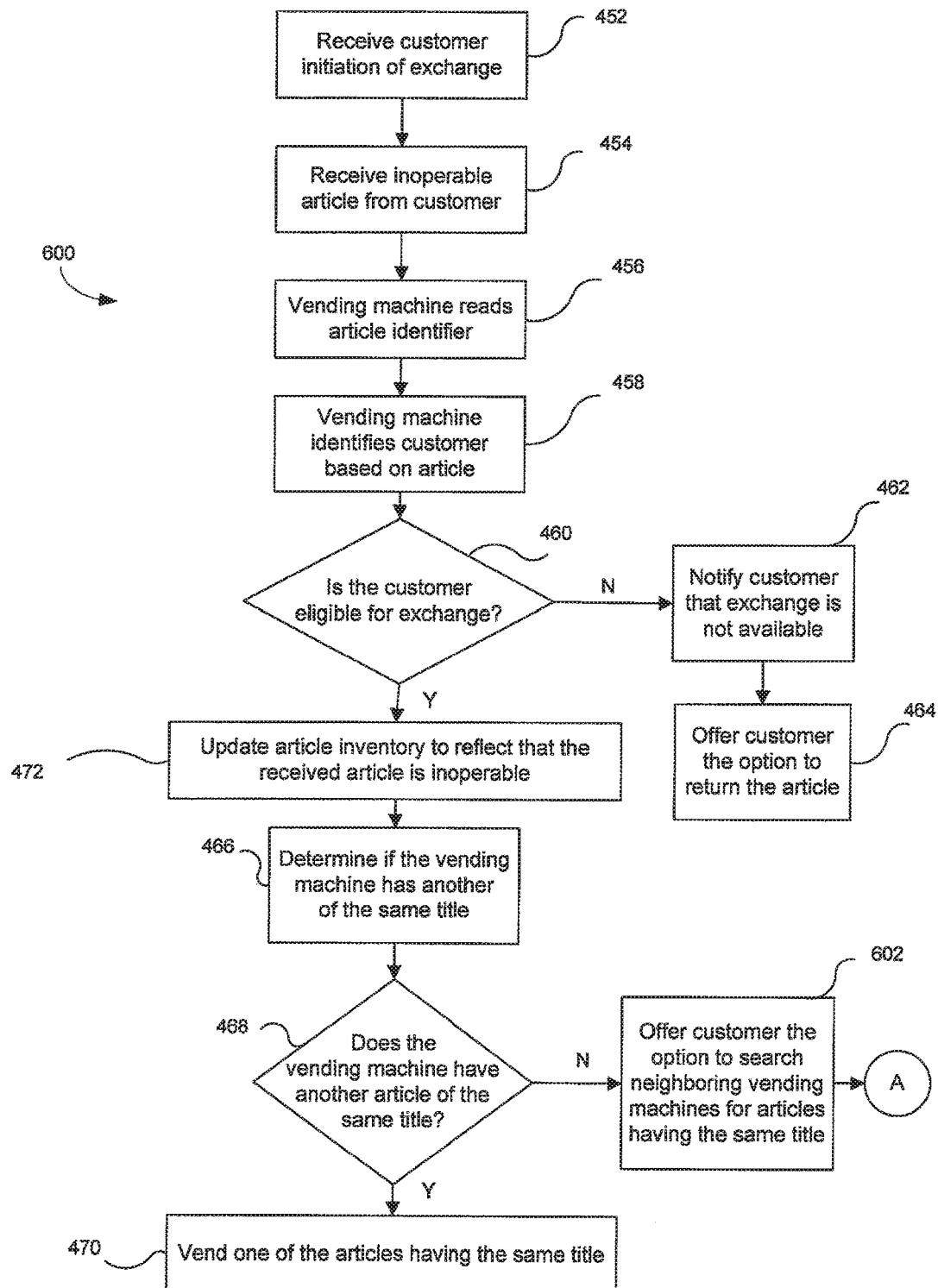
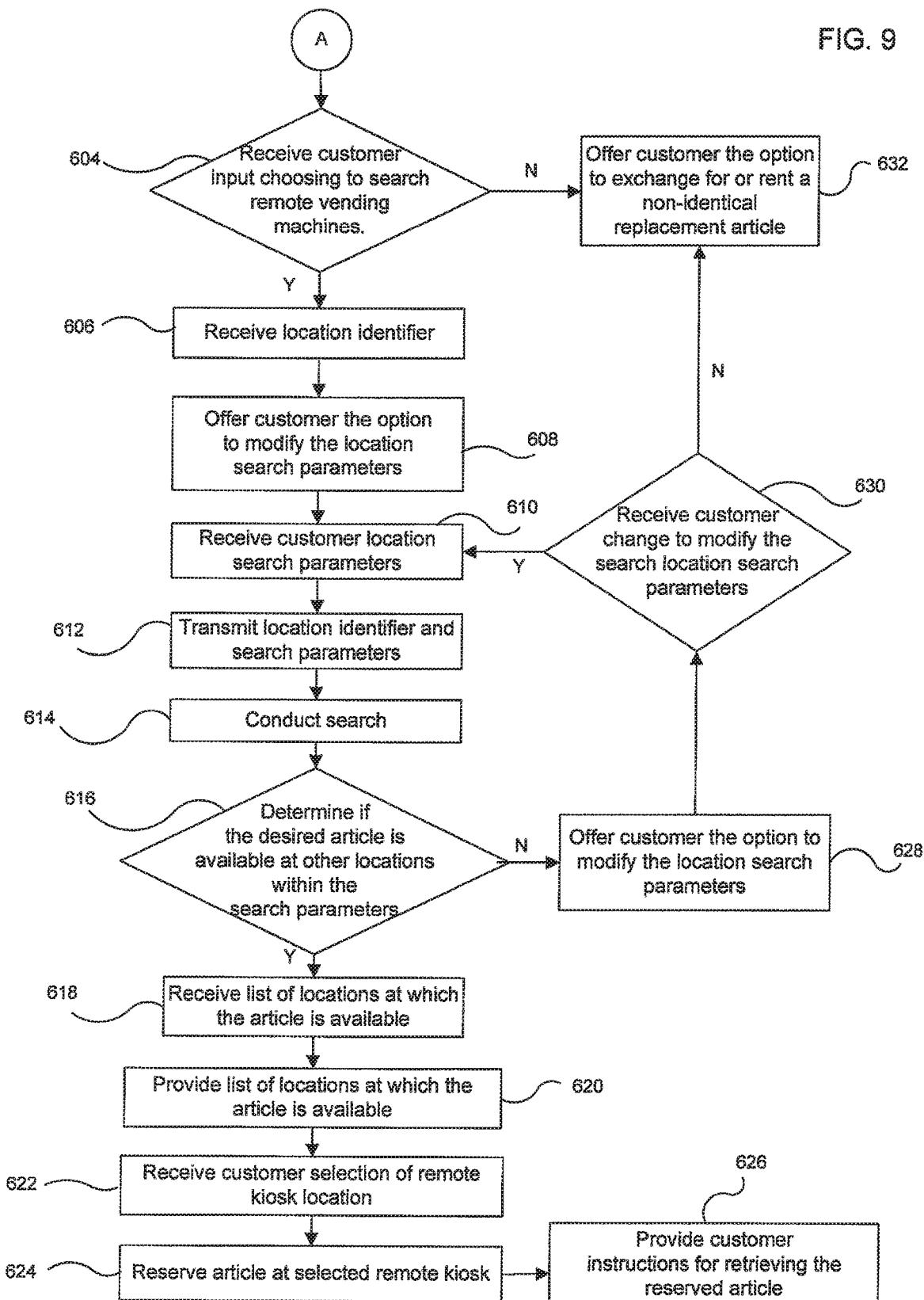


FIG. 8





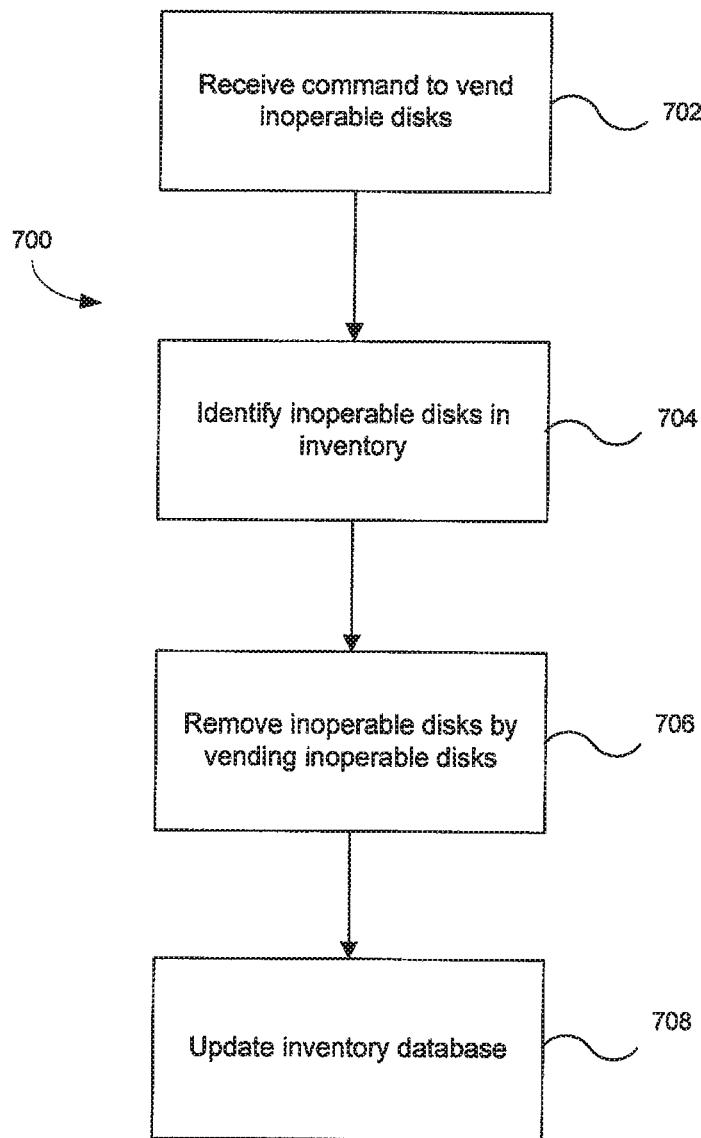


FIG. 10

FIG. 11

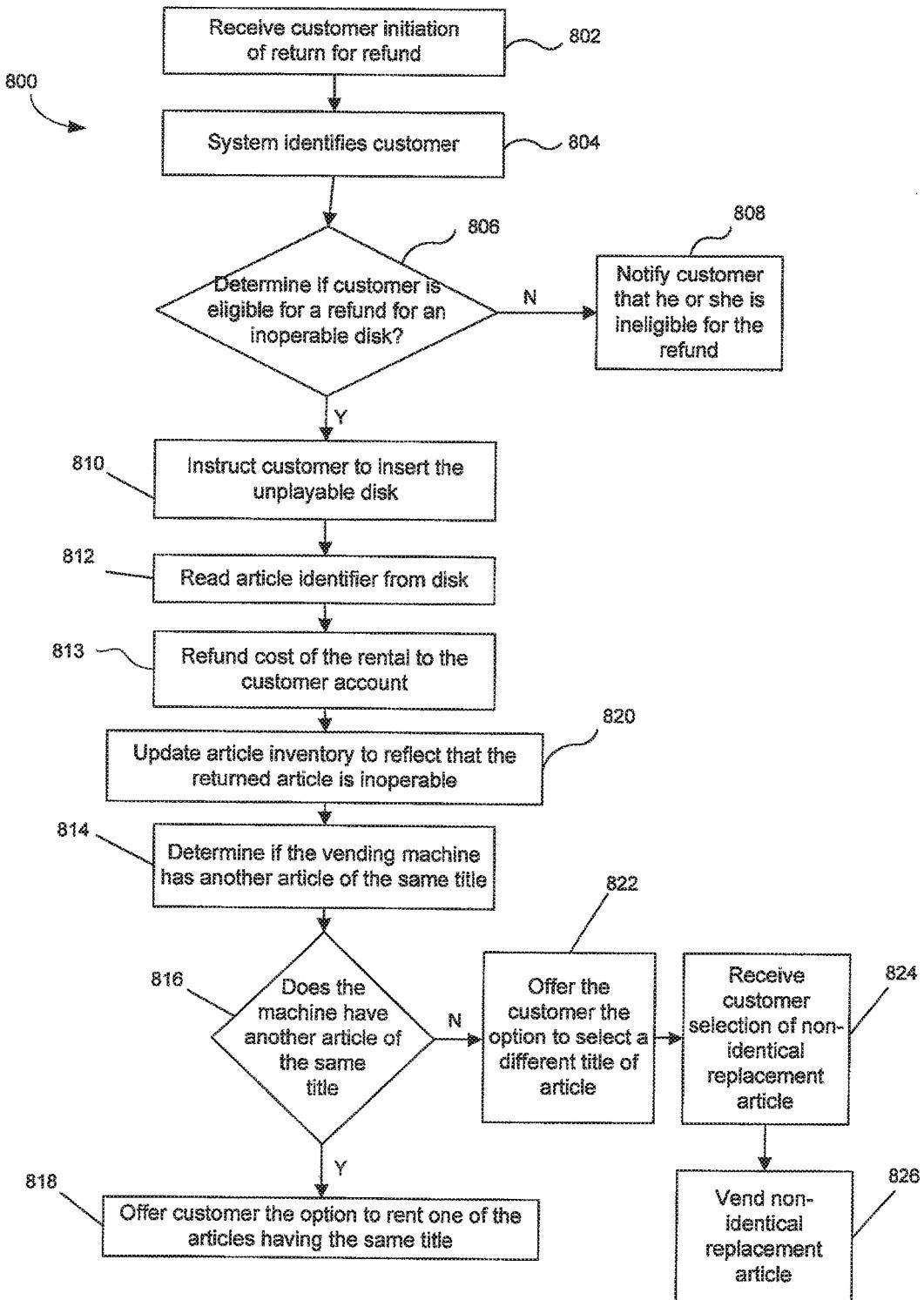


FIG. 12

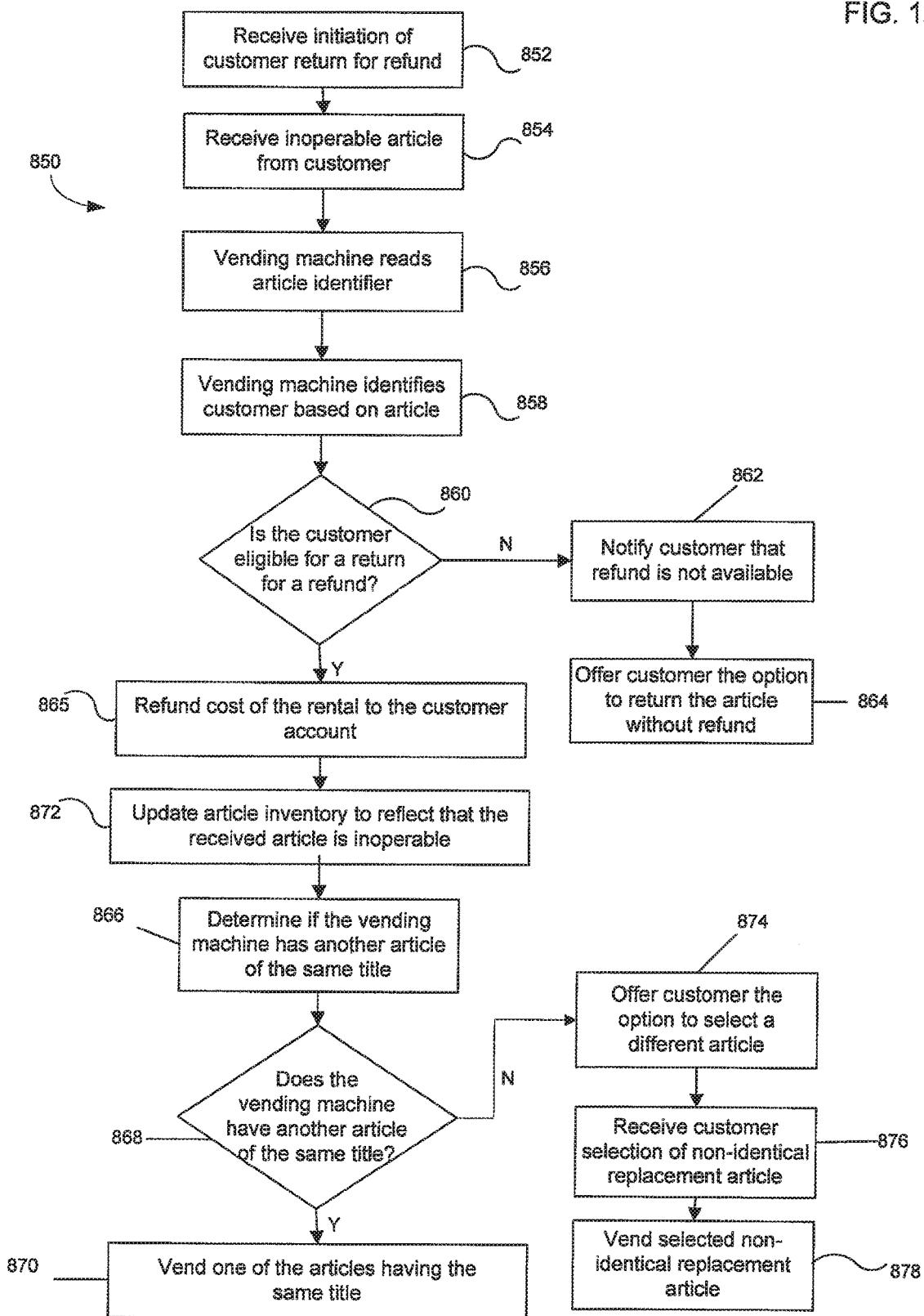
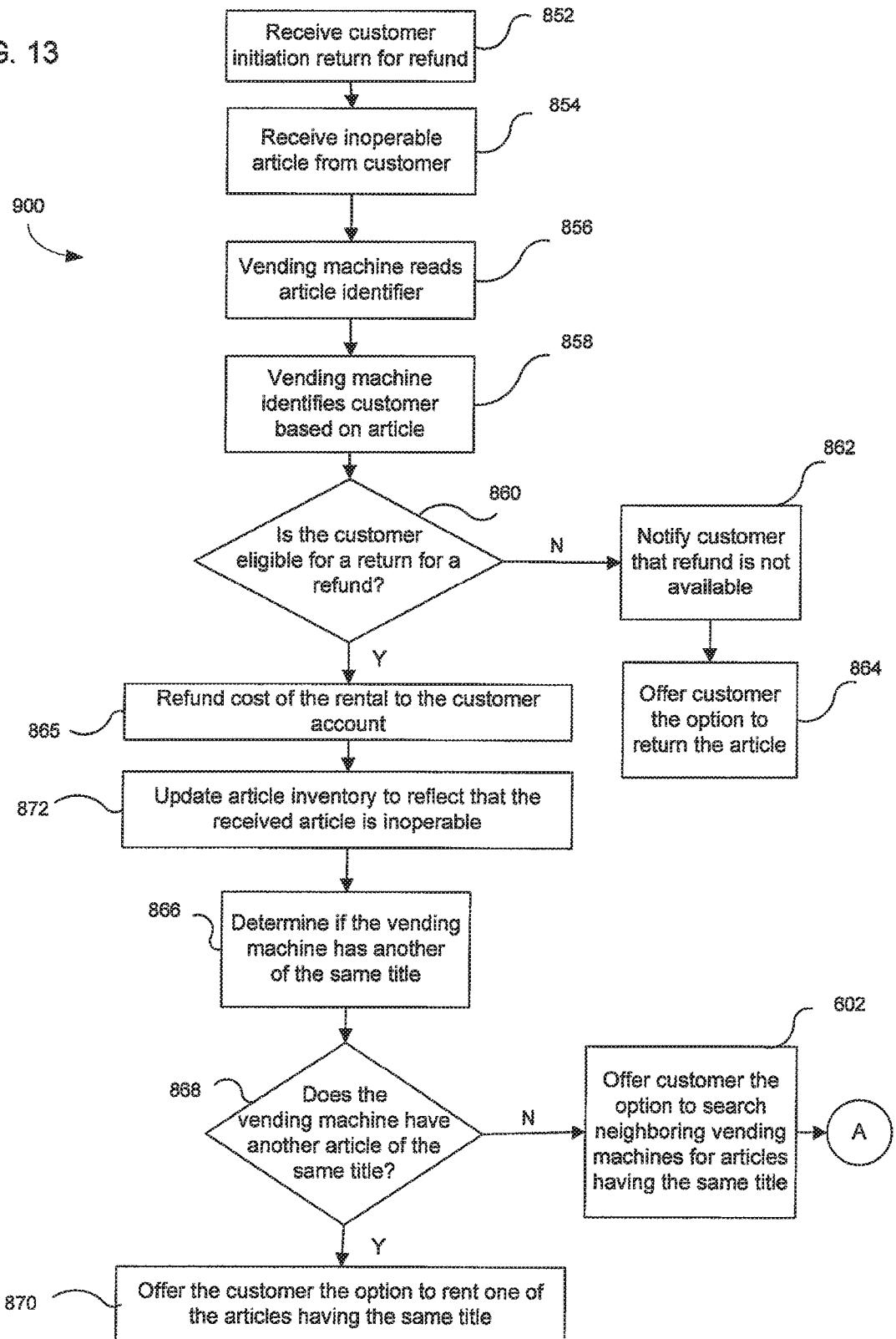


FIG. 13



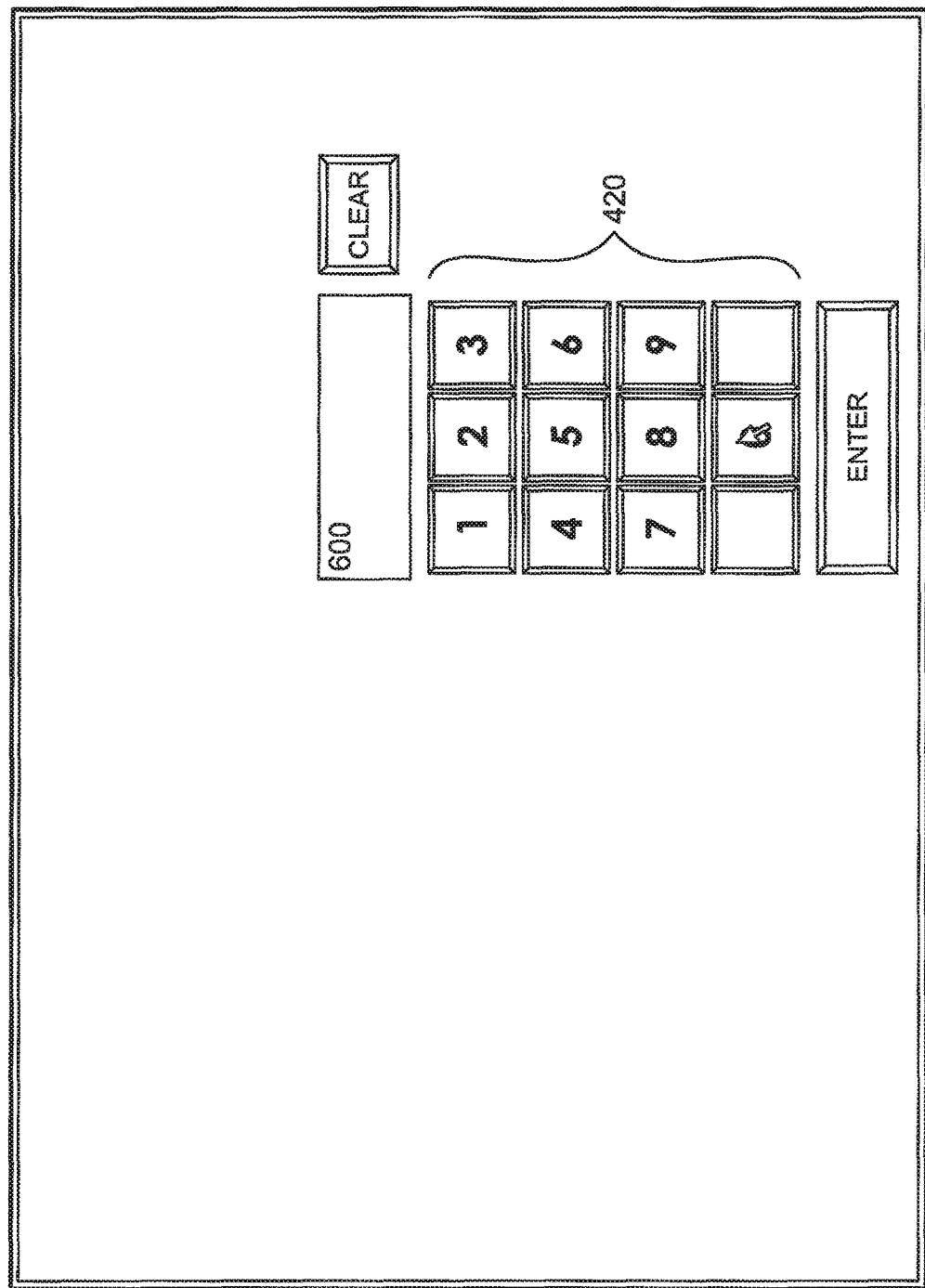


FIG. 14

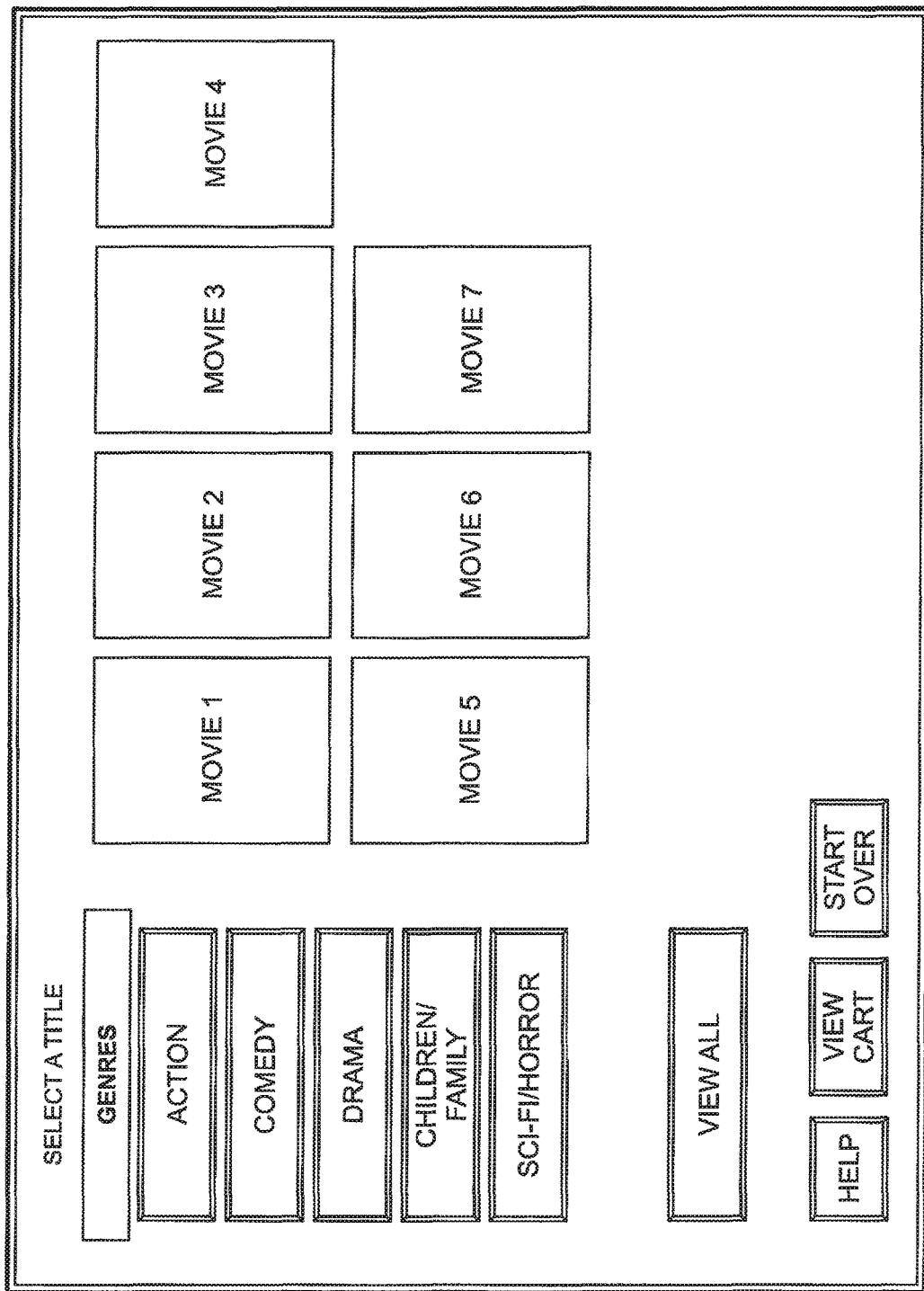


FIG. 15

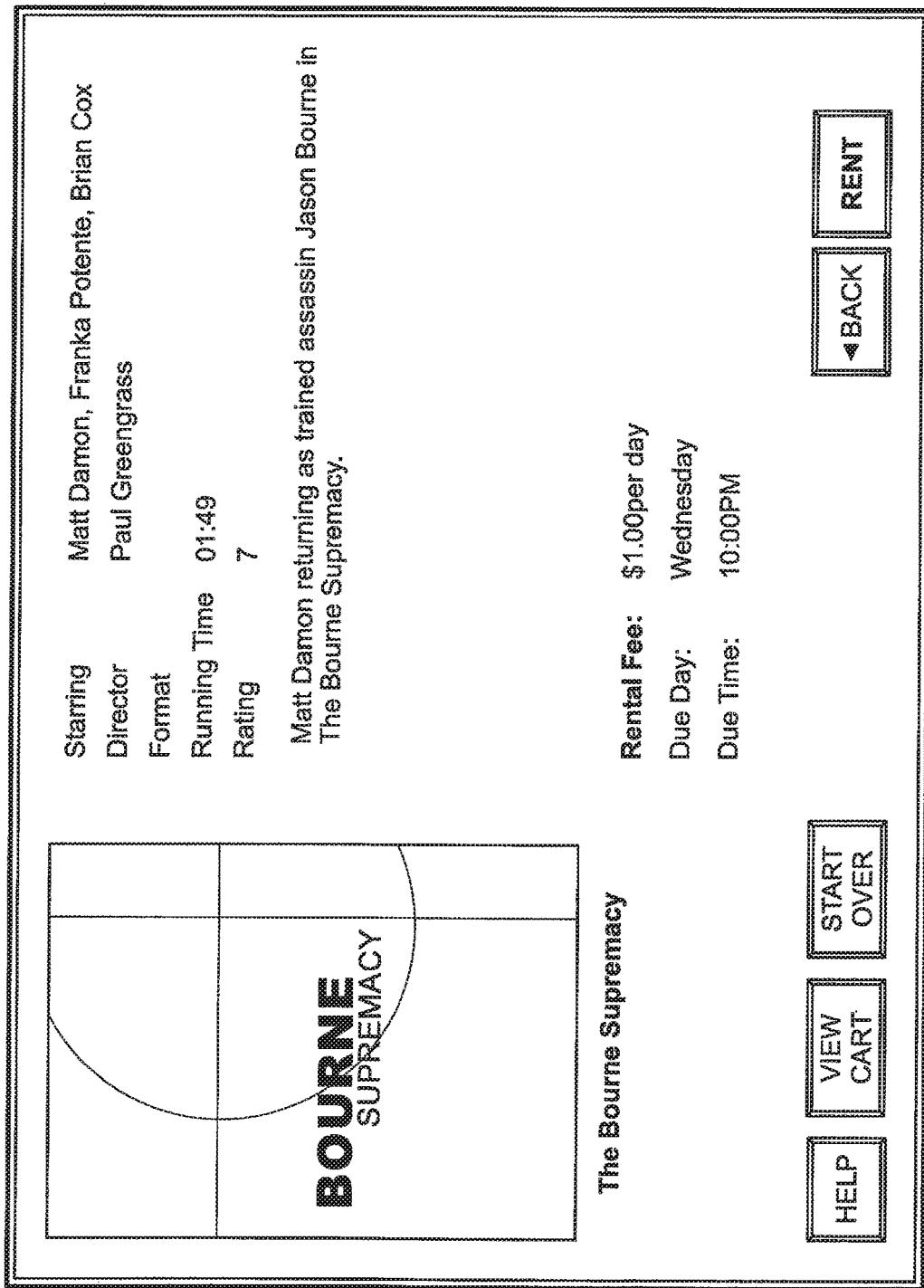


FIG. 16

| Title   | Rent/Buy | Due Date   | Due Time | Price  | Remove                                    |        |     |        |       |        |  |
|---|----------|------------|----------|--------|---|--------|-----|--------|-------|--------|--|
| The Bourne Supremacy  | *Rent    | 02/09/2005 | 10:00 PM | \$1.00 | <input type="button" value="Remove"/>     |        |     |        |       |        |  |
|   |          |            |          |        |   |        |     |        |       |        |  |
| <table><tr><td>Sub Total</td><td>\$1.00</td></tr><tr><td>Tax</td><td>\$0.05</td></tr><tr><td>Total</td><td>\$1.05</td></tr></table> |          |            |          |        | Sub Total                                 | \$1.00 | Tax | \$0.05 | Total | \$1.05 |  |
| Sub Total   | \$1.00   |            |          |        |   |        |     |        |       |        |  |
| Tax   | \$0.05   |            |          |        |   |        |     |        |       |        |  |
| Total   | \$1.05   |            |          |        |   |        |     |        |       |        |  |
|   |          |            |          |        |   |        |     |        |       |        |  |
| <input type="button" value="ADD ANOTHER MOVIE"/>  |          |            |          |        | <input type="button" value="CHECKOUT"/>   |        |     |        |       |        |  |
| <input type="button" value="PROMO CODE"/>   |          |            |          |        | <input type="button" value="START OVER"/> |        |     |        |       |        |  |
| <input type="button" value="HELP"/>   |          |            |          |        |   |        |     |        |       |        |  |

FIG. 17

**ARTICLE VENDING MACHINE AND  
METHOD FOR EXCHANGING AN  
INOPERABLE ARTICLE FOR AN  
OPERABLE ARTICLE**

**CROSS REFERENCE**

This application is continuation application of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 14/668,921 which was filed on Mar. 25, 2015 entitled "Article Vending Machine and Method for Exchanging an Inoperable Article for an Operable Article"; and U.S. patent application Ser. No. 14/668,921 is a continuation application of Ser. No. 12/554,906, which was filed on Sep. 5, 2009 and issued as U.S. Pat. No. 9,104,990 entitled "Article Vending Machine and Method for Exchanging an Inoperable Article for an Operable Article" both of which are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

**TECHNICAL FIELD**

The present invention relates to improvements in article dispensing machines and components and methods related to the same. More particularly, the present invention relates to a digital video disc (DVD) dispensing apparatus and method for exchanging an inoperable article for an operable one.

**BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF THE  
INVENTION**

While the present invention is often described herein with reference to a digital video disc distribution system, an application to which the present invention is advantageously suited, it will be readily apparent that the present invention is not limited to that application and can be employed in article dispensing systems used to distribute a wide variety of rentable articles.

An improved DVD dispensing machine is disclosed in commonly owned U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609, which is herein incorporated by reference in its entirety. The invention of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention can function as a DVD dispensing machine-based distribution system that will typically have multiple units of each new release per DVD dispensing machine. The dispensing machines of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention can stock up to two thousand DVDs (movies, games or other entertainment content), making the system competitive with existing brick-and-mortar video rental superstores.

The dispensing machine and system of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention distinguishes itself from such stores by offering major benefits not conventionally offered by such stores, including additional cross-marketing programs promotional rentals for a certain amount of dollars spent at the hosting store) and convenience (e.g., open always).

The dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention yields a competitive advantage in the DVD rental marketplace by offering consumers cross-marketing/promotional programs, convenience of selection (e.g., computer-based searches for movies and recommendations based on consumer profiles), and potentially extended hours. The present invention employs a more cost-effective, convenient platform than brick-and-mortar stores. In addition, with the present invention, DVD dispensing machines can be situated in hosting locations having

high foot traffic, such as at a popular grocery store, restaurant, drug store, and/or other popular hosting locations.

The dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention can be operated at a substantial savings over the costs associated with traditional brick-and-mortar video rental stores. For example, the present invention does not require hourly employees manning the dispensing machines or restocking them with inventories, due to the ability of the article transport storage units to be delivered to/picked up from host locations by third-party delivery services, such as traditional or contracted courier services.

Unlike brick-and-mortar stores, the dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention does not require an on-site store manager because all operational decisions can be made at a centralized location by a management team office remote from the hosting locations. Unlike brick-and-mortar stores, the dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention does not require significant physical space. Unlike brick-and-mortar stores, the dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention has low operating costs because no heating or air conditioning is required for the dispensing machines and they consume a relatively low level of electrical energy. In addition, the dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent has low maintenance costs and downtime.

The dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention addresses the shortcomings of traditional brick-and-mortar stores in a convenient and cost-effective delivery vehicle having the added bonus of serving as an effective promotional platform that drives incremental sales to hosting locations. In addition, the dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention overcomes these disadvantages by at least offering more new releases and older selections for any given time period, and lower cost per viewing with significantly more convenience than Internet-based and pay-per-view services.

The dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention is a fully automated, integrated DVD movie video and video game rental and/or purchase systems. It preferably incorporates robust, secure, scalable software that provides a fully personalized user experience and real-time feedback to hosting locations and advertisers, scalable hardware that leverages existing technologies such as touch screen, focused audio speakers and plasma video monitors, technology utilizing the Internet through a system website, and an article transport storage unit that facilitates the exchange of new DVDs for old DVDs in each machine with virtually no need for human intervention. These technologies and others fill long-felt needs in the art and give advantages over conventional video distribution options. The dispensing machine of the U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609 patent and the present invention functions as much as a promotional platform as it does a rental kiosk.

By utilizing the dispensing machines and the hilly-interactive, real-time, linked Internet website, consumers can rent one or more MD movie videos, video games, or other entertainment content directly from dispensing machines as well as indirectly by making a rental reservation through the website for later pickup at a conveniently located machine. These dispensing machines are preferably networked with each other, with the inventory control and/or supply office and with the system website by phone-line, DSL, or other Internet connection at each hosting location. Through this linked network, the rental experience for each consumer can

be customized based on a profile for each consumer, such as via personalized home pages and rental screens.

As with any DVD rental system, from time to time a user may return a damaged or otherwise unplayable disk, which may later be rented out to a customer who receives the unplayable disk. The present invention is directed to a DVD dispensing machines and method for permitting a customer who receives an unplayable disk to exchange that unplayable disk for a playable disk. The present invention enables a user to return the unplayable disk to the article vending machine, indicate that the user wishes to exchange an unplayable disk via a user interface, and exchange the unplayable disk for a functional one. In one embodiment, instead of permitting an exchange when a customer returns an unplayable disk, the article dispensing machine may automatically reimburse the user the cost of the rental for the unplayable disk.

In certain embodiments, the article dispensing machine may first determine whether the customer is eligible to exchange the disk based on a customer criteria. This may be desirable to prevent a customer from repeatedly fraudulently claiming that a disk is inoperable in order to exchange it for a new disk without paying an extra fee. This feature may also be desirable to limit situations in which a customer has repeated problems playing various disks due to deficiencies with the customer's disk player rather than due to any problem with the disks. For example, the article dispensing machine may not permit exchange if the customer has used the exchange function for more than 20% of the customer's rentals, which may indicate that the customer is merely using the exchange function to try to get a new rental without paying another fee. In some embodiments, in response to a customer request to exchange a disk, the dispensing machine may determine whether the vending machine contains other disks of the same title. If the dispensing machine does not contain another disk of the same title, the machine may offer the customer the option to exchange the unplayable disk for a disk of a different title. Alternatively, or additionally, the dispensing machine may determine which other dispensing machines in the area have a disk of the same title and may provide the customer the choice to exchange for those disks located at a different vending machine. In certain embodiments, in response to a request from a designated service person, the article vending machine may be configured to automatically purge all of the articles that have been returned because they were inoperable.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is an illustration of a system for communicating and processing information in a network of article dispensing machines and dispensing apparatus;

FIG. 2 is a perspective view of an article dispensing machine constructed in accordance with the principles of the present invention;

FIG. 3 is a partially open perspective view of a portion of the article dispensing machine of FIG. 2 with certain elements removed for clarity;

FIG. 4 is a plan view of the portion of the article dispensing machine of FIG. 3;

FIG. 5 is a perspective view of portions of the article dispensing machine of FIG. 2 with certain elements removed for clarity;

FIG. 6 is a flowchart illustrating an order of operations performed by an article dispensing machine for exchanging an inoperable article for an operable one;

FIG. 7 is a flowchart illustrating a second embodiment of an order of operations performed by an article dispensing machine for exchanging an inoperable article for an operable one;

5 FIG. 8 is a flowchart of illustrating an order of operations performed by an article vending machine connected to a network for exchanging an inoperable article for an operable one;

10 FIG. 9 is a continuation of the flowchart of FIGS. 8 and 13;

15 FIG. 10 is a flowchart of illustrating an order of operations performed by an article vending machine for dispensing inoperable articles;

20 FIG. 11 is a flowchart illustrating an order of operations performed by an article dispensing machine for receiving an inoperable article and providing a refund for the cost of the rental of the inoperable article;

25 FIG. 12 is a flowchart illustrating a second embodiment of an order of operations performed by an article dispensing medicine for receiving an inoperable article and providing a refund for the cost of the rental of the inoperable article;

30 FIG. 13 is a flowchart of illustrating an order of operations performed by an article vending machine connected to a network for receiving an inoperable article and providing a refund for the cost of the rental of the inoperable article;

35 FIGS. 14-16 are illustrations of exemplary article browsing and search screens for an article dispensing machine.

40 FIG. 17 is an illustration of an exemplary article shopping cart screen for an article dispensing machine.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

While this invention is susceptible of embodiments in many different forms, there is shown in the drawings and will herein be described in detail preferred embodiments of the invention with the understanding that the present disclosure is to be considered as an exemplification of the principles of the invention and is not intended to limit the broad aspect of the invention to the embodiments illustrated.

45 FIGS. 1-3 illustrate an article dispensing machine designated 230. Article dispensing machine 230 may be one of a plurality of article dispensing machines included within an article distribution system having a plurality of such machines situated at a plurality of hosting locations. The article dispensing machines of a particular article distribution system preferably form a network. As such, those machines are preferably in electrical communication with each other and with a central server or central controller.

50 As shown FIG. 1, each article dispensing machine 230 includes a dispensing machine processor 300, also referred to herein as a vending controller, which is connected to a user interface control system 234 and a code reading device 370 collectively referred to as "the peripheral devices." The processor 300 is capable of executing various programs to provide input to and/or receive outputs from the peripheral devices. Suitable processors for such use are known to those of skill in the art. In addition, the processor is operably connected to at least one memory storage device 281, such as a hard-drive or flash-drive or other suitable memory storage device.

55 Article dispensing machine memory storage device 281 can include any one or a combination of volatile memory elements (e.g., random access memory (RAM, such as DRAM, SRAM, SDRAM, etc.)) and nonvolatile memory elements (e.g., ROM, hard drive, tape, CDROM, etc.). Moreover, article dispensing machine memory storage

device 281 may incorporate electronic, magnetic, optical, and/or other types of storage media. Article dispensing machine memory storage device 281 can have a distributed architecture where various components are situated remote from one another, but are still accessed by processor. Article dispensing machine memory storage device includes an article dispensing machine database 282.

The article dispensing machines 230 preferably comprise a network of machines in communication with one another. As shown in FIG. 1, in the preferred configuration, the article dispensing machines 230 are networked with one another via a central server or central controller 302 in a hub-and-spoke system. However, optionally, the article dispensing machines may be connected and communicate directly with one another, and/or subsets of article dispensing machines may communicate with one another directly as well as with the central server 302.

Generally, in terms of hardware architecture, the central server 302 includes a central processor and/or controller, central memory, and one or more input and/or output (I/O) devices (or peripherals) that are communicatively coupled via a local interface. The architecture of the central server is set forth in greater detail in U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609, the contents of which are incorporated herein by reference. Numerous variations of the architecture of the central server would be understood by one of skill in the art and are encompassed within the scope of the present invention.

Steps and/or elements, and/or portions thereof of the present invention may be implemented using a source program, executable program (object code), script, or any other entity comprising a set of instructions to be performed. When a source program, the program needs to be translated via a compiler, assembler, interpreter, or the like, which may or may not be included within the memory, so as to operate properly in connection with the operating system (O/S). Furthermore, the software embodying the present invention can be written as (a) an object oriented programming language, which has classes of data and methods, or (b) a procedural programming language, which has routines, subroutines, and/or functions, for example but not limited to, C, C++, Pascal, Basic, Fortran, Cobol, Pert, Java, and Ada. frequency (RF) or other transceiver, a telephonic interface, a bridge, and a router.

When article dispensing machine 230 is in operation, the article dispensing machine processor is configured to execute software stored within article dispensing machine memory, to communicate data to and from the dispensing machine memory, and to generally control operations of article dispensing machine pursuant to the software. The software aspects of the present invention and the O/S, in whole or in part, but typically the latter, are read by processor, perhaps buffered within the processor, and then executed.

When the present invention or aspects thereof are implemented in software, it should be noted that the software can be stored on any computer readable medium for use by or in connection with any computer related system or method. In the context of this document, a computer readable medium is an electronic, magnetic, optical, or other physical device or means that can contain or store a computer program for use by or in connection with a computer related system or method. The present invention can be embodied in any computer-readable medium for use by or in connection with an instruction execution system, apparatus, or device, such as a computer-based system, processor-containing system, or other system that can fetch the instructions from the instruction execution system, apparatus, or device and

execute the instructions. In the context of this document, a "computer-readable medium" can be any means that can store, communicate, propagate, or transport the program for use by or in connection with the instruction execution system, apparatus, or device. The computer readable medium can be for example, but not limited to, an electronic, magnetic, optical, electromagnetic, infrared, or semiconductor system, apparatus, device, or propagation medium. More specific examples (a non-exhaustive list) of the computer-readable medium would include the following: an electrical connection (electronic) having one or more wires, a portable computer diskette (magnetic), a random access memory (RAM) (electronic), a read-only memory (ROM) (electronic), an erasable programmable read-only memory (EPROM, EEPROM, or Flash memory) (electronic), an optical fiber (optical), and a portable compact disc read-only memory (CDROM) (optical). Note that the computer-readable medium could even be paper or another suitable medium upon which the program is printed, as the program can be electronically captured, via, for instance, optical scanning of the paper or other medium, then compiled, interpreted or otherwise processed in a suitable manner if necessary, and then stored in a computer memory.

For communication with the central server 302, article dispensing machine 230 is equipped with network communication equipment and circuitry. In a preferred embodiment, the network communication equipment includes a network card such as an Ethernet card. In a preferred network environment, each of the plurality of article dispensing machines 230 on the network is configured to use the TCP/IP protocol to communicate via the network 301. It will be understood, however, that a variety of network protocols could also be employed, such as IPX/SPX, Netware, PPP and others. It will also be understood that while a preferred embodiment of the present invention is for article dispensing machine 230 to have a "broadband" connection to the network 301, the principles of the present invention are also practicable with a dialup connection using a standard modem. Wireless network connections are also contemplated, such as wireless Ethernet, satellite, infrared and radio frequency networks.

The central controller 302 communicates with the article dispensing machine controllers 300 via the network 301. The central controller 302 is preferably located at a central station or office that is remote from the plurality of article dispensing machines 230. The central controller 302 can operate as the server for communicating over the network 301 between the plurality of article dispensing machines 230. The central controller 302 receives communications and information from the article dispensing machines 230, and also transmits communications and information to the machines 230. For example, when a DVD rental transaction is performed at the article dispensing machine 230, transaction data such as the rented DVD title is then transmitted from the machine 230 to the central controller 302 via the network 301. It will be understood that central servers in general, such as the central controller 302, are often distributed. A plurality of central servers/controllers 302 may optionally be arranged in "load balanced" architecture to improve the speed and efficiency of the network. To accomplish the implementation of multiple controllers 302, the controllers 302 may be in communication with router/distributor 303.

The central controller 302 is also in communication with a central database 304. The central database 304 stores information regarding the transaction network, customers and customer transactions. For example, the central database

**304** stores data regarding the vending inventory at each of the plurality of article dispensing machines **230**. The central database **304** also stores sales information regarding the sales quantities of the vending merchandise stored in the machines **230**. For example, the central database **304** stores information regarding the sales totals for each DVD title and for each machine **230** vending location. Central database **304** also stores user information and rental transaction information, such as user IDs, PINs, the date on which DVDs are due to be returned, and the date on which DVDs were rented from the machines **230**. Some of this information is also preferably stored in article dispensing machine database **282**. The central database **304** may also store a master inventory list of the DVDs housed in each of the dispensing machines.

Central database **304** is preferably a relational database, although other types of database architectures may be used without departing from the principles of the present invention. For example, database **304** may be a SQL database, an Access database or an Oracle database, and in any such embodiment have the functionality stored herein. Central database **304** is also preferably capable of being shared, as illustrated, between a plurality of central controllers **302** and its information is also preferably capable of being transmitted via network **301**. It will be understood that a variety of methods exist for serving the information stored in central database **304**. In a preferred embodiment, .net and Microsoft Reporting Services are employed, however, other technologies such as ODBC, MySQL, CFML and the like may be used.

The central controller **302** and central database **304** are also preferably accessible by a personal computer **306**. The personal computer **306** will be understood as comprising hardware and software consistent with marketable personal computers, such as a display monitor, a keyboard and mouse and a microprocessor. The personal computer also comprises Internet browser software such as Firefox or Internet Explorer or another such interface. Using the browser software, a user at the personal computer **306** can access a web interface through the central controller **302**. To that end, central controller **302** preferably comprises web server software such as IIS or Apache. It will be understood that a variety of web server software and web browser software exists to implement the principles of the present invention without departing therefrom. Through the web browser software, the personal computer **306** communicates with the central controller **302** and allows the user to login to a central command functionality of the central controller **302** and to view and modify data stored in the central database **304**. The browser interface also allows the user to perform certain system functions, which will affect the inventory and behavior of the article dispensing machines **230**.

In a preferred embodiment, a financial server **305** is also in communication with the network **301**. It will be understood that a variety of financial services exist for processing financial information via the Internet and other networks **301**. Those services allow for the processing of credit card and debit card information, so that users of the services do not have to interface directly with credit and debit card companies. In FIG. 1, the financial server **305** is illustrated as a single server, although the financial server **305** may comprise an entire sub-network of financial servers **305** responsible for processing financial information.

As shown in FIG. 2, article dispensing machine **230** includes a machine housing **232** with front, rear, top, bottom and side panels. The machine housing **232** is preferably a combination molded fiberglass and sheet metal cabinet.

However, those skilled in the art will appreciate that the housing can be constructed from a variety of other suitable materials and with a variety of other suitable manufacturing techniques.

As shown most clearly in FIG. 2, a user interface portion **234** of housing **232** includes a card reader **240**, a keypad and/or touch screen **242** and an article transfer opening **244** sometimes referred to herein as a receptacle. The card reader **240** is preferably designed in known fashion to read magnetically encoded membership and/or credit cards for authorizing the distribution of articles of inventory through the article transfer opening **244**. Keypad and/or touch screen **242** permits consumers and/or inventory stocking personnel to communicate with the dispensing machine **230** and/or a central office linked in electrical communication with the dispensing machine. Keypad and/or touch screen **242** also permits consumers and/or inventory stocking personnel to enter appropriate commands directed to carrying out specific machine tasks. It will be appreciated that the optional touch screen includes a monitor made with known technologies making it capable of being utilized as a user interface for entry of commands designed to carry out machine tasks.

Furthermore, it will be appreciated that additional user interface portions having additional or even identical user interface components could be incorporated within article dispensing machine **230**. For example, these components could be incorporated on other panels of the housing **232** of machine **230** so that the machine can be used simultaneously by multiple consumers, translating into more efficient distribution of articles in high traffic areas.

Turning now to the functioning of the machine during a consumer transaction, as a consumer approaches an article dispensing machine, the consumer observes the display monitor and the user interface **234**. The consumer may also observe a plasma/LCD monitor displaying marketing information, or a lightbox containing marketing information for branding the vending apparatus **230**. The consumer then enters the appropriate commands at the user interface control **234** associated with the dispensing machine to select a disk to be dispensed by the machine. The user interface can employ simple menus and a fixed set of keys for consumers to make their selections, it can employ break-resistant touch screens, or it can employ a combination of both. Once a selection has been made, the consumer then merely inserts his/her magnetically encoded dispense activation card into the card reader **240** positioned at the front of the dispensing machine **230** and, in response, the machine will dispense the selected disk without the need for further input by the consumer.

Referring now to FIG. 3, which shows the components positioned in the interior of dispensing machine **230**, the article dispensing machine includes a storage device **248** which is a carousel-style, cylindrical storage facility having a plurality of compartmentalized rows **249** defined by circular-shaped storage racks **250** sharing a common central axis. Each of the rows has a plurality of compartments **369**. Each storage rack **250** includes radially extending, angularly separated compartment panels defining article storage compartments **369** which are designed to receive and retain flat-type pack articles, such as DVD cases, as desired. The compartment panels are preferably axially aligned to retain the opposing sides of DVD cases at the top and bottom ends thereof. In that regard, the MD cases are preferably retained between successive vertical pairs of storage racks **250**. The storage racks **250** are vertically spaced by axially extending support members **254**.

A first motor 251, hereinafter referred to as the rotational motor, rotates the storage device 248 about a vertical axis formed by the driven shaft 252. As shown FIG. 4, rotational motor 251 drives a belt 259, which in turn rotates wheels 253 and shaft 252 to which the storage racks 250 are attached.

As shown in FIGS. 3 and 4, a selector arm 256 having a picker device 264 which is capable of removing a DVD from the compartments 369, is adjacent the storage device 248.

The selector arm 256 may further comprise a conveyor belt 374, which contacts one of the media products in one of the compartments 369 and conveys the product to the article transfer opening 244 whereby it's delivered to a user on the exterior of the article dispensing machine 230. The conveyor 374 is driven by a conveyor motor 372. Further details pertaining to the mechanics and operation of the selector arm are disclosed in commonly owned U.S. Pat. Nos. 7,234,609 and 7,366,586 and U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/863,909, the contents of which are herein incorporated by reference in their entirety.

As shown in FIG. 5, the dispensing machine contains a code reading device 370. The code reading device may be an image capture device such as a digital camera, or a constant reading device such as a scanner or a digital video camera or a RF scanner. The code reading device is positioned to read an article identification code from an article as the article is placed in the receptacle 244. An article database correlates the article identification code to certain article information, such as, for example the title of a DVD.

A first embodiment of a method for exchanging an inoperable disk for an operable one 400 is shown in FIG. 6. The user interface 234 presents a user returning a DVD with the option to request to exchange an inoperable DVD for an operable one as shown in step 402.

The user interface 234 identifies the customer via information obtained from a card. In this embodiment, the user interface 234 prompts the customer to insert or swipe a membership card into the card reader 240. Identification information is read from the membership card, which may be a credit or debit card, and the user is identified as shown in step 404. User identification may be performed by the vending machine processor 300 or the central processor 303.

Alternatively, as shown in FIG. 7, the identification of the user may be determined based on the returned article. As shown in this second embodiment 450, the user initiates the exchange of an inoperable disk for an operable one via the user interface, step 452. The user interface then instructs the customer to insert the inoperable disk into the receptacle 244, as shown in step 454. The code reading device 370 then reads the article identifier from the disk as shown in step 456. The vending controller/processor then references a transaction database to identify the customer to whom the disk having the article identifier has been rented as shown in step 458. Optionally, the user interface 234 may then request verification from the customer that the system has identified the correct customer.

In the embodiments shown in FIGS. 6 and 7, 400 and 450, the user's eligibility to perform the exchange is then determined. In a first embodiment, the user's identification information is checked against a customer exchange "blacklist" that identifies users who are prohibited from exchanging an inoperable article for an operable one as shown in steps 406, 460. The users may be identified on the exchange blacklist by an identification code, for example, by the card number of the user or by a cryptographic representation of a user card number. The customer exchange blacklist may be stored on the central memory 304 or it may be stored on both the central memory and the memories of the individual

kiosks 281. If the customer is listed on the customer exchange blacklist, the user interface 234 notifies the customer that he or she is ineligible to exchange the inoperable disk for an operable one, steps 408, 462. If the customer is not eligible for an exchange, the kiosk, via the user interface 234 may ask the customer if he or she wants to return the disk, as shown in step 464, at which point the normal return procedure would be followed.

In a second embodiment, instead of maintaining a black-list, against which the customer's identification is checked, a customer's rental activity may be dynamically checked for certain eligibility criteria. A history of the customer's rental activity is stored on the central memory 304 or, alternatively, it may be stored on both the central memory and the memories of the individual kiosks 281.

One such customer criterion may be the percentage of transactions that result in exchanges of inoperable articles. For example, a customer who has exchanged an inoperable article during more than 20% of his or her rental transactions 20 may be added to the blacklist. Another such criterion may be the frequency of customer exchanges. For example, a customer who has exchanged at least one inoperable article per week for four consecutive weeks may be blacklisted. Another such criterion may be the number of current rentals 25 that the customer has, whereby the customer would not be permitted to perform an exchange if he or she has more than X number of rentals checked out. Another such criterion may be the number of exchanges, in which, a customer who has exchanged more than X number of times may be blacklisted. Yet another such criterion may be the time since 30 the last exchange, for example a customer may be added to the blacklist if he or she has exchanged an inoperable article within the past day. In addition, a blacklist may use more than one of these criteria. For example, customers may be 35 added to the blacklist if they exceed the set percentage of transactions that result in exchanges or if the customer has exchanged an article within the past day.

In the embodiment in which a customer blacklist is used, the above-listed criteria may also be used to determine when 40 a customer is placed on the blacklist. A customer may be removed from the blacklist when that customer's transaction history no longer satisfies the blacklist criteria. For example, if a customer has been added to the blacklist because his or her percentage of transactions that resulted in exchanges 45 exceeded the predetermined threshold, the customer may be removed from the blacklist when the customer's percentage of rentals that result in exchanges drops below that predetermined threshold. Alternatively, a customer may be removed from the blacklist manually by a customer service 50 person with access to and permission to edit the blacklist via a personal computer in communication with the central server.

If the customer is determined to be ineligible for an exchange in process 400, as shown in step 410, the user 55 interface 234 instructs the customer to insert the inoperable disk into the receptacle 244. The system then reads the article identifier from the disk using the code reading device 370, as shown in step 412. An article identifier database which may be stored on the kiosk memory 281, is accessed 60 to determine the type of the article, which, in the case of a DVD or the like is representative of the title of the article, and which may be represented by a code. Once the type of the returned article is determined (the title of the DVD), the system accesses an inventory database which may be stored 65 on the kiosk memory 281 to determine whether the article dispensing machine contains another article of the same type, herein referred to as an "identical replacement article"

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steps 414, 466. If the article dispensing machine contains one or more identical replacement articles available, the article dispensing machine dispenses one of the replacement articles, as shown in steps 416, 418, 468, 470. As shown in steps 420, 472, the article dispensing machine also updates its article inventory database to identify the returned inoperable article as "inoperable" 420, 472. Articles in the inventory database marked as "inoperable" are unavailable for rental. Once the user has inserted the inoperable DVD into the receptacle 244, the inoperable DVD is transferred via the transfer mechanism 256 to an open storage slot 369 in the vending machine.

If the article dispensing machine does not contain one or more identical replacement articles available for rental, in one embodiment, the user interface 234 prompts the user to select another non-identical replacement article from the inventory of the article dispensing machine, as shown in steps 422, 474. FIGS. 12-17 show exemplary article selection and browsing screens of a user interface. The user then proceeds to select a non-identical replacement article in steps 424, 476, which may be vended to the user at no extra cost, steps 426, 478.

As shown in FIGS. 11-13, in an alternative embodiment, the article dispensing machine may provide the customer with a refund or credit corresponding to the cost of the rental of the article instead of providing a replacement article in response to the consumer's request to return the inoperable article. FIG. 11 shows an order of operations 800 for an article dispensing machine configured to identify the customer based on information obtained from a customer identification card or the like, determine if the customer is eligible for a refund, and, if so, provide a credit or refund to the customer. Specifically, in step 802, the article dispensing machine receives the customer initiation of a return of an inoperable article for a refund via a user interface 234. The system then identifies the customer based on information received from a customer identification card or the like, as described above and as shown in step 804. Using the customer identification, the article dispensing machine then determines if the customer is eligible for a refund for the customer's return of an inoperable disk, as shown in step 806. As discussed above, such a determination may be based on a customer blacklist or the customer's rental activity. If the customer is ineligible for the refund, the article dispensing machine notifies the customer accordingly, as shown in step 808.

If, on the other hand, the article dispensing machine determines that the customer is eligible to return the inoperable disk for a refund in step 806, the machine then instructs the customer via the user interface 234 to insert the unplayable disk into the receptacle 244 as shown in step 810. Once the disk has been received by the article dispensing machine, as shown in step 812, the code reader 370 reads an article identifier from the disk to determine the identity of the disk as described in detail above. As shown in step 813, the article dispensing machine then proceeds to refund the cost of the rental for the inoperable disk to the customer's account. The instruction to provide a customer refund is transmitted from the article dispensing machine 230 to a financial server 305 and may be sent via the central server 302. As shown in step 820, the article dispensing machine inventory is updated to reflect that the returned article is inoperable.

As shown in step 814, the article dispensing machine also determines if there is another article having the same title in the machine's inventory. If the article dispensing machine has an article of the same title, i.e. an identical replacement

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article, in its inventory, the machine offers the customer the option to rent one of the identical replacement articles via the user interface 234, as shown in steps 816 and 818. If, on the other hand, the machine does not have an identical replacement article in its inventory, it offers the customer the option to select and rent a different article, as shown in steps 822-826.

FIG. 12 shows an order of operations 850 similar to that shown in FIG. 11, but, instead of identifying the customer based on information obtained from a customer card, customer identification is based on the identity of the returned article, as described above with respect to FIG. 7. Specifically, in step 852, the article dispensing machine receives the customer initiation of a return of an inoperable article for a refund via a user interface 234. The system then receives the inoperable article from the customer via receptacle 244, as shown in step 854.

Once the disk has been received by the article dispensing machine, as shown in step 856, the code reader 370 reads an article identifier from the disk to determine the identity of the disk as described in detail above. The vending controller/processor then references a transaction database to identify the customer to whom the disk having the article identifier has been rented as shown in step 858. Using the customer identification, the article dispensing machine then determines if the customer is eligible for a refund for the customer's return of an inoperable disk, as shown in step 860. As discussed above, such a determination may be based on a customer blacklist or the customer's rental activity. If the customer is ineligible for the refund, the article dispensing machine notifies the customer accordingly, as shown in step 862, and may offer the customer the option to return the article without a refund, as shown in step 864.

If the customer is eligible to return the article for a refund, as shown in step 860, the article dispensing machine then proceeds to refund the cost of the rental for the inoperable disk to the customer's account, as shown in step 865. The instruction to provide a customer refund is transmitted from the article dispensing machine 230 to a financial server 305 and may be sent via the central server 302. As shown in step 872, the article dispensing machine inventory is updated to reflect that the returned article is inoperable.

As shown in step 866, the article dispensing machine also determines if there is another article having the same title in the machine's inventory. If the article dispensing machine has an article of the same title, i.e. an identical replacement article, in its inventory, the machine offers the customer the option to rent one of the identical replacement articles via the user interface 234, as shown in steps 868 and 870. If, on the other hand, the machine does not have an identical replacement article in its inventory, it offers the customer the option to select and rent a different article, as shown in steps 874-878.

As shown in FIGS. 8, 13 and 9, and processes 600 and 900, optionally, the article dispensing machine may offer the customer the choice to search the inventories of remotely located vending machines for one or more identical replacement articles located at those remote vending machines and generate a list of remote article vending machines at which an identical replacement article is available. A database of the inventory of the remote article vending machines may be stored at the central memory 304. A copy of the inventory database may also be stored on the memory of the local kiosk 281. The user interface 234 may provide the customer with the option to select from the list of remote article vending machines at which an identical replacement article is available and reserve one of the identical replacement

articles at a remote vending machine. A further discussion of searching and remotely reserving articles follows.

FIGS. 8 and 13 shows an order of operations 900 and 600 similar to those operations in FIGS. 7 and 12, respectively, but in FIGS. 8 and 13, if an identical replacement article is not present in the vending machine to which the article was returned, instead of or in addition to offering to the customer the option to rent a different article, the article dispensing offers the customer the option to search neighboring vending machines for articles having the same tide as the returned article, as shown in step 602.

As shown in FIG. 9, once a request to search the inventory of remote article dispensing machines has been initiated in step 604 the system receives a location identifier, as shown in step 606. The location identifier identifies the location of the user. The location identifier can be received from several sources. First, the location identifier can be received manually from a user at the vending location. In that embodiment, the user interface 234, at the vending apparatus 230 requests that the user provide the location identifier. The user then supplies the location identifier using the keypad or touch screen. An exemplary touch screen numeric key pad is shown as 420 in FIG. 14. In that embodiment, the location identifier can be data that is easy to recall for the user, such as a zip code. In another embodiment, the location identifier is received automatically, from the vending controller 300. The vending controller in that embodiment is provided with data identifying its own location, such as an address, an intersection, a global positioning identifier or other coordinate data identifying its physical location. Alternatively, the each article dispensing machine may have a unique identifier associated with that machine. The central server may have a database stored on the central server memory that correlates a set of parameters associated with the unique identifier for each dispensing machine, including the location of the machine. In this embodiment, the central processor may use the unique identifier for each machine to look up the parameters of the article dispensing machine, including its location, on the database.

Next, as shown in step 608, the user interface may optionally request that the user limit the geographic range of the search by inputting a location search parameter. For example, the user may request that the search be limited to locations within a 5 mile radius or a specific zip code. The kiosk then receives that user entered location search parameter in step 610.

Next, in step 612, optionally the location identifier and the search parameter may be transmitted from the vending controller 300 to the central server 302. In essence, the vending controller 300 requests of the central server 302 the location of identical replacement articles. In steps 614 and 616, the central server 302 queries the database 304 to determine the location of the identified identical replacement articles. A query is performed on the database 304 to determine a vending apparatus 230 inventory having an identical replacement article. The results of the query are then sorted according to their location, and are ranked according to the locations that are closest to the location identifier. For example, the first result will be the location of a vending apparatus 230 that is one block away, the second result will be the location of a vending apparatus 230 that is 1 mile away, and so on. Further, optionally the system may be configured to transmit any predetermined number of locations. For example, the system may transmit to the user only one recommended location having the requested vendible media product, or the system may suggest any number of locations having the product, wherein the suggestions are

ranked in order of proximity to the location identifier. Alternatively, the locations of a certain number of vending apparatuses within a certain distance may be displayed to the user and an indicator may identify to the user which of those locations has the identical replacement article in stock.

In step 618, the location of a vending kiosk 230 or locations of multiple kiosks having the requested vendible media product in their vending inventory is received by the vending kiosk 230 at the first location from the central server. In step 620, the location or locations can be displayed on the touch sensitive display 234 at the vending apparatus 230. Then, in step 622, the system generates an interface at the first location from which the user can reserve the identical replacement article, located at the second location. Thus, the user interface at the first vending apparatus 230 allows the user to reserve the identical replacement article from the inventory at a second, remotely located vending apparatus 330. The user reserves the identical replacement article via the user interface at the first vending location, and the transaction data is transmitted to the central server 302, and then to a vending controller 300 at the second remote vending location which reserves the article for pick up by the customer as shown in step 624. The user interface then provides the customer instructions for retrieving the reserved article at the remote kiosk, as shown in step 626.

Then, at the remote vending location, the vending controller 300 receives user identification, such as a credit card or identification card passed through the card reader 240 or, alternatively, a PIN provided by the user using the keypad 242. When the vending controller 300 at the second vending location has confirmed the identity of the user, the vending controller 300 generates a signal to deliver the identical replacement article to the user at the second vending location.

If the search for remote vending machines having an identical replacement article, step 614, within the user designated search parameters does not result in any available locations, optionally the user interface may offer the customer the option to modify the location search parameters, as shown in step 628. If the customer opts to modify the search parameters, a new search is conducted using the modified parameters. If the customer opts not to modify the search parameters, the customer may be given the option to select a non-identical replacement article, as shown in steps 630, 632.

In another aspect of certain embodiments shown in FIG. 10 as process 700, an article vending machine may be configured to automatically dispense all of the disks that have been identified as inoperable to a service person. The vending machine is configured to receive a command from an authorized service person instructing the vending machine to dispense all of the disks that have been designated as inoperable step 702. The processor references the inventory database to identify each disk that has been identified as inoperable, step 704. The transfer mechanism 256 then removes the inoperable disks from their storage slots one at a time and vends each disk from the receptacle, step 706. The inventory database is updated to reflect that the vended inoperable disks have been removed from the article vending machine, step 708.

Any process descriptions or blocks in figures represented in the figures should be understood as representing modules, segments, or portions of code which include one or more executable instructions for implementing specific logical functions or steps in the process, and alternate implementations are included within the scope of the embodiments of the present invention in which functions may be executed

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out of order from that shown or discussed, including substantially concurrently or in reverse order, depending on the functionality involved, as would be understood by those having ordinary skill in the art.

While the specific embodiments have been illustrated and described, numerous modifications come to mind without significantly departing from the spirit of the invention, and the scope of protection is only limited by the scope of the accompanying Claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for receiving an inoperable article via an article vending machine and providing an exchange of the inoperable article for a replacement article, the article vending machine having a user interface, a processor, a receptacle, a selector arm, and an inventory of articles housed in the article vending machine, the method comprising the steps of:

receiving a command through the user interface requesting to initiate a return of an inoperable article;

receiving the inoperable article via the receptacle; engaging the inoperable article at a first position proximate to the receptacle,

using the selector arm;

transferring the inoperable article, using the selector arm, from the first position to a second position within the article vending machine;

disengaging the inoperable article at the second position; identifying a customer associated with the inoperable article using program code operating with the processor;

determining if the customer is eligible to receive the exchange of the inoperable article for the replacement article using the program code; in response to determining that the customer is eligible for the exchange,

determining if the inventory contains the replacement article that is identical to the inoperable article, using the program code, wherein the determining if the inventory contains a replacement includes:

accessing a database comprising identifying information for each article included in the inventory, and comparing identifying information of the inoperable article with the identifying information of the articles included in the inventory to find a replacement article that has the same identifying information as the inoperable article;

in response to determining that the inventory does contain an identical replacement article;

transmitting to the user interface an option to receive the identical replacement article, and

receiving a selection of at least one of the option to receive the identical replacement article or the option to receive a refund

receive a request from a service person via the user interface to purge all inoperable articles, and in response to the request to purge:

access the database to identify each article identified as inoperable; and

provide for removal, from the second position, each of the identified inoperable articles.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the article vending machine is networked to a plurality of remote vending machines each having an inventory of articles, the method further comprising the steps of, in response to determining that the inventory of the article vending machine does not contain an identical replacement article:

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determining which remote vending machines comprise an identical replacement article within the respective remote vending machine inventories;

transmitting a list of remote vending machines having identical replacement articles to the user interface;

transmitting, to the user interface, an option to reserve the identical replacement article at one of the remote vending machines; and

receiving a selection of at least one of the option to reserve the identical replacement article.

3. The method of claim 2 further comprising the step of transmitting to the user interface an option to reserve the identical replacement article at one of the remote vending machines.

4. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of, in response to determining that the article vending machine inventory does not contain a replacement article:

transmitting to the user interface an option to receive a non-identical replacement article and an alternative option to receive a refund for the cost of the rental of the inoperable article; and,

receiving a selection of at least one of the option to receive a non-identical replacement article or the option to receive a refund.

5. The method of claim 2 further comprising the step of transmitting to the user interface an option to receive refund for the cost of the rental of the inoperable article if the article vending machine inventory does not contain an identical replacement article.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein the determination of whether a customer is eligible to receive an exchange is based, at least in part, on at least one customer criterion selected from the group consisting of number of returned inoperable articles, frequency of returns of inoperable articles, percentage of transactions resulting in an returns of an inoperable article, and time of last return of an inoperable article.

7. The method of claim 1, wherein the determination of whether a customer is eligible to receive an exchange for the inoperable article is based on whether the customer is listed on an inoperable article refund blacklist.

8. The method of claim 1, further comprising the steps of: reading an article identifier from the inoperable article; and

referencing a database to obtain identifying information for the returned article based on the article identifier, using program code operating with the processor.

9. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of identifying a database entry for the inoperable article in the database using program code operating with the processor.

10. The method of claim 9, further comprising the step of modifying the database entry for the inoperable article to indicate that the corresponding article is inoperable.

11. The method of claim 10, further comprising the step of prohibiting rental of the inoperable article.

12. The article vending machine of claim 1 wherein the article vending machine is networked to a plurality of remote vending machines each having an inventory of articles.

13. The article vending machine of claim 12, wherein the program code is further configured to, in response to determining that the inventory does not contain an identical replacement article:

determine which of the remote vending machines have in their inventories an identical replacement article, provide a list of the remote vending machines having identical replacement articles to the user interface,

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provide, to the user interface, an option to reserve one of the identical replacement articles at one of the remote vending machines on the list of the remote vending machines having identical replacement articles; provide, to the user interface, an alternative option to receive a refund for the cost of the rental of the inoperable article; and receive a selection of at least one of the option to reserve one of the identical replacement articles or the option to receive a refund.

14. The article vending machine of claim 13 wherein the program code is further configured to permit a user to reserve one of the identical replacement articles at one of the remote vending machines on the list of the remote vending machines having identical replacement articles.

15. The article vending machine of claim 1, wherein the program code is further configured to, in response to determining that the inventory does not contain an identical replacement article:

transmit to the user interface an option to receive a non-identical replacement article, provide, to the user interface, an alternative option to receive a refund for the cost of the rental of the inoperable article; and receive a selection of at least one of the option to receive a non-identical replacement article or the option to receive a refund.

16. The article vending machine of claim 1, wherein the program code is further configured to, in response to determining that the inventory does not contain an identical replacement article:

provide, via the user interface, an option to receive a coupon for a rental article, provide, via the user interface, an alternative option to receive a refund for the cost of the rental of the inoperable article, and receive a selection of at least one of the option to receive a coupon and the option to receive a refund.

17. An article vending machine comprising:  
an inventory comprised of a plurality of articles; a receptacle for receiving an inoperable article; a selector arm for transferring articles within the article vending machine, the selector arm being configured to: engage the inoperable article at a first position proximate to the receptacle, transfer the inoperable article from the first position to a second position within the article vending machine, and disengage the inoperable article at the second position; and a user interface configured to receive a request to initiate an exchange of the inoperable article for a replacement article;

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a memory configured to store one or more databases, the one or more databases including a list of the articles that comprise the inventory of the article vending machine; and

a processor configured using program code to:

identify a customer associated with the inoperable article; determine if the customer is eligible to receive an exchange of the inoperable article for the replacement article;

in response to determining that the customer is eligible for the exchange,

determine if the inventory of the article vending machine contains a replacement article that is identical to the inoperable article by:

accessing the one or more databases to obtain identifying information for each article included in the inventory of the article vending machine, and

comparing identifying information of the inoperable article with the identifying information of the articles included in the inventory to find a replacement article that has the same identifying information as the inoperable article;

in response to determining that the inventory does contain an identical replacement article:

offer, via the user interface, an option to receive the identical replacement article; and

receive a selection of the option to receive the identical replacement article;

receive a request from a service person via the user interface to purge all inoperable articles, and in response to the request to purge:

access the database to identify each article identified as inoperable; and

provide for removal, from the second position, each of the identified inoperable articles.

18. The article vending machine of claim 17, wherein the articles are automatically dispensed via the receptacle in response to the request from the service person to purge all of the articles identified as inoperable in the database.

19. The article vending machine of claim 17, wherein the selector arm includes a picker device that is configured, in response to receiving the request to purge, to engage each inoperable article in the second position within the article vending machine, and to continue engaging the inoperable article while the selector arm transfers the article from the second position to the receptacle.

20. The article vending machine of claim 17, wherein the selector arm includes a conveying device that is configured to dispense the inoperable articles through the receptacle by transferring the inoperable articles towards the receptacle.

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