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Patterson

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(54) **TRACKING ELECTRONIC CONTENT**

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G06F 15/16 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **709/229; 726/27**

(58) **Field of Classification Search** **709/229, 709/206, 217; 705/75, 51; 713/168**

See application file for complete search history.

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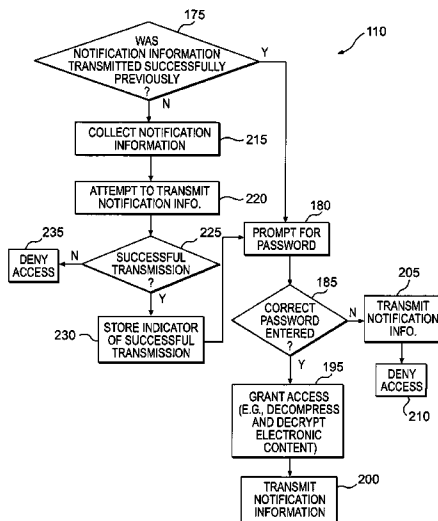
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method of tracking electronic content includes producing a file of electronic content and executable instructions that collect notification information and attempt to transmit the notification information to an address when triggered by an event. The executable instructions deny access to the electronic content until the notification information is transmitted successfully.

27 Claims, 19 Drawing Sheets



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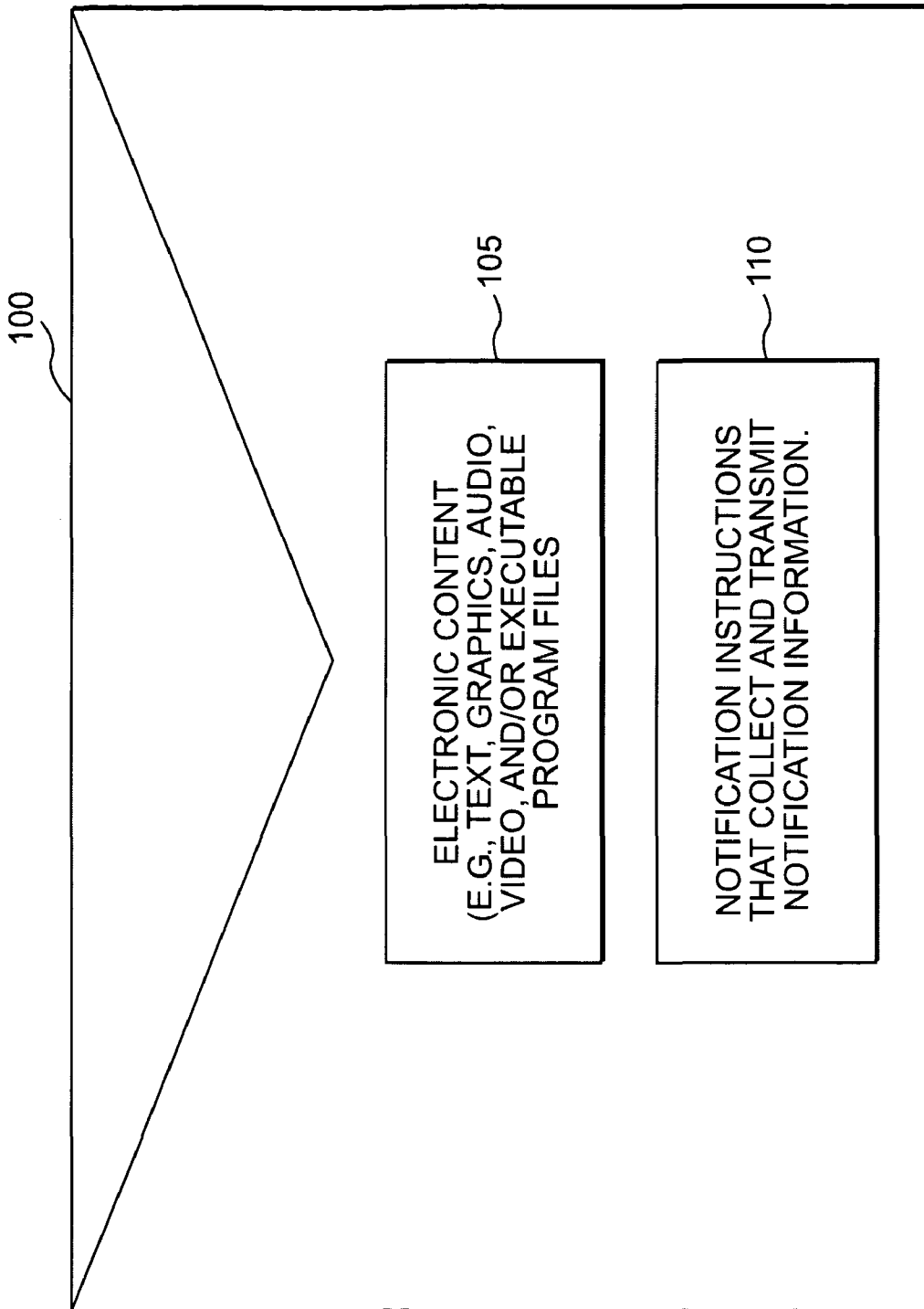


FIG. 1

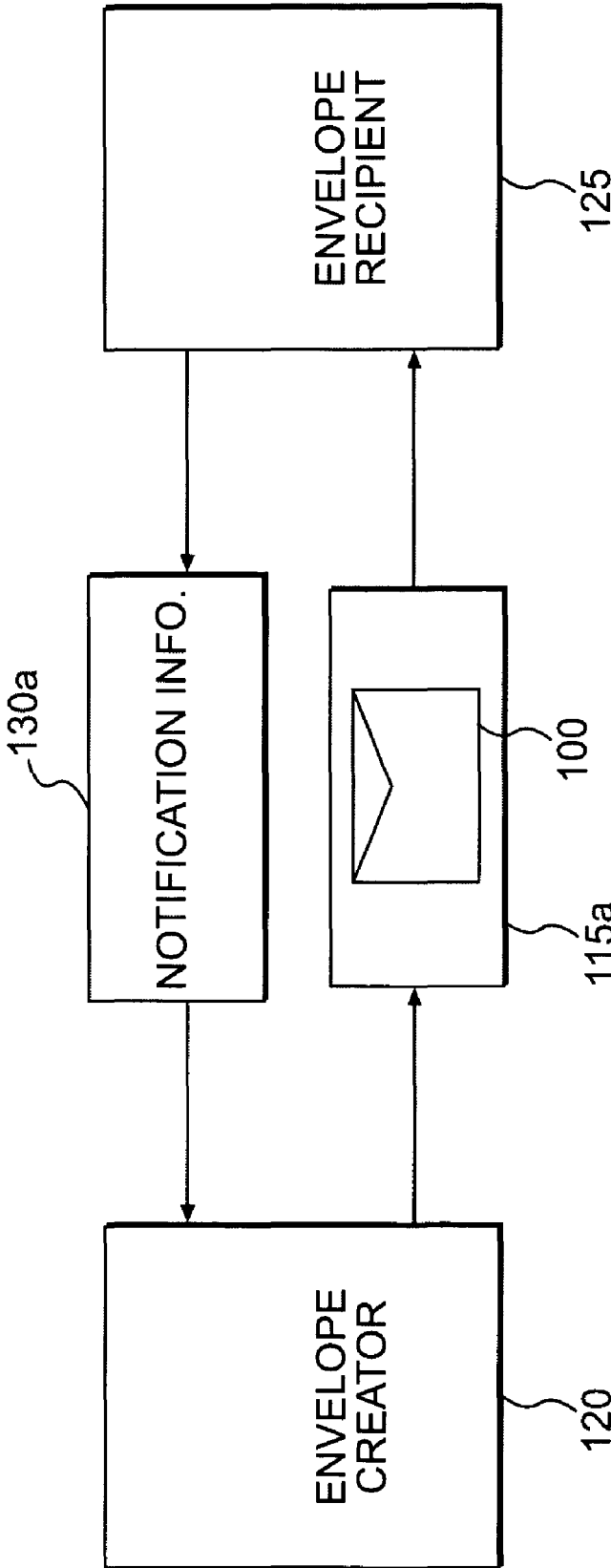


FIG. 2A

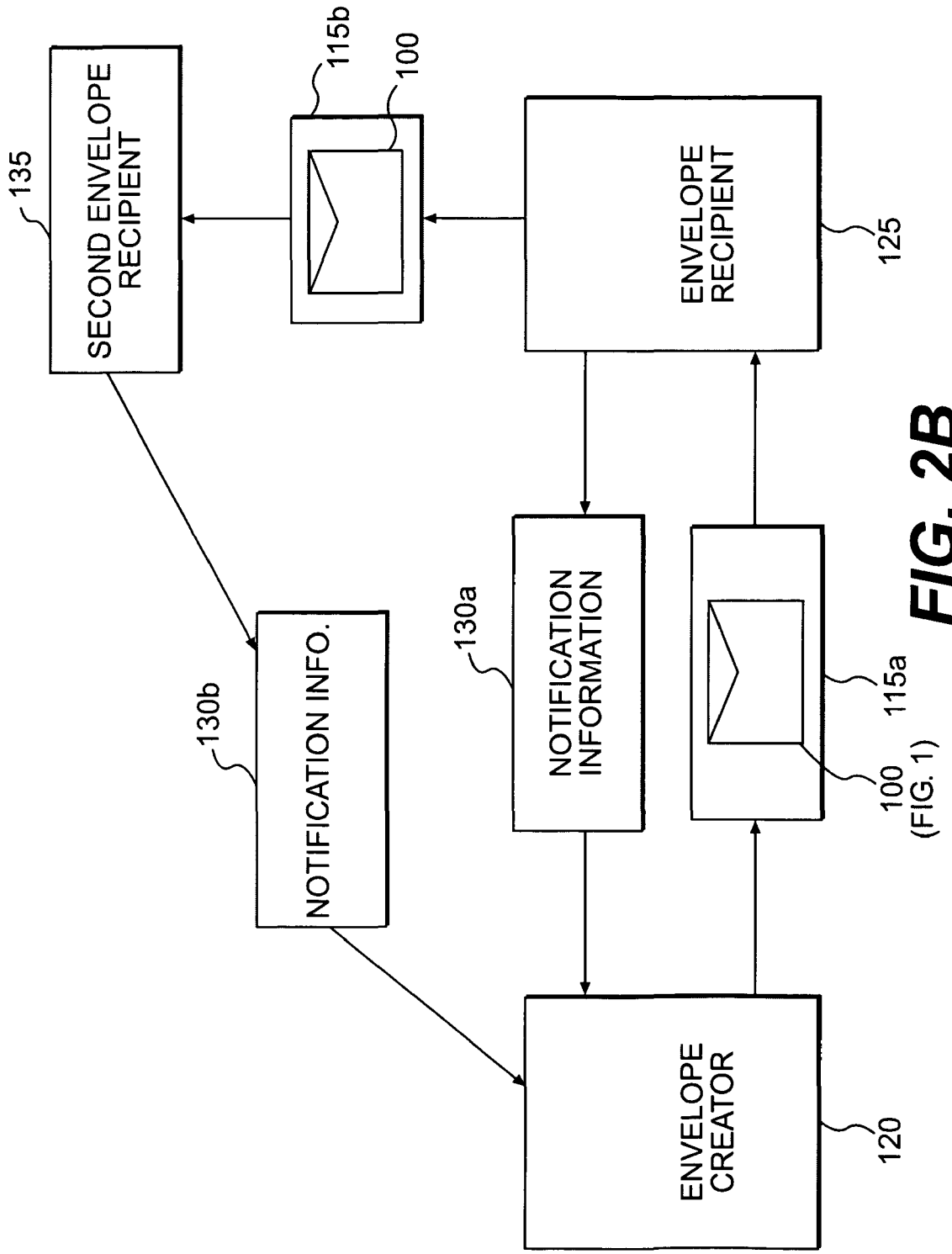


FIG. 2B

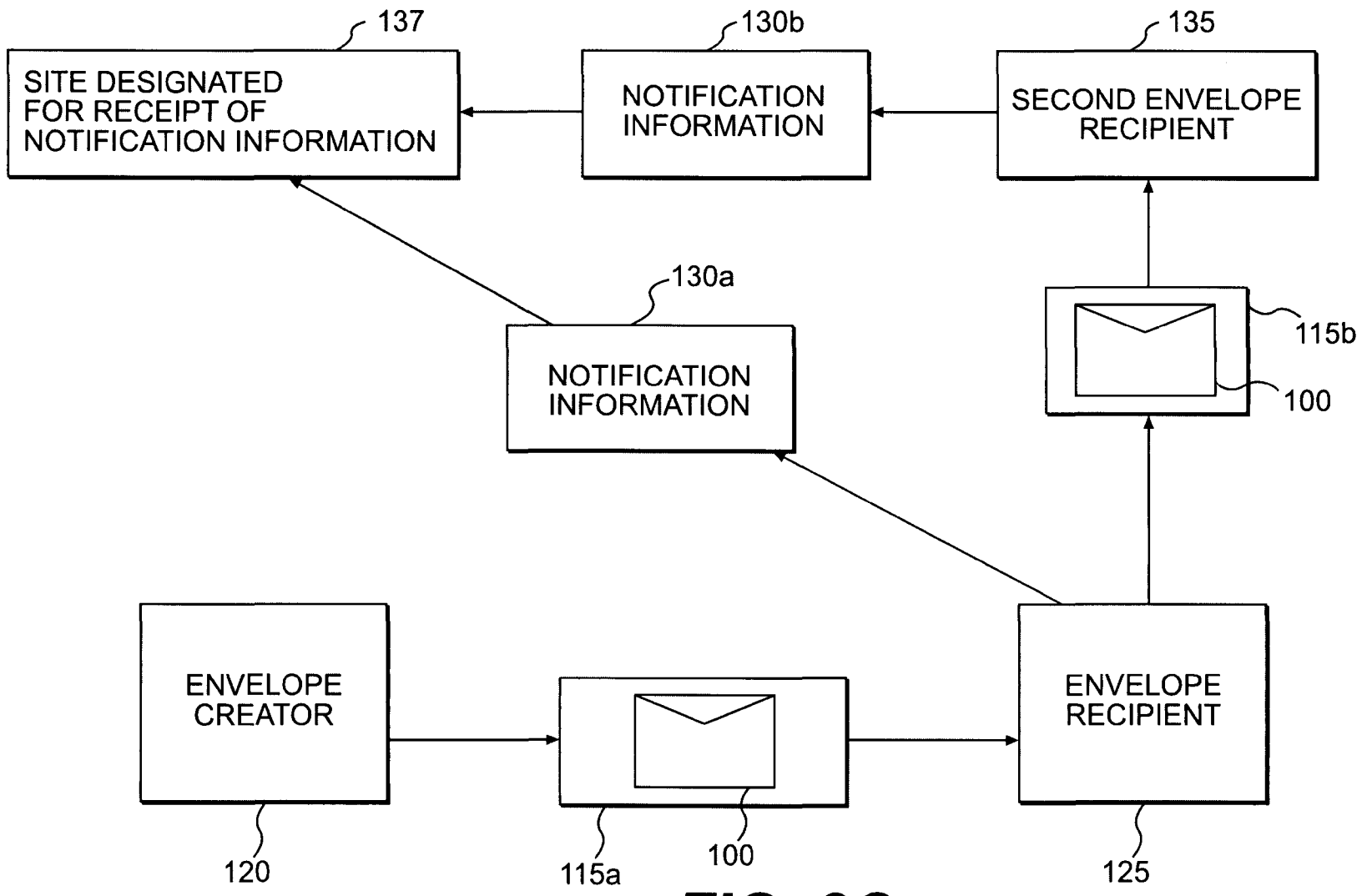


FIG. 2C

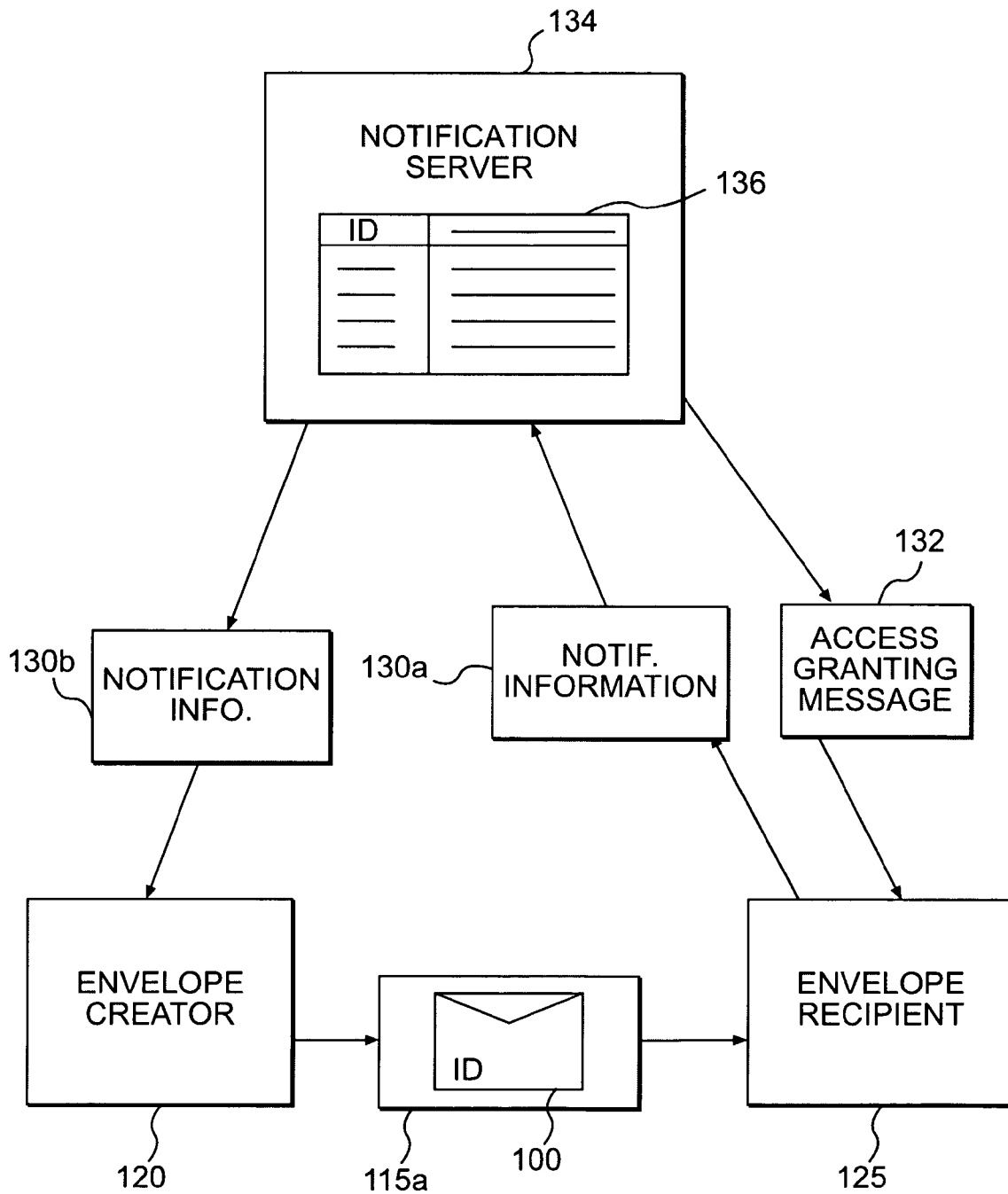


FIG. 2D

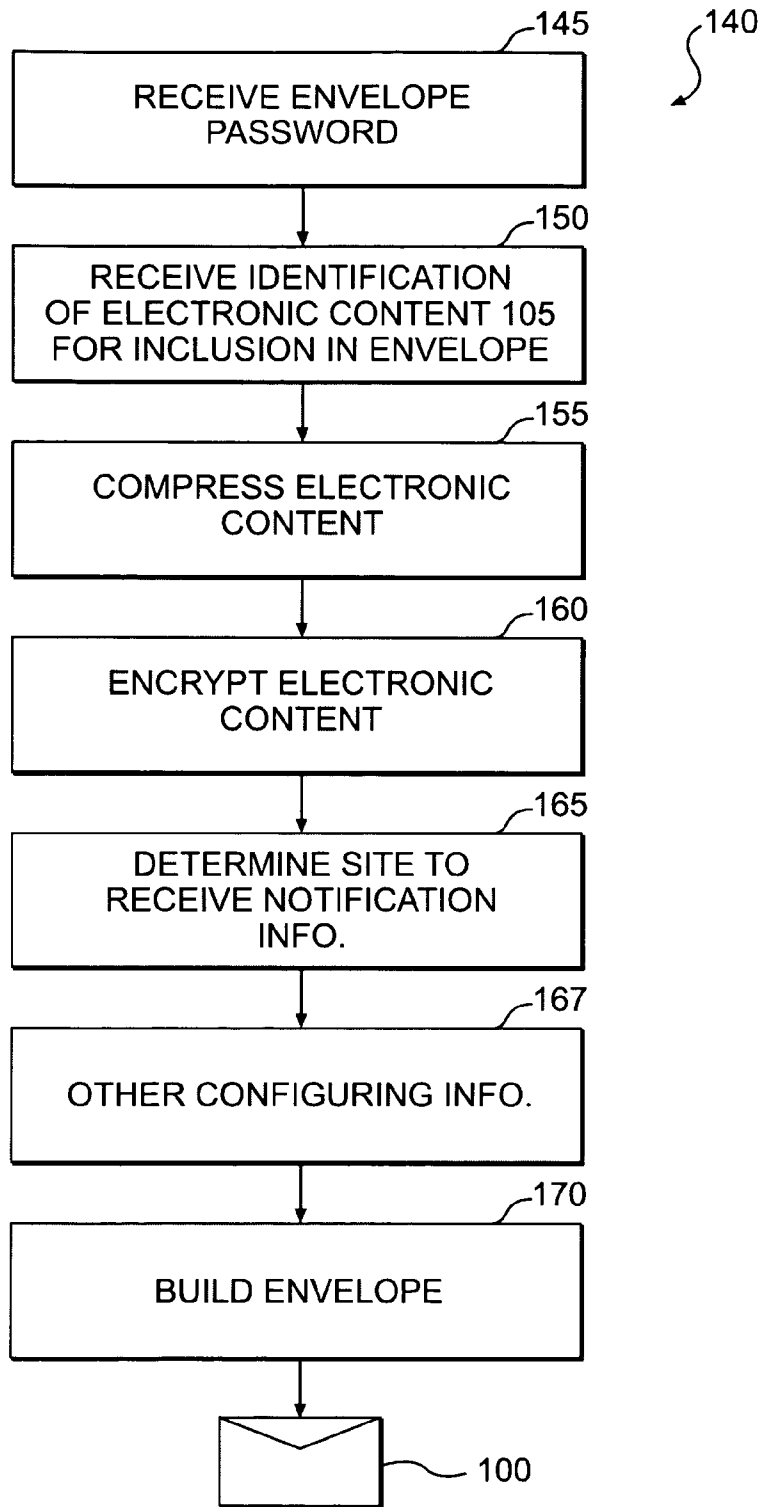


FIG. 3

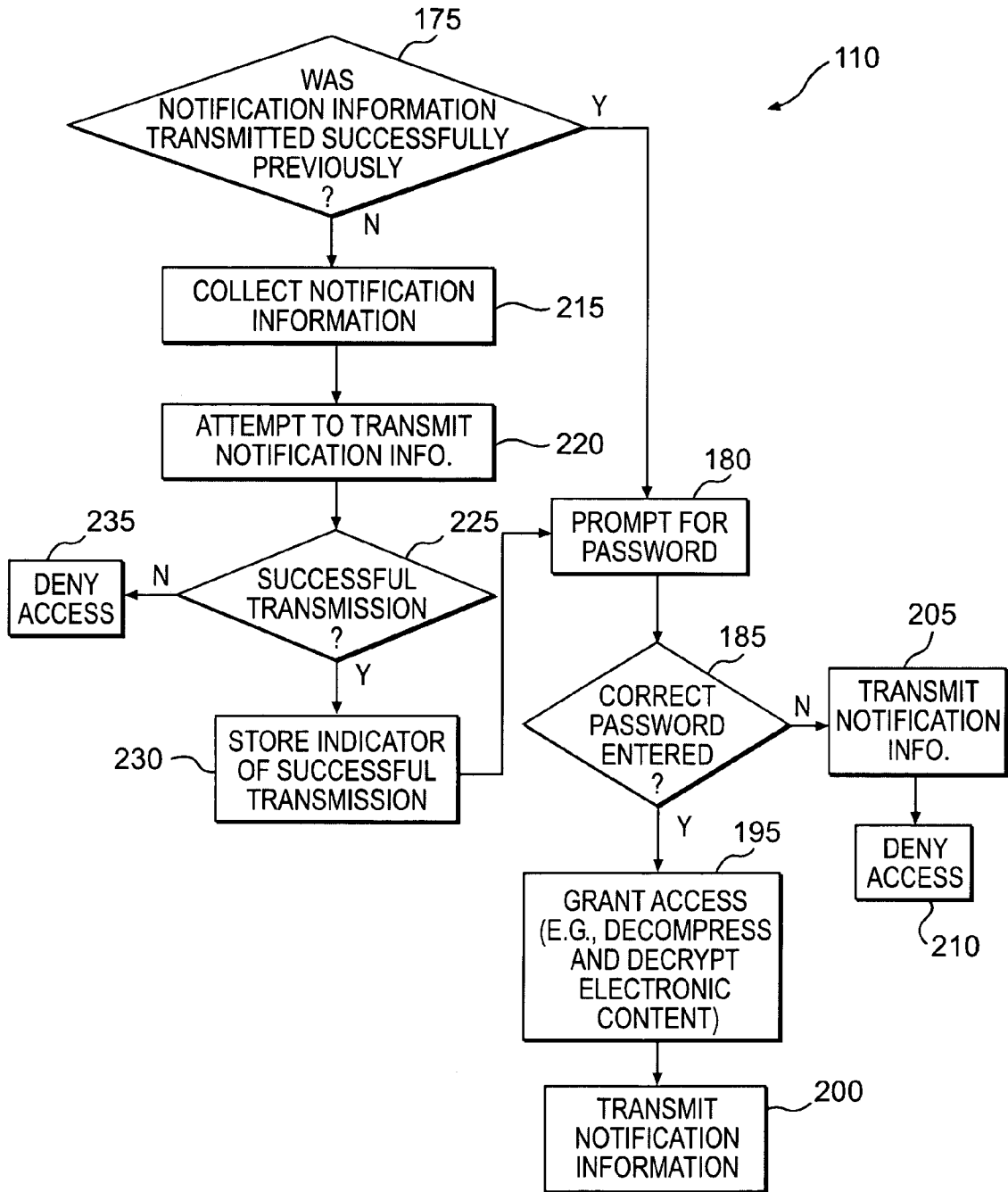


FIG. 4

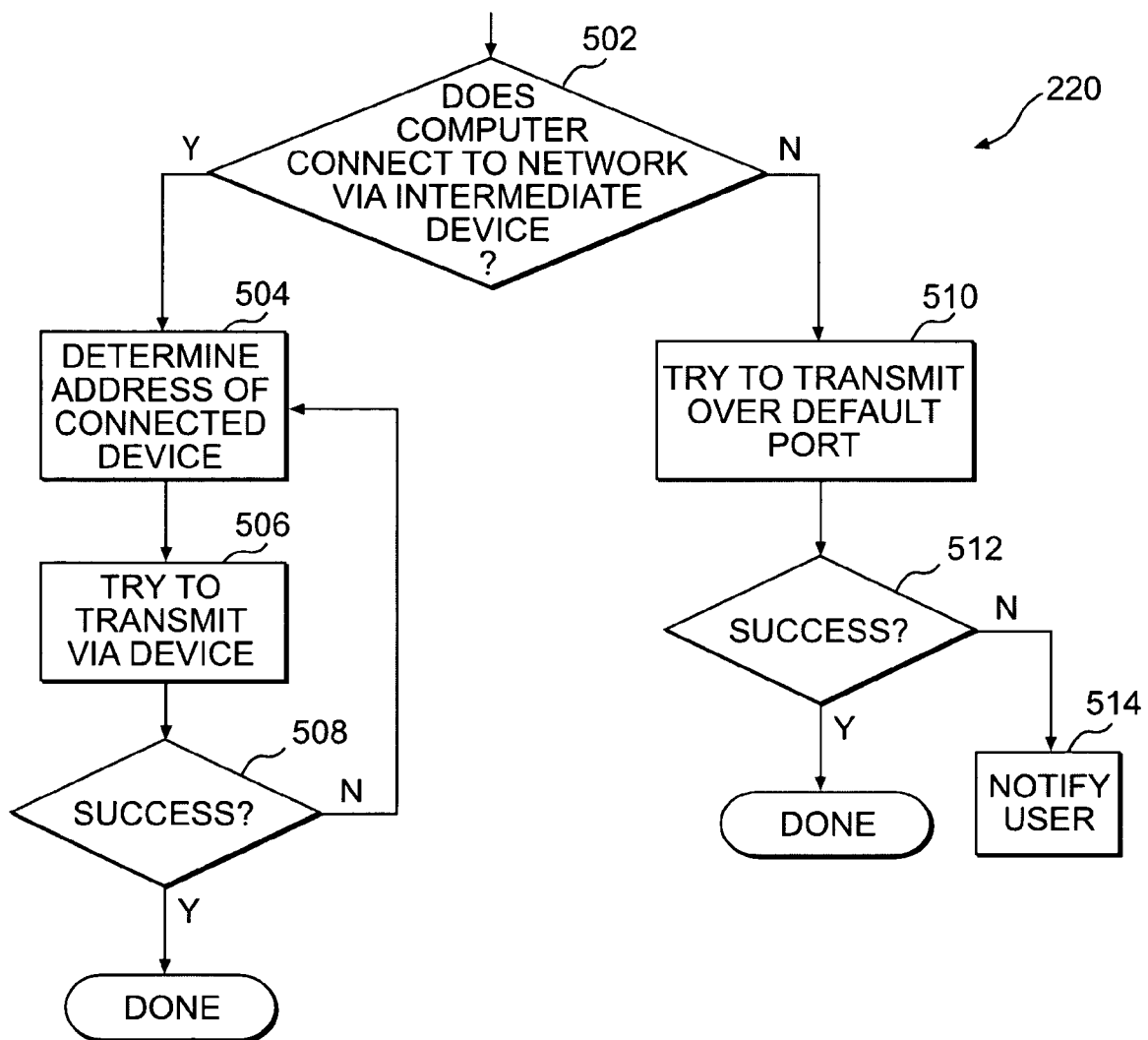


FIG. 5

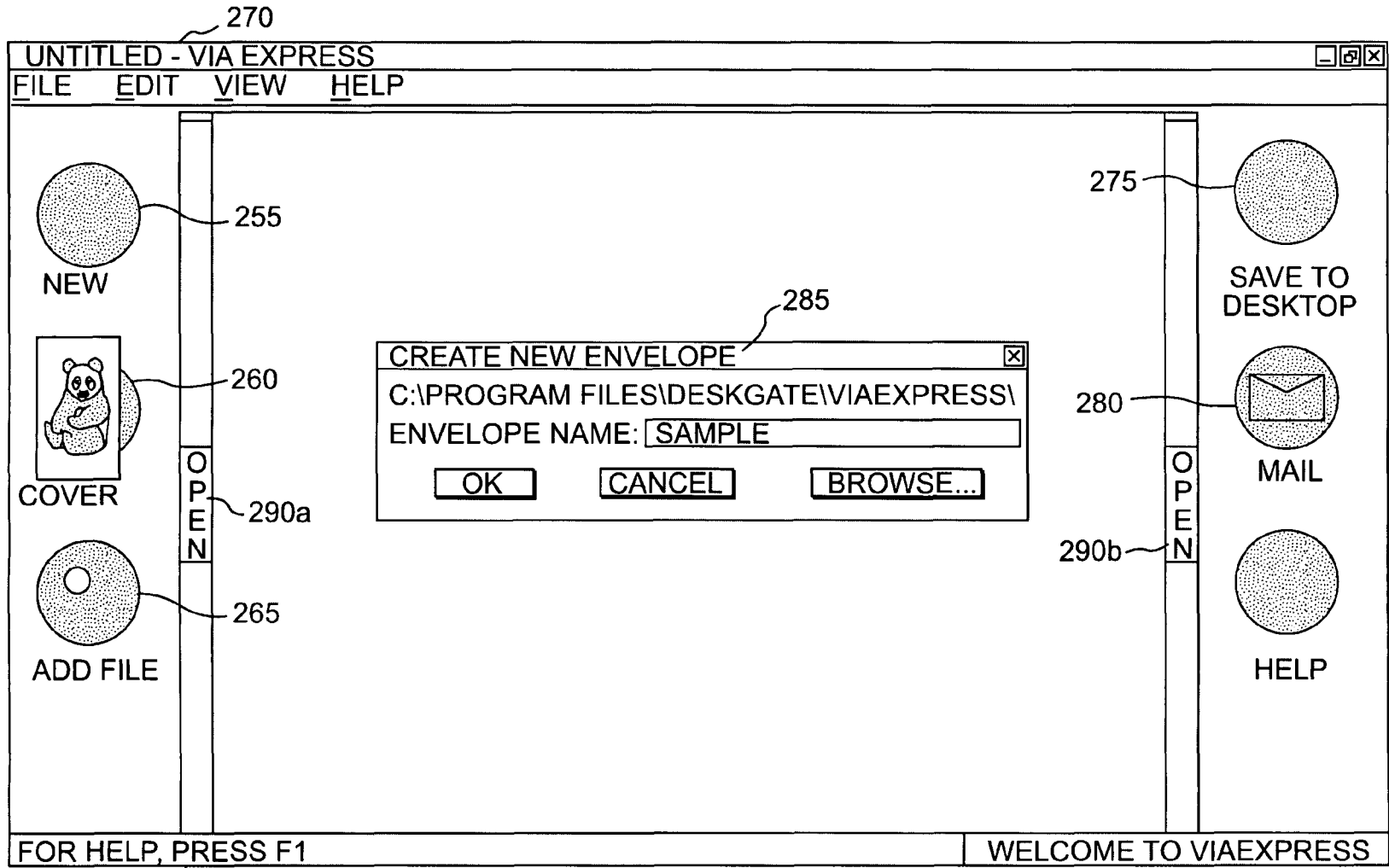


FIG. 6A

250

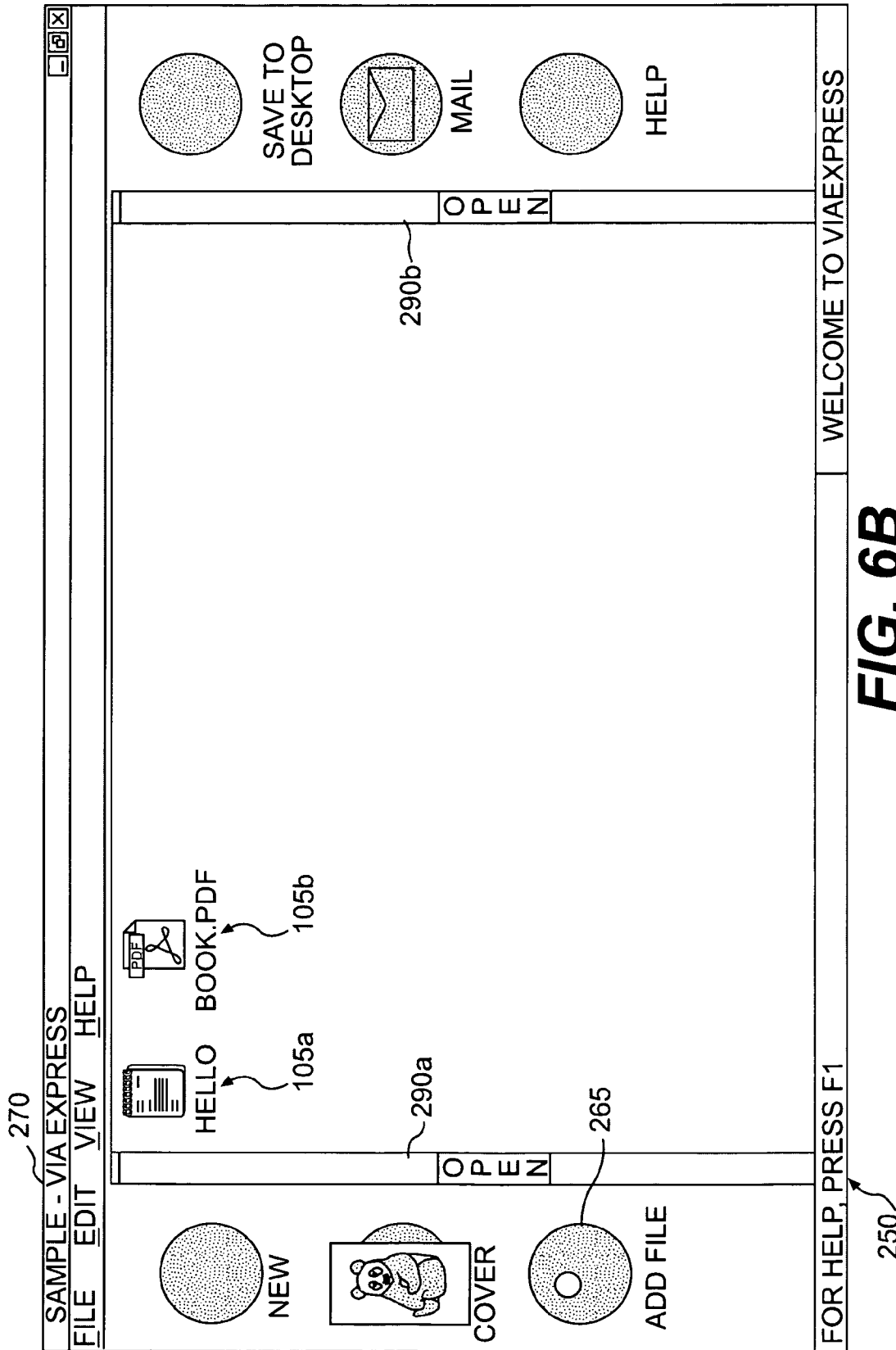
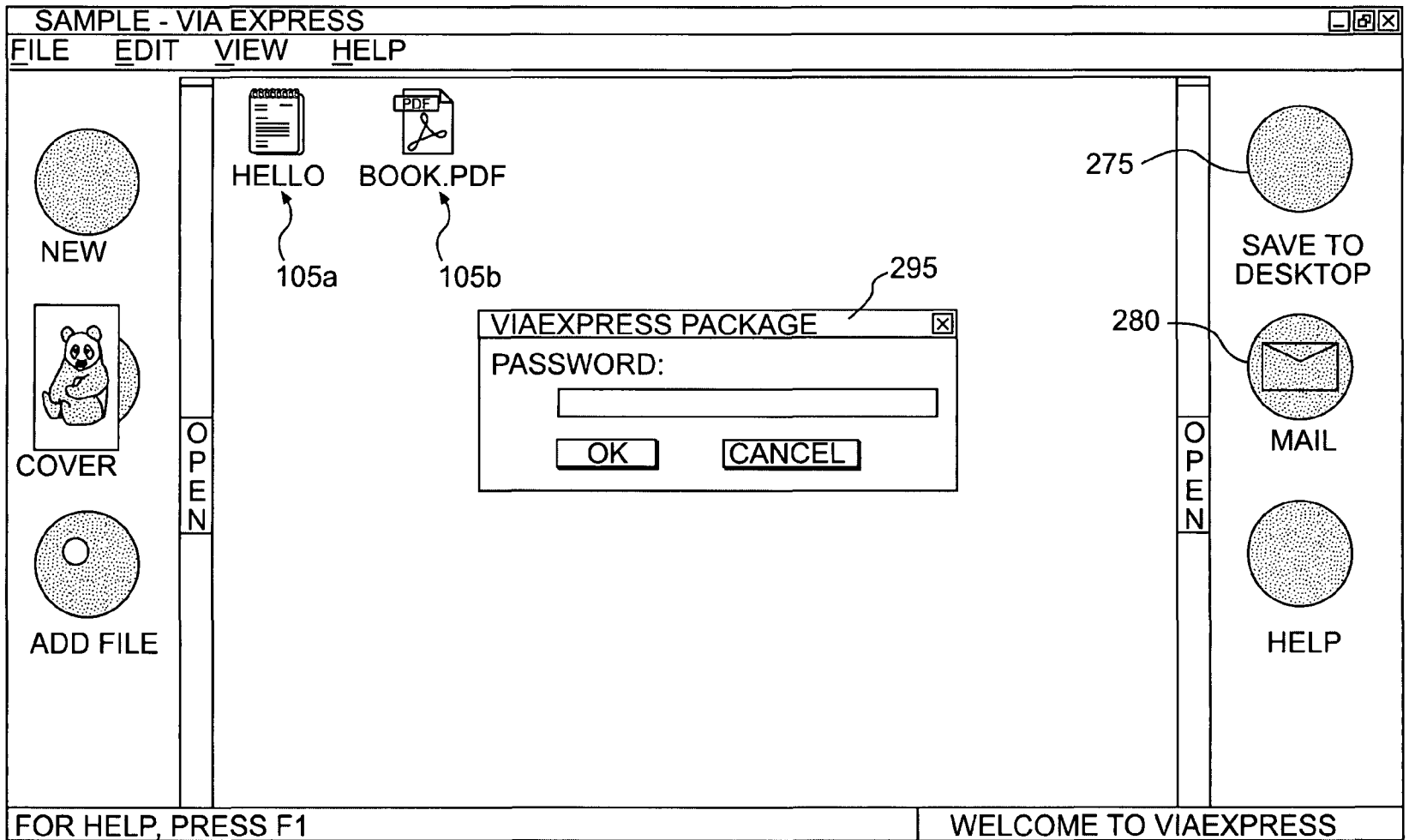


FIG. 6B



250

FIG. 6C

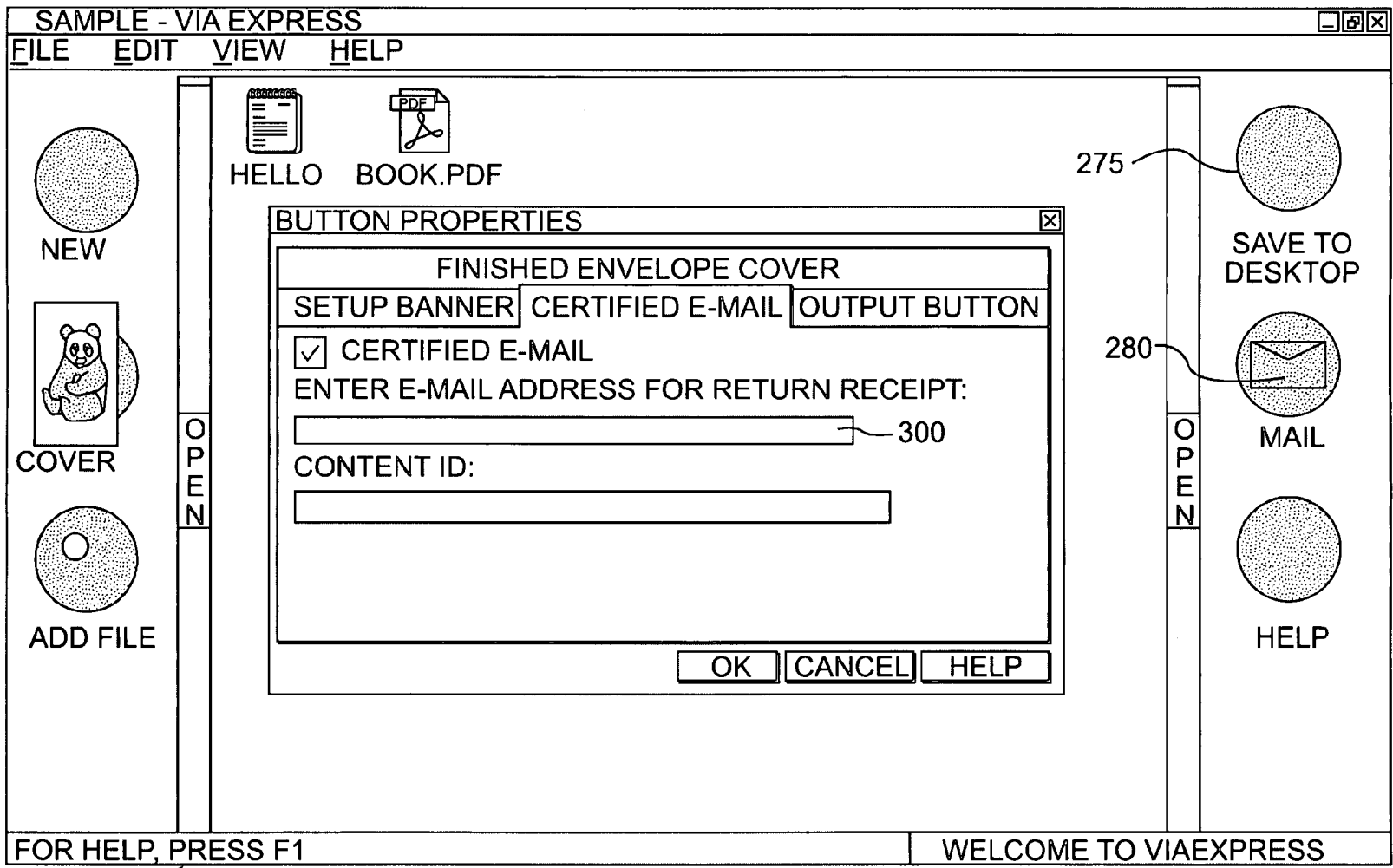


FIG. 6D

250

275

280

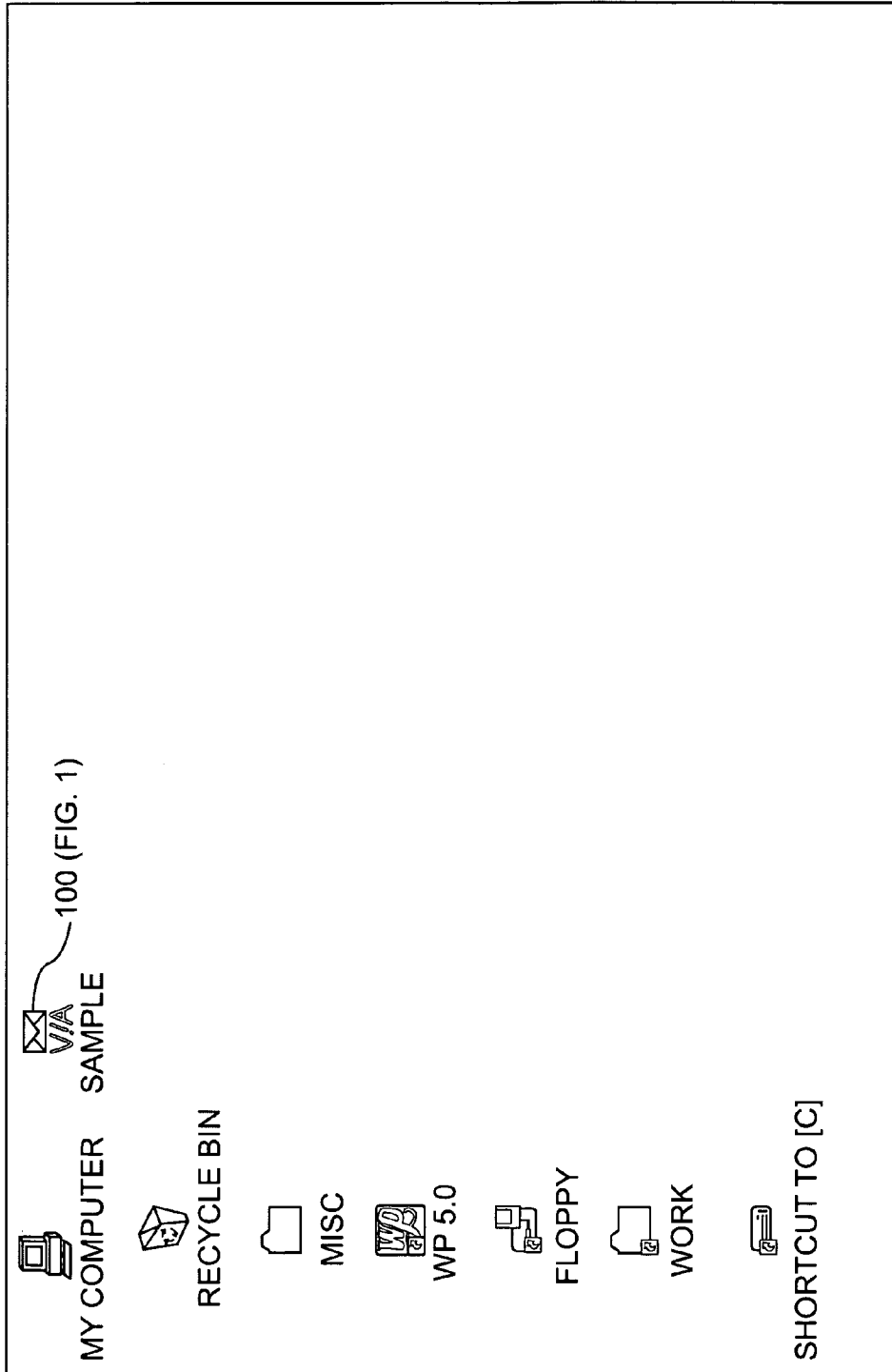
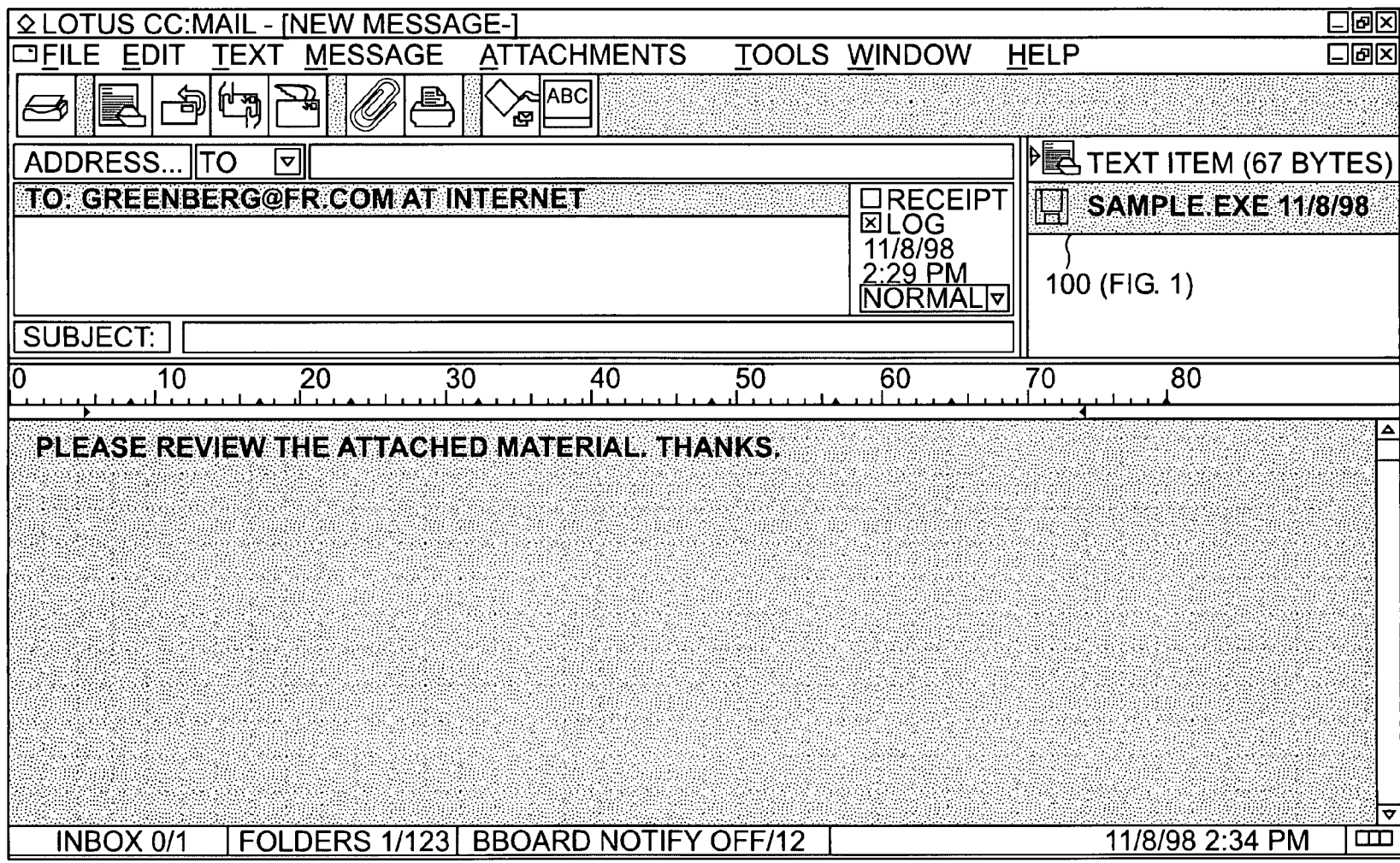


FIG. 6E



310 ↗

FIG. 6F

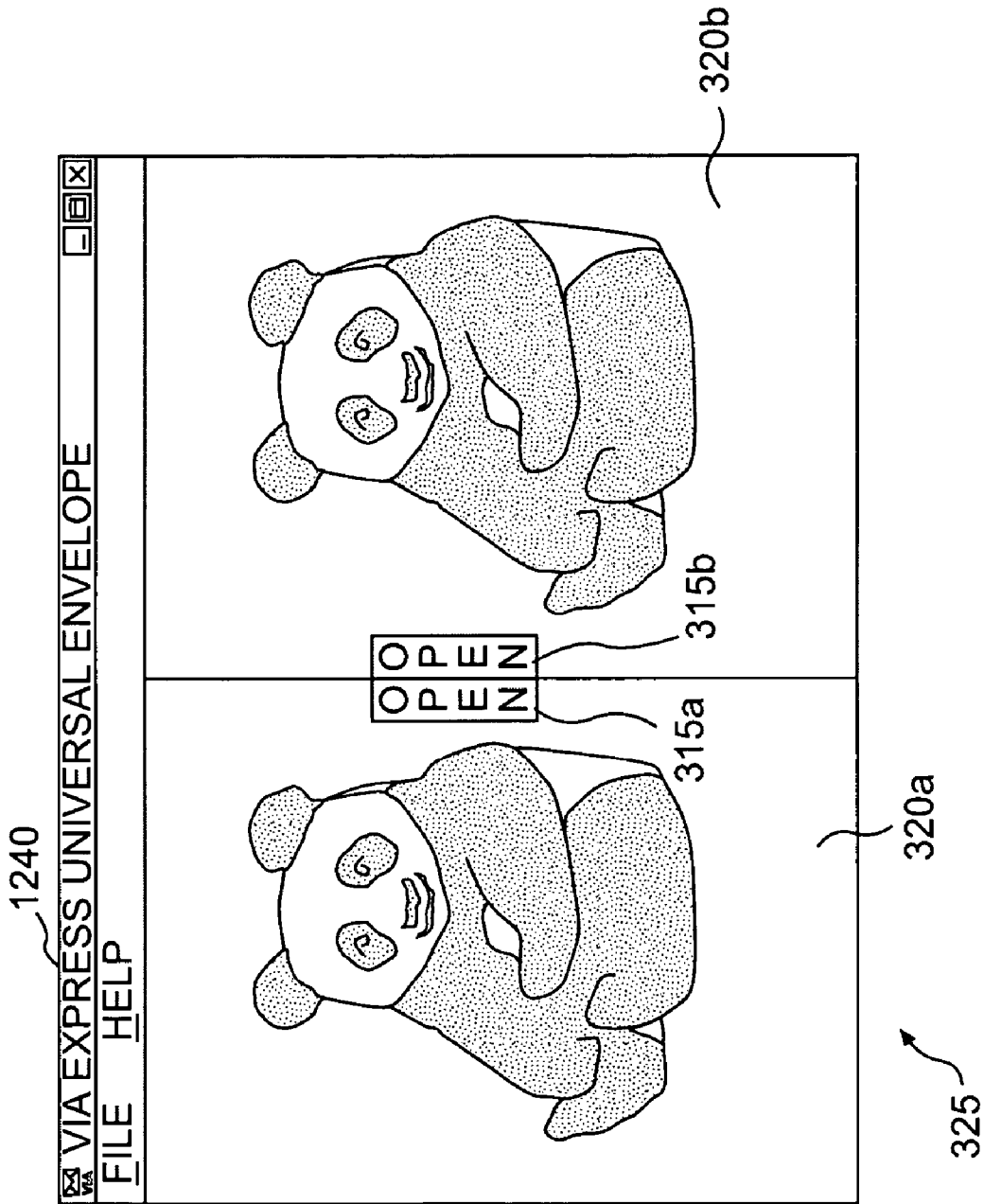


FIG. 6G

CERTIFIED E-MAIL RECEIPT FORM

ACCESS: AUTHORIZATION FORM

*ENTER YOUR NAME

*ENTER YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS

*ENTER YOUR ORGANIZATION

THE SENDER WILL BE NOTIFIED IMMEDIATELY

SEND

READY

330

335

340

345

FIG. 6H

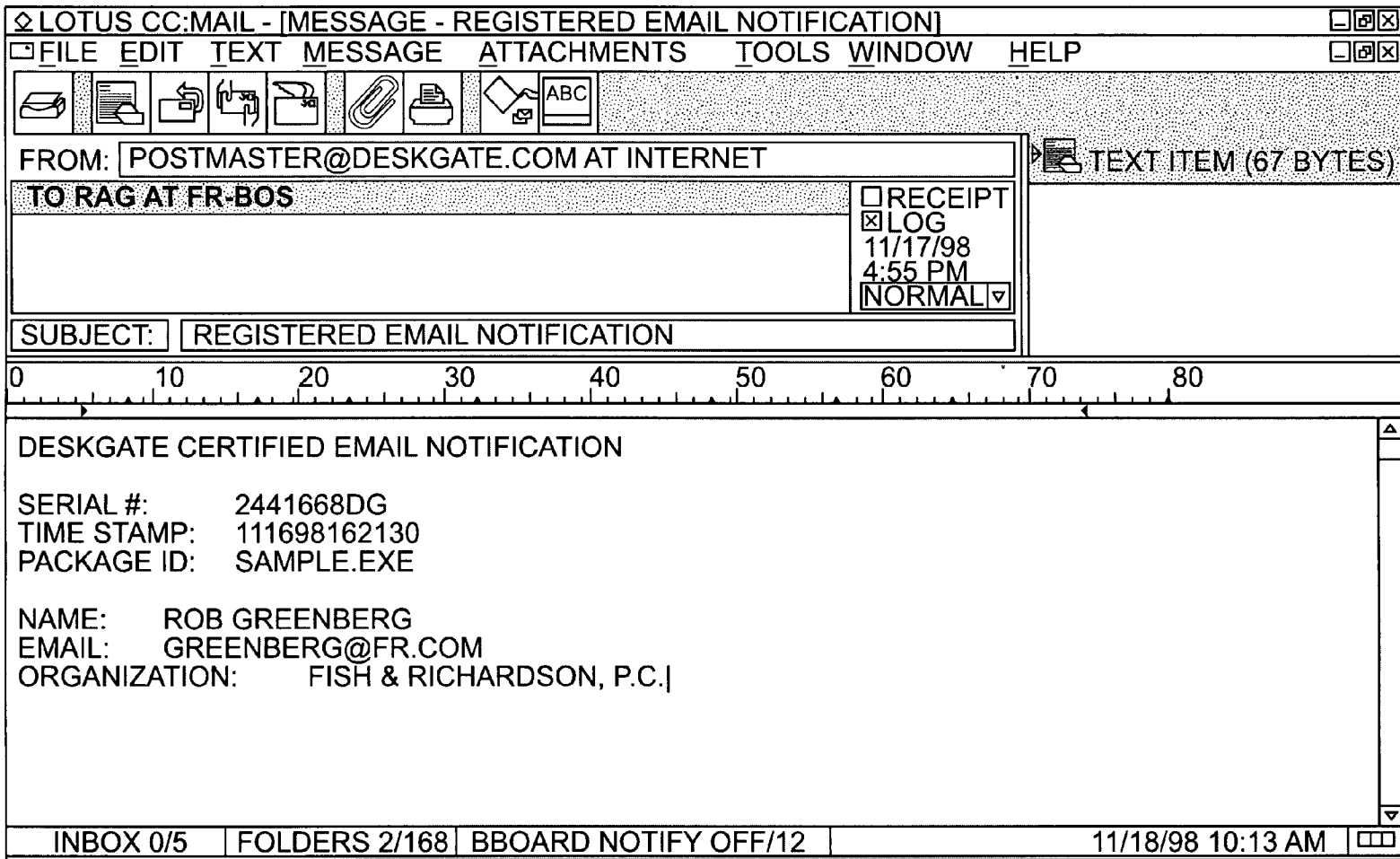


FIG. 6I

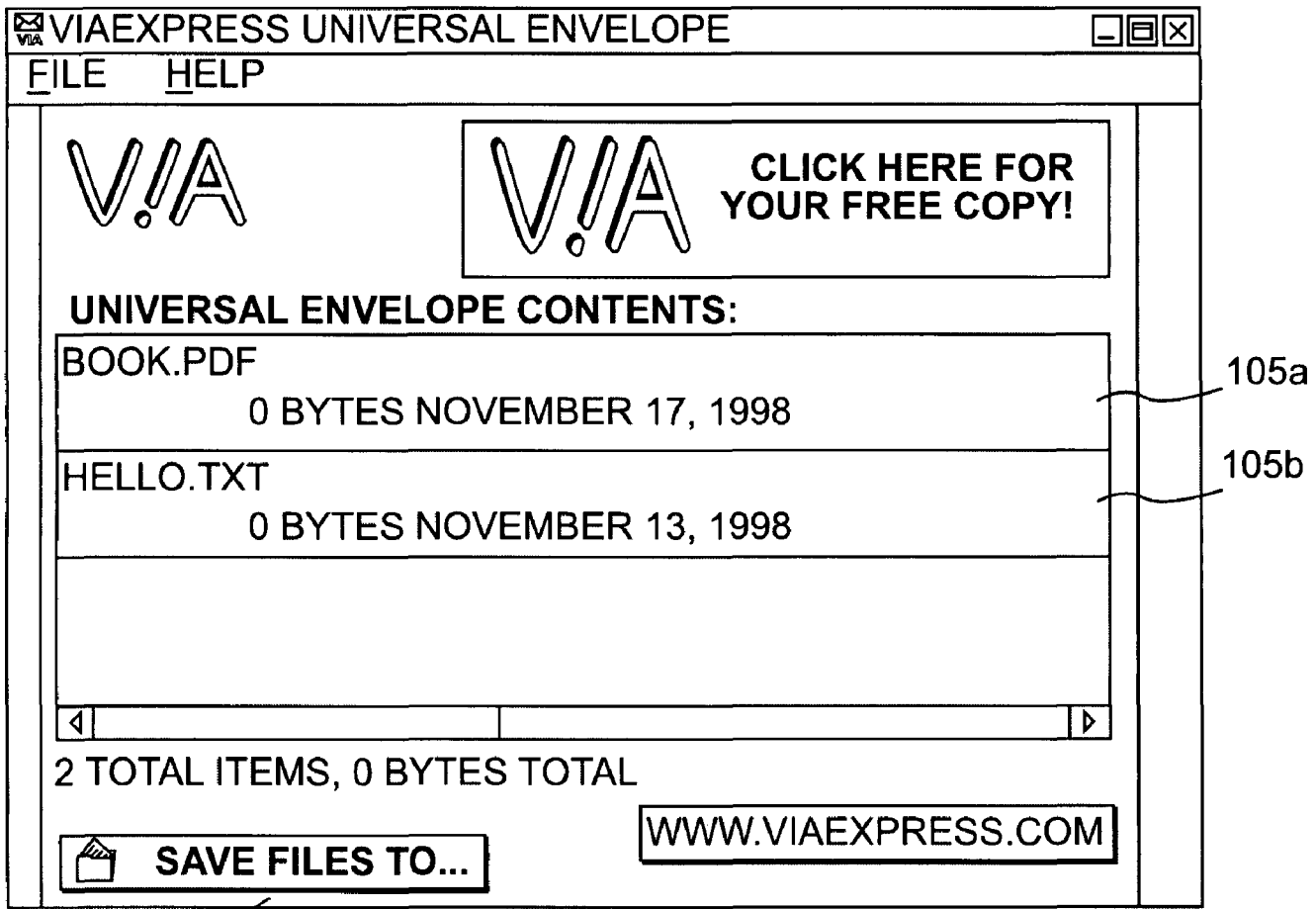


FIG. 6J

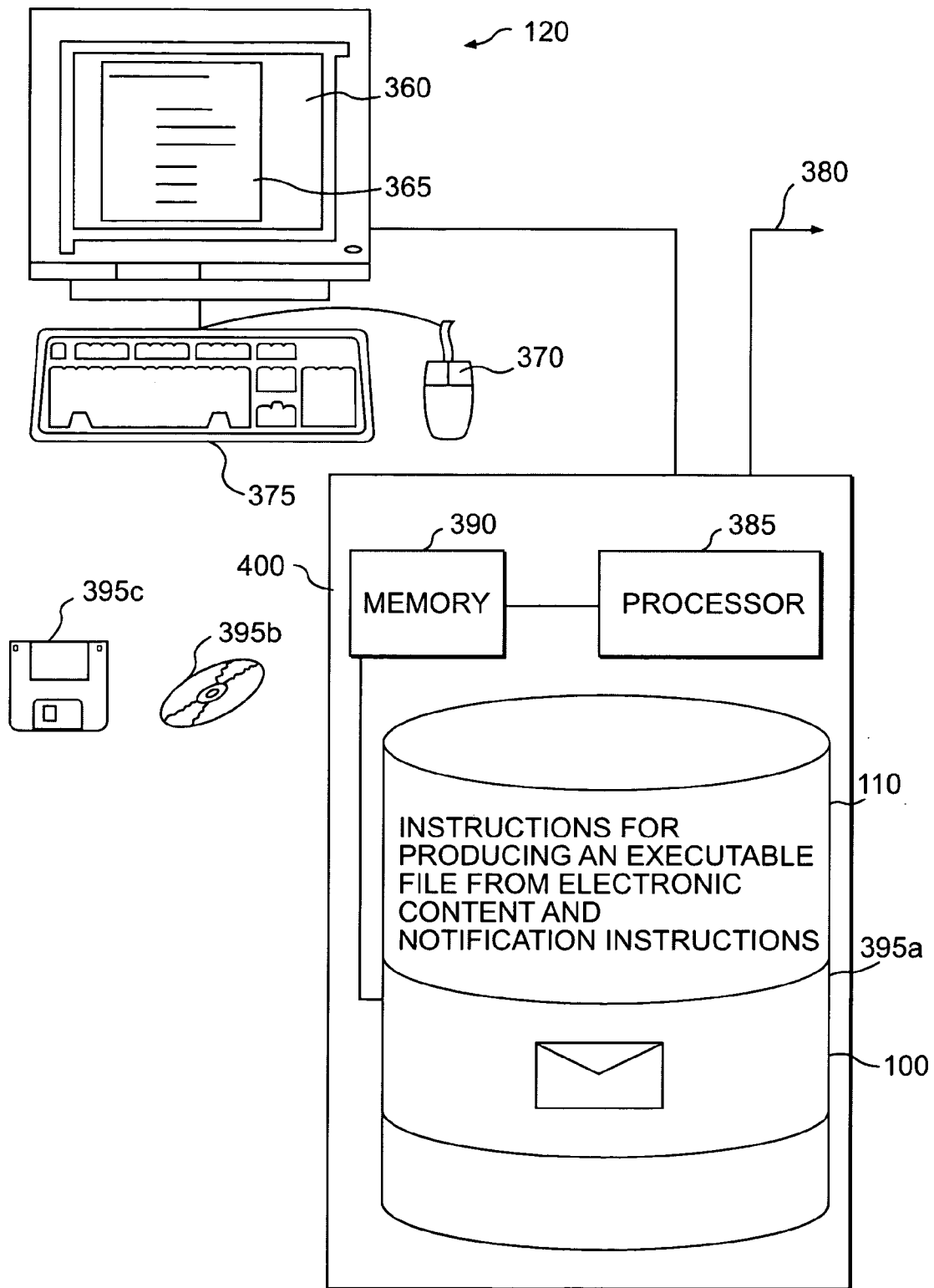


FIG. 7

TRACKING ELECTRONIC CONTENT**CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

This application is a continuation application of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/199,150 filed Nov. 24, 1998 now U.S. Pat. No. 6,751,670, which is now incorporated herein by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates to tracking electronic content, for example, content included with or attached to an electronic mail message.

BACKGROUND

Electronic mail (e-mail) enables computer users to conveniently share information. Frequently, however, network packets carrying e-mail are dropped due to network traffic or physical transmission problems. Even when successfully delivered, recipients sometimes delete or otherwise fail to read received e-mail. Thus, a user sending e-mail often cannot not be sure the intended recipient ever read or received the e-mail.

Some e-mail software packages, such as cc:Mail™ available from Lotus™ Corporation of Cambridge, Mass., provide a “return receipt” option when sending e-mail. E-mail software that receives e-mail specifying “return receipt” can automatically send back a receipt message indicating that the intended recipient received the e-mail. Some software packages permit an administrator or user to disable “return receipt” functions and, thus, prevent transmission of receipts back to e-mail senders.

E-mail contents can include text messages entered in an e-mail editor and/or attachment files (attachments). Recent surveys indicate that more than 50% of information transmitted via e-mail is transmitted in the form of attachments. Many e-mail software packages enable a user receiving an e-mail attachment to easily forward received attachments to other recipients. Thus, an attachment may be quickly disseminated to a large number of individuals unknown to the user originally sending the attachment.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In general, in one aspect, a method of tracking electronic content includes producing a file that includes electronic content and executable instructions. The executable instructions collect notification information and attempt to transmit the notification information to an address when triggered by an event. The executable instructions deny access to the electronic content until the notification information is transmitted successfully.

Embodiments may include one or more of the following. The executable instructions may deny access until an access granting message is received in response to the successful transmission of notification information. The trigger event may include an attempt to access (e.g., view, use, or list) the electronic content, for example, from a computer or user that has not previously accessed the electronic content.

The executable instructions may collect notification information by querying a computer and/or interactively collecting information from a user. Such information may include demographic information (e.g., a name, an e-mail address, and an organization identifier) or system information (e.g., a network address).

The electronic content may be encrypted. Encrypted content may be accompanied by instructions decrypt the content. The electronic content may be compressed. Compressed content may be accompanied by instructions that decompress the content. The electronic content may include at least one file of data, text, graphics, audio, video, or an executable instructions. The file may be transmitted via e-mail (e.g., as an e-mail attachment).

The method may further include determining an address to receive the notification information. Such determining may be performed by interactively receiving an address from a user. Such determining also may be determined by automatically identifying the address as the address of the user creating the file.

The executable instructions that transmit notification information may dynamically determine how to transmit the notification information via an intermediate device (e.g., a proxy server and a firewall).

In general, in another aspect, a method of tracking access to electronic content includes encrypting electronic content, determining an address for receipt of notification information, and producing a file that includes the encrypted electronic content, and executable instructions. The executable instructions collect notification information and attempt to transmit the notification information to the determined address in response to an attempt to access the electronic content on a computer that has not previously accessed the electronic content. The notification instructions decrypt the encrypted electronic content after transmitting notification information successfully.

In general, in another aspect, a method for tracking access to electronic content includes receiving notification information from a recipient of a file including electronic content, the notification information being transmitted in response to an attempt to access the electronic content. The notification information includes an identifier that identifies a user or computer system. The method also includes determining an address for receipt of the notification information and transmitting the notification information to the determined address.

Embodiments may include one or more of the following. An access granting message may be transmitted. The identifier that identifies a user or computer system included in the notification information may be used to verify that an authorized user produced the file. The identifier may also be used to update information (e.g., a usage-charge) corresponding to the identifier.

In general, in another aspect, a computer-implemented method of regulating access to electronic content includes collecting notification information in response to an attempt to access the electronic content, attempting to transmit the collected notification information to an address, and selectively granting access to the electronic content based on a result of the attempted transmission of the notification information.

In general, in another aspect, a method of tracking access to electronic content includes creating a file that includes electronic content and causes access to the electronic content to be denied until notification information has been successfully transmitted. The method also includes transmitting the file to a set of addresses that includes at least one address and receiving notification information.

In general, in another aspect, a computer-implemented method of regulating access to e-mail includes detecting an attempt by a message recipient to access received e-mail, attempting to collect notification information from the recipient.

ent, and selectively granting access to the e-mail based on a result of the attempt to collect notification information.

In general, in another aspect, a method of regulating access to electronic content includes collecting notification information from a recipient of electronic content in response to an attempt to access the electronic content, initiating transmission of the collected notification information to an address other than that of an immediate sender of the electronic content and selectively controlling access to the electronic content based on a result of the transmission of the notification information.

In general, in another aspect, a method for acquiring information, includes receiving notification information in response to an attempt to access electronic data having computer executable instructions, wherein the notification information is collected by executing the executable instructions when triggered by an event at one or more successive computers other than a first computer and the notification information is received at a network address other than a network address transmitting the electronic data.

In general, in yet another aspect, a method for assessing fees or controlling information includes receiving electronic data having at least in part computer executable instructions from a sending computer, transmitting the received electronic data and executable instructions to one or more successive computers and wherein the computer executable instructions are executed at the one or more successive computers and upon transmission of an authorized user identifier to a network address other than a network address of the sending computer, access is granted to at least a portion of the electronic data.

In general, in another aspect, a computer program, disposed on a computer readable medium, tracks electronic content. The computer program including computer program instructions for causing a computer to produce a file that includes electronic content and executable instructions that collect notification information and attempt to transmit the notification information to an address when triggered by an event. The executable instructions deny access to the electronic content until the notification information is transmitted successfully.

In general, in another aspect, a computer program, disposed on a computer readable medium, regulates access to electronic content. The computer program includes instructions for causing a processor to collect notification information in response to an attempt to access the electronic content, attempt to transmit the collected notification information to an address, and selectively grant access to the electronic content based on a result of the attempted transmission of the notification information.

Advantages include one or more of the following.

Transmitting electronic content in envelopes permits access to electronic content to be tracked in perpetuity. That is, regardless of how an envelope is passed on by different recipients, the envelope creator, or a user designated by the envelope creator, receives notification information describing each recipient who attempts to access the electronic content in the envelope.

By including its own set of executable instructions the envelope can be used by existing e-mail software packages without modification. Additionally, the executable instructions, for example, those that dynamically determine how to reach a network through intermediate devices (e.g., a firewall), make the task of preventing transmission of notification information extremely difficult without completely severing a network connection.

The notification information provided by an envelope can include any information that can be acquired by querying a computer system or user. The information collected can provide valuable marketing data describing the attributes of users accessing the electronic content.

Receipt of notification information not only communicates receipt of a file but also of attempted access or other attempted functions (e.g., printing, saving, and deleting).

The use of a notification server enables envelopes to control access to electronic content, for example, by limiting the number of times a particular user can access electronic content.

Other advantages of the invention will become apparent in view of the following description, including the figures, and the claims.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a diagram of an envelope.

FIG. 2A-2D are diagrams illustrating transmission of notification information.

FIG. 3 is a flow chart of a procedure for creating envelopes.

FIG. 4 is a flow chart of a procedure for controlling access to electronic content based on successful transmission of notification information.

FIG. 5 is a flow chart of a procedure for transmitting notification information.

FIGS. 6A-6J are screenshots of envelope creation and use.

FIG. 7 is a diagram of a computer platform.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Referring to FIG. 1, an envelope file **100** (envelope) includes electronic content **105** (e.g., data, text, graphics, audio, video, or executable instructions) and executable notification instructions **110** that control and report access to the electronic content **105**. The envelope file **100** may be transmitted to other users or computers, for example, as an attachment to an e-mail message. The envelope **100** may also be transmitted via a network service such as FTP (File Transfer Protocol) or HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) or other mechanisms such as physical transfer of a floppy disk storing the envelope or a direct modem connection between computers. A recipient of the envelope **100** may attempt to access (e.g., view, use, or list) content **105** included in the envelope **100**. The notification instructions **110** included in the envelope **100** may respond to the access attempt by collecting notification information (e.g., a user name) and attempting to transmit the collected information to a network address designated during envelope **100** creation. The notification instructions **110** may be configured during creation of the envelope **115** to grant or deny access to the electronic content **105** based on the results of the attempted transmission of the notification information **140**.

The executable notification instructions **110** included in an envelope **100** may include computer platform-specific instructions. For example, an envelope **100** may include binary instructions **110** that program any PC-compatible computer. The executable instructions, however, need not be targeted to a particular computer platform. For example, the instructions **110** may be Java commands. The executable instructions are placed in the envelope **100** such that an attempt to execute the envelope file **100** (e.g., "C:\envelope.exe") causes execution of the executable instructions.

Referring to FIG. 2A, an envelope **100** may be transmitted from an envelope creator **120** to an envelope recipient **125**, for example, by including the envelope **100** as an attachment to

an e-mail message **115a**. Attempted access to the content of the envelope **100** by the recipient **125** causes execution of the notification instructions **110** of the envelope that collect and transmit notification information **130a** from the recipient **125** to the envelope creator **120**. Such information **130a** may include system information (e.g., a network address and/or other data stored on a system) and/or demographic information such as a user's name, e-mail address, street address, and/or organization. The envelope creator **120** and recipient **125** may use the same or different computer systems.

Including an envelope **100** as an e-mail attachment **115a** offers an envelope creator **120** a "certified receipt" functionality that transmits notification information **130a** indicating that not only has a recipient received the envelope **100**, but that the recipient has also accessed (or attempt to access) the envelope contents **105**. The notification instructions **110** included in the envelope **100** can be configured during creation to report events other than attempted access to envelope contents **105** such as an attempt to save contents **105** to a file, an attempt to delete envelope contents **105**, and/or an attempt to print envelope contents **105**. For example, the notification instructions **110** may monitor viewing of electronic content **105** and transmit notification information **130a** that summarizes the viewing (e.g., which pages of a document were read) when viewing ends.

An envelope **100** can be included as an e-mail attachment **115a** using any e-mail software package that supports attachments (e.g., Lotus™ cc:Mail™, Microsoft™ Exchange, and Eudora). Because the envelope **100** includes its own independently executable notification instructions **110** that control electronic content **105** access and transmission of notification information **130a**, **130b**, the envelope **100** provides a notification mechanism independent of the capabilities of any particular e-mail software package. This independence offers a number of benefits. For example, because the functionality provided by an envelope **100** is independent of the e-mail package used to transmit or receive e-mail, users can continue to use an e-mail package of their choice without modification and still receive notification information **130** from an envelope **100**. Additionally, because the envelope **100** need not rely on functions provided by any e-mail software package, defeating the notification scheme implemented by an envelope **100** becomes much more difficult than re-configuring an e-mail software package (e.g., an administrator clicking on a check-box control that prevents transmission of return receipt messages).

Referring to FIG. 2B, after transmission to a recipient **125**, the envelope **100** remains a convenient way to transmit electronic content **105** included in the envelope **100** to others. Thus, a recipient **125** can easily re-transmit the received electronic content **105** to one or more new recipients **135** by forwarding the received envelope **100** in a new e-mail message **115b**. The notification instructions **110**, however, remain packaged with the electronic content **105** in the envelope **115** and continue to control access to the electronic content **105** and transmit notification information **130b** collected from the different recipients **135** that receive the forwarded envelope **100**. Thus, the notification instructions **110** collect and transmit notification information **130b** to an envelope creator **120** each time a different user or computer accesses the electronic content **105** even though the recipient **135** did not receive the envelope directly from the envelope **100** creator. Thus, the notification information **130a**, **130b** received by an envelope creator **120** can produce a list of the different users and computers that access a particular envelope's electronic content **105** as an envelope **100** is passed on to different recipients. The information reported can provide invaluable mar-

keting data that tracks the number and demographic attributes of users accessing a particular set of electronic content **105**.

Referring to FIG. 2C, an envelope **100** creator may configure the envelope **100** to transmit collected notification information **130a**, **130b** to an address **137** other than the address **120** of the envelope creator **120**. Additionally, the envelope **100** creator can configure the envelope **100** to broadcast the notification information **100** to may different addresses (not shown).

Referring to FIG. 2D, the notification instructions **110** included in an envelope **100** may transmit notification information **130a** via a notification server **134** instead of directly to an address **120** designated during envelope creation. The notification instructions **110** may be configured to deny access until an access granting message **132** is received from the notification server **134**. The notification server **134** may automatically transmit an access granting message **132** upon receipt of notification information **130a**. Alternatively, the notification server **134** may process the notification information **130a** before transmitting an access granting message **132**. The use of a notification server **134** to transmit access granting messages **136** provides a method of controlling access (e.g., limiting the number of people who can access an envelope **100**) without requiring server software to continually run on an envelope creator's computer.

The notification server **134** may include a table **136** that enables the server **134** to track use of envelopes and/or envelope production software. The table **136** can include information describing users of the envelope production software. For example, the table **136** can store identifiers corresponding to authorized envelope creators. The table **136** can also store information describing particular envelopes by storing envelope IDs as they are received.

To facilitate use of a notification server **134**, each envelope **100** may include an identifier indicating the user or computer system **120** that created the envelope **100**, the address of the notification server **134**, and the address specified during envelope creation that ultimately receives the notification information. The notification server **134** can match the identifier included in the notification information **130a** with an identifier in its table **136** to verify legitimate envelope production or compute usage charges. The notification server **134** can then re-transmit the notification information **130a** to the address designated by an envelope creator during envelope creation.

Referring to FIG. 3, a procedure **140** produces an envelope **100**. The procedure **140** may prompt (**145**) an envelope creator to designate a password for password protection of the electronic content **105**. The notification instructions **110** use the designated password to deny access to an envelope's **100** electronic contents **105** to a recipient who fails to provide the designated password. Thus, unless a recipient receives an envelope's **100** password, for example, via a phone call or separately transmitted e-mail message, the recipient cannot access the electronic contents **105** of the envelope **100**.

After receiving identification (**150**) of electronic content **105** for inclusion in an envelope **100**, the procedure **140** may compress (**155**) the electronic content **105** to minimize the size (e.g., number of bytes) of the envelope **100** and, thus, speed transmission of the envelope **100** across network lines. The procedure **140** may use any one of a variety of compression algorithms such as PKZip compression. The procedure **140** also may encrypt (**160**) the electronic content **105** to provide security both during transmission over public network lines and to prevent attempts to bypass the notification instructions **110** and access an envelope's content **105** before successfully transmitting notification information **130a**, **130b**. The password designated by an envelope creator may

act as the encryption key, providing extra protection against unauthorized access. The procedure **140** may use any of a variety of encryption algorithms such as Blowfish, DES (Data Encryption Standard), or PKZip encryption. The terms compression and encryption are not mutually exclusive. That is, compressing data (i.e., making the size of an envelope smaller) may also serve to encrypt the data.

The procedure **140** may determine (**165**) a network address that will receive the notification information **130a**, **130b**. By default, the procedure **140** may assume that the user executing the envelope producing procedure **140** should receive the notification information **130a**, **130b**. For example, the procedure **140** may query a system configuration file (e.g., a Windows™ registry) to determine the e-mail address of the envelope creator. However, an envelope creator may expressly designate a different address at the time the envelope is created.

The procedure **140** may receive other envelope configuring (**167**) information from an envelope creator. For example, the creator may specify that the envelope **100** need not successfully transmit notification information **130a**, **130b** before granting access to the envelope's electronic content **105**. The creator may even specify that no notification information **130a**, **130b** should ever be transmitted by the envelope **100**.

The procedure **140** then builds (**170**) the envelope **100** to include data corresponding to the identified electronic content **105** and notification instructions **110**. The notification instructions **110** included in the envelope **100** may vary depending on the envelope's **100** specified configuration. For example, an envelope **100** including compressed and encrypted data corresponding to the electronic content **105** may include notification instructions **110** that decompress and decrypt the data **105** when granting access to the content **105**.

Other implementations of procedure **140** perform the actions shown in different orders. Further, some implementations omit actions shown. Additionally, other implementations may include different configuration capabilities. For example, an envelope **100** creator may configure the envelope **100** to collect different notification information **130a**, **130b**.

Referring to FIG. 4, the notification instructions **110** included in an envelope **100** can be configured to control access to the electronic content **105**. Typically, an envelope **100** will include compressed and/or encrypted electronic content **105**. Further, different electronic content **105** included in an envelope may use different file formats (e.g., electronic content may include a JPEG file and a file that includes sound data). Thus, an envelope recipient usually cannot easily access the electronic content **105** by direct examination. Instead, the recipient must execute the notification instructions **110** of an envelope **115** to gain access (e.g., extract the electronic content **105** from the envelope). For example, a recipient may save an envelope **100** received as an attachment as a file and execute the file using platform specific commands (e.g., "C:\envelope.exe"). Many e-mail packages, such as cc:Mail™, can launch executable files from within the e-mail package.

When executed, notification instructions **110** can determine (**175**) whether a previous attempt to access the electronic content **105** resulted in success (e.g., success transmission of notification information **130a**, **130b** or receipt of an access granting message **136**). If so, the notification instructions **110** may grant access (**195**) to the electronic content **105** without re-collecting and/or re-transmitting notification information **130a**, **130b**. If, however, a previous attempt to access the electronic content **105** did not result in success, the

notification instructions **110** attempt to collect (**215**) and transmit (**220**) the notification information **130a**, **130b**.

Many different techniques exist for determining (**175**) whether a previous access attempt resulted in successful. For example, each envelope **100** may include an envelope ID. The envelope ID may be produced during envelope creation by combining a timestamp produced during envelope production with a machine identification code of the computer used to produce the envelope (e.g., a network address). The notification instructions can store (**230**) the envelope ID on a computer system (e.g., in the registry) after successful transmission of notification information **140**. By examining a computer system for prior storage of an envelope's envelope ID, the instructions **110** can determine (**175**) whether a previous access attempt succeeded. The determination (**175**) may be a computer system-based or a user-based inquiry. For example, by storing a user identification code along with the envelope ID, the notification instructions **110** can distinguish between different users of the same computer system. Thus, the notification instructions **110** do not repeatedly require re-transmission of notification information **130a**, **130b** by users who already have successfully transmitted notification information **140**.

If the instructions **110** determine (**175**) that no previous access attempt succeeded, the instructions **110** collect (**215**) notification information **130a**, **130b**. The notification instructions **130** may interactively collect notification information **140** from a recipient through a GUI dialog (see FIG. 6H). The notification instructions **130** also may collect information by querying the recipient's computer system. For example, the notification instructions **130** may examine registry information to retrieve a wide variety of system and demographic information.

After collecting (**215**) the notification information **130a**, **130b**, the notification instructions **110** attempt (**220**) to transmit the collected notification information **130a**, **130b** to the address specified during an envelope's creation (**165** FIG. 3). An attempt to transmit the notification information **130a**, **130b** may fail immediately and return a network service error code (e.g., a port timeout error code). Additionally, even though transmission does not result in a network service error, the computer sending the notification information **130a**, **130b** may not receive a network acknowledgment message that indicates successful transmission and receipt of the notification information **130a**, **130b**. Further, notification instructions **110** configured to grant access only upon receipt of an access granting message may fail to receive the access granting message **132** after a period of time. The notification instructions **110** may be configured during envelope creation to deny access based on any of these circumstances, alone or in combination. If, however, the attempted transmission succeeds (**225**) or an access granting message **136** is received, the notification instructions **110** can store (**230**) data indicating successful access.

The notification instructions **130** may prompt (**180**) a recipient for entry of the password, if any, designated during envelope **100** creation (**145** FIG. 3). Entry of a correct password (**185**) can cause the notification instructions **11** to grant (**195**) access to an envelope's electronic content **105**. Granting access may include decompressing and decrypting the electronic content **105**. As previously discussed, events other than attempted access may trigger collection and transmission of notification information **130a**, **130b**. For example, as shown notification information **130a**, **130b** may be transmitted after entry of an incorrect password (**205**) or after each successful access to electronic content **105** (**200**).

Different implementations of the instructions **110** may not perform the same actions or perform actions in the same order as shown. For example, prompting for a password (**180**) may occur prior to a determination (**175**) of whether notification information **130a**, **130b** was successfully transmitted.

Referring to FIG. 5, an envelope's notification instructions **110** have no prior knowledge of the place a recipient's computer holds in a network configuration. For example, some computers connect directly to a public network (e.g., the Internet) while others connect via intermediate devices such as protective proxy servers or firewalls.

Thus, the notification instructions **110** include instructions **220** that dynamically determine how to navigate through a network configuration to a public network. The ability to adapt to different configurations makes it more difficult for an administrator or recipient to prevent transmission of notification information **130a**, **130b**.

The instructions **220** transmit notification information **130a**, **130b** by determining how a recipient's computer connects to a network (**502**). For example, the instructions **220** can check a computer system's registry to see if proxy service is enabled or disabled. If disabled, the instructions **220** can try to transmit notification information via communication ports customarily used for network use (e.g., port **1080** which is typically reserved for Internet communication) (**510**). If such efforts fail, the instructions may try other commonly used ports or notify the user that transmission was unsuccessful (**504**).

If proxy service is enabled, notification information **130a**, **130b** must be sent to the network via an intermediate device. Thus, the instructions **220** attempt to determine the address of the intermediate device (**504**). For example, the instructions **220** may examine the registry to determine how different network services access the Internet from the computer system. For example, instructions **220** may examine the address stored in a Hkey_Clases_Root/Internet/Netscape/ProxyServer registry entry to see how a Netscape™ browser accesses the Internet through the intermediate device. After determining the address of the intermediate device, the instructions **220** attempt to transmit the notification information **110** (**506**) via the determined address. If the transmission fails (**508**), the instructions **220** may make another attempt using a different registry entry corresponding to a different network service (e.g., Microsoft™ Explorer). Alternatively, the instructions **220** may query the user for the address of the intermediate device.

Referring to FIGS. 6A-6J, an intuitive graphical user interface facilitates production of an envelope **100** from electronic content **105**. The interface uses a vault metaphor that presents each envelope **100** as storing electronic contents **105** behind access doors **290a**, **290b**.

Referring to FIG. 6A, in addition to a menu bar **270**, the interface screen **250** includes buttons (e.g., **255**) that initiate tasks needed to create an envelope **100**. As shown, the interface screen **250** includes a "New" button **255**. Selecting the "New" button (e.g., moving a mouse and clicking on the button) initiates creation of a new envelope **100**. As shown, a dialog **285** enables an envelope creator to name the new envelope **100** (e.g., "Sample"). A directory of the same name (e.g., "Sample") is created on the user's computer to store files added to the envelope.

Referring to FIG. 6B, an envelope creator has added electronic content **105** including a text file **105a** and an Adobe™ PDF file **105b**. The user can add electronic content **105a**, **105b** by selecting an "Add File" button **265** and browsing through system directories and selecting files, by interacting

with items in the menu bar **270**, or by dragging-and-dropping files into the interface screen **250**.

Referring to FIG. 6C, after adding electronic content **105a**, **105b**, the user selects either a "Save to Desktop" button **275** or a "Mail" button **280** to generate an instance of an envelope **100**. As shown, a dialog **295** may prompt the user to designate an envelope password to protect the electronic contents **105a**, **105b**. As shown in FIG. 6D, a dialog also may request specification of an address **300** for receipt of the notification information **130a**, **130b**.

Selecting the "Mail" button **280** launches a linked e-mail client (e.g., cc:Mail™) and causes it to create a new message having the envelope **100** as an attachment. Then, the user can optionally enter text and/or add other attachments before sending the e-mail message and attachments according to the particular protocol of the e-mail client. Alternatively, as shown in FIG. 6E, selecting the "Save to Desktop" button saves the envelope **100** to a system desktop **305** or directory. A user can then e-mail the envelope **100** as an attachment by manually including the envelope **100** in an e-mail message. As shown in FIG. 6F, a user has attached an envelope to a Lotus™ cc:Mail™ e-mail message.

As shown in FIG. 6G, after transmission to a recipient, a recipient can attempt to access electronic content **105** in an envelope **115** by interacting with a graphical user interface provided by the notification instructions. Continuing the vault motif, the screen shows a pair of access doors **320a**, **320b** each having "open" buttons **315a**, **315b**. The doors **320a**, **320b** may also include a graphic image (e.g., a panda) or series of images specified by the creator of the envelope **100**. Selecting either "open" button **280a**, **280b** can signify attempted access to the electronic content **105** and thus cause collection and attempted transmission of the notification information **130a**, **130b** by the notification instructions **110**.

As shown in FIG. 6H, notification instructions **110** optionally may collect demographic information via a dialog **330** that includes text controls for entry of a person's name **335**, e-mail address **340**, and organization **345**. As previously described, collection of information may be performed instead of, or in addition to system calls or examination of configuration files.

Referring to FIG. 6I, the envelope creator or other address designated during envelope creation receives an e-mail message containing the notification information.

Referring to FIG. 6J, after successful transmission of the collected notification information, the graphical user interface presents the envelope recipient with a list of the electronic content **105a**, **105b** included in the envelope **100** during envelope creation. The recipient can view the content, for example, by selecting (e.g., clicking on) an electronic content icon **105a**, **105b** or can save (e.g., by selecting button **332**) the electronic content **105a**, **105b** to specified files.

Referring to FIG. 7, a computer platform **120** suitable for executing instructions **140** that produce an envelope **100** includes a digital computer **400** having memory **390** and a processor **385**. The digital computer **400** also includes a mass storage device **395a** (e.g., a hard disk) that includes the instructions **140** for creating an envelope from electronic content. In the course of operation, instructions **140** are transferred from the mass storage device **395a** to memory **390** and processor **385** for execution. Of course, a wide variety of mass storage devices such as a floppy disk **395b** or a CD-ROM **395c** may store the instructions **110**.

The computer platform **120** also may include a monitor **360** for displaying the graphical user interface screens **365** and electronic content **105**. The user may interact with the graphical user interface **365** via a keyboard **375** and/or a

pointing device such as a mouse 370. The computer platform 120 also includes a network connection 380 that permits transmission of the executable file to other computers.

Other embodiments are within the scope of the following claims. For example, rather than implementing the instructions that construct an envelope as a stand-alone application, different implementations may integrate the instructions directly into an e-mail software package. Such a e-mail software package expands traditional e-mail packages capabilities beyond receiving a "return receipt" message. For example, these packages can provide mechanisms that regulate access to e-mail content and track access to the e-mail content via notification information received from recipients accessing the content.

In one embodiment, an e-mail system could provide a "certified receipt" feature as a native function. Upon generating an email message, a user could designate (e.g., by using pull-down menu functions or by clicking appropriate checkboxes) that the text of the email message itself, and/or the content of one or more attachments to the email, require "certified receipt" before the recipient could view or otherwise access the content. The message sender optionally could designate the nature and type of notification information to be collected from the recipient, as well as the identity or address of one or more parties that are to receive the notification information.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for acquiring information, comprising the step of:

receiving notification information from a successive computer in response to an attempt to access electronic data having computer executable instructions, the successive computer having previously received the electronic data from another successive computer, a successive computer being a computer that receives the electronic content from a computer other than an original recipient computer;

wherein the notification information is collected by executing the computer executable instructions when triggered by an event at the successive computer and the notification information is received at a network address other than a network address transmitting the electronic data to the original recipient computer.

2. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of: tracking the one or more successive computers that receive the electronic data based on the receipt of the notification information from the one or more successive computers.

3. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of matching an identifier in the notification information with an identifier in a table to compute a charge.

4. The method of claim 3, wherein the charge is a usage charge.

5. The method of claim 3, wherein the identifier is at least any one of a user identifier that created the electronic data, an address receiving the notification information, an identifier of the electronic content, and an address specified when the electronic data was created.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein the electronic data comprises at least any one of an envelope and one or more files.

7. The method of claim 1, wherein a portion of the electronic data includes electronic content other than the computer executable instructions.

8. The method of claim 7, wherein the computer executable instructions deny access to the electronic content until the collected notification information has been transmitted to the network address other than the network address transmitting the electronic data.

9. The method of claim 8, wherein the executable instructions selectively deny access to a part of the electronic content.

10. The method of claim 7, wherein the electronic content includes at least any one of a text file, a graphics file, an audio file, a video file, an instruction file, and a program file.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein the event is at least one of:

- (i) an attempt by a user to access the electronic data;
- (ii) an attempt by a user to save the electronic data;
- (iii) an attempt by a user to delete the electronic data; or
- (iv) an attempt by a user to list the electronic data.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein the notification information includes user information collected by querying a user for personal information.

13. The method of claim 1, wherein the notification information at least in part includes one of market data and demographic data.

14. The method of claim 1, further comprising prompting for user identification at the one or more successive computers.

15. The method of claim 14, further comprising granting access to at least a portion of the electronic data based on the user identification.

16. A method for assessing fees or controlling information, comprising the steps of:

receiving electronic data having at least in part computer executable instructions from a sending computer; transmitting the received electronic data and executable instructions to one or more successive computers; and wherein the computer executable instructions are executed at the one or more successive computers and upon transmission of an authorized user identifier to a network address other than a network address of the sending computer, access is granted to at least a portion of the electronic data.

17. The method of claim 16, further comprising the step of updating information based on the authorized user identifier.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein the step for updating information includes updating a usage charge.

19. The method of claim 16, further comprising the step of obtaining user information when the computer executable instructions are executed.

20. The method of claim 19, wherein the user information includes at least any one of a personal information, a market information, and a demographic information.

21. The method of claim 19, further comprising the step of computing a charge when the user information is received at a network address other than a network address of the sending computer.

22. The method of claim 21, wherein the user information includes at least any one of a personal information, a market information, and a demographic information.

23. The method of claim 16, further comprising denying access to at least part of the electronic data until user information is received at the network address other than the network address of the sending computer.

24. The method of claim 16, wherein the electronic data is received from a server.

25. The method of claim 16, further comprising encrypting at least a part of the electronic data.

26. The method of claim 16, further comprising the step of receiving an access granting message at the one or more successive computers.

27. The method of claim 16, wherein the granting access to at least a portion of the electronic data is also based in part on the result of a transmission of notification information.