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Showers et al.

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(54) **ATTRIBUTE PRIORITIZED CONFIGURATION USING A COMBINED CONFIGURATION-ATTRIBUTE DATA MODEL**

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G06F 7/00 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
USPC **707/723**; 705/26.5

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
USPC 707/723; 705/26.5
See application file for complete search history.

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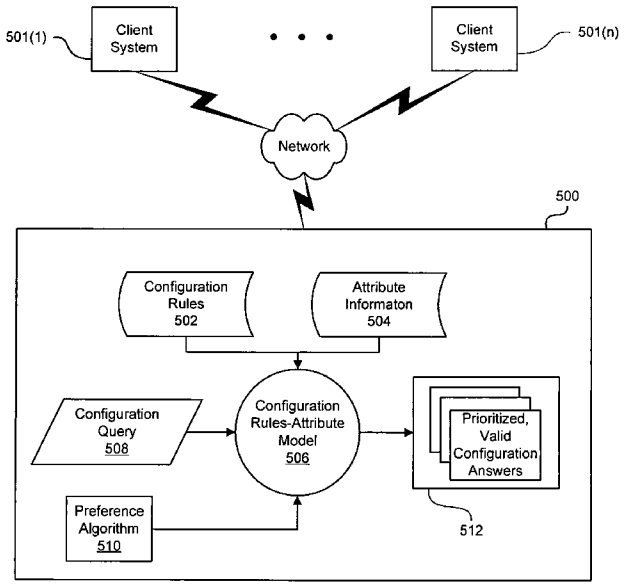
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system uses an integrated configuration model to efficiently identify and attribute prioritize valid configuration answers. Submitting an attribute-based configuration query to the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system allows the query to be answered in a single step. The combined configuration rules and attribute data guide product configuration processing and minimize configuration processing by, for example, calculating only the valid configuration answers that are candidates for the preferred valid answer(s). Thus, the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system can minimize the number of valid configuration answers to be considered for presentation to a client system or other user of the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system.

20 Claims, 9 Drawing Sheets



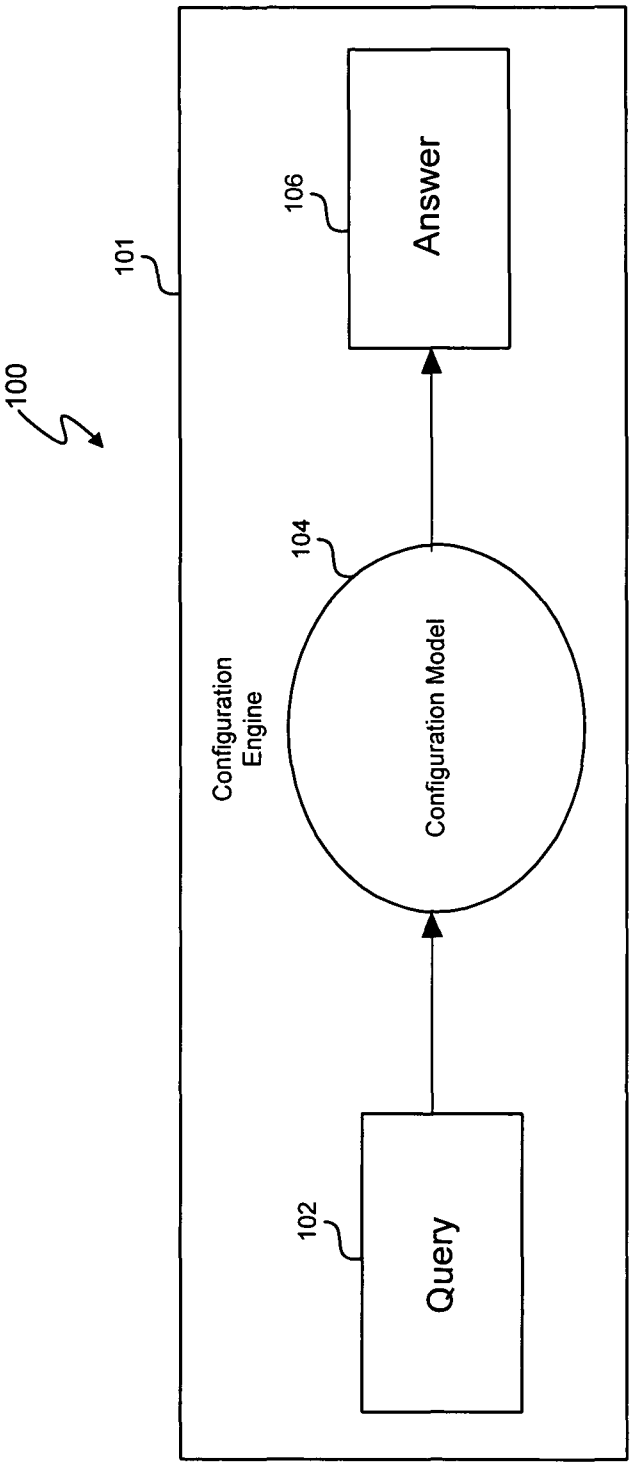


Figure 1 (prior art)

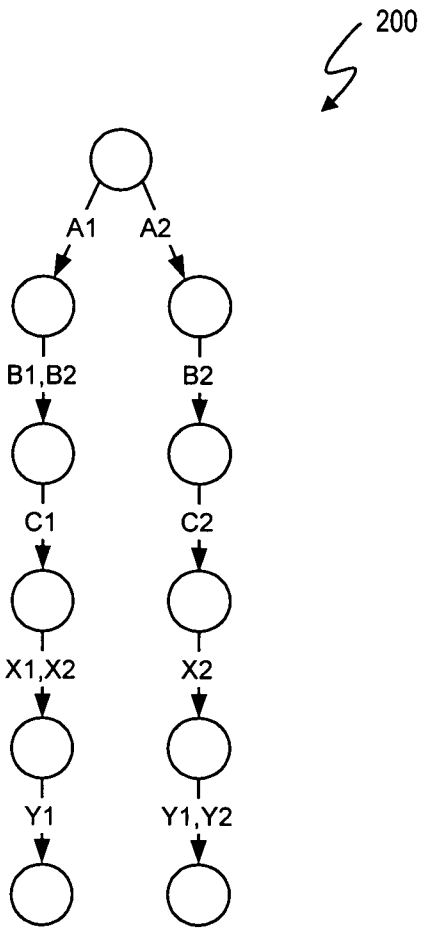


Figure 2 (prior art)

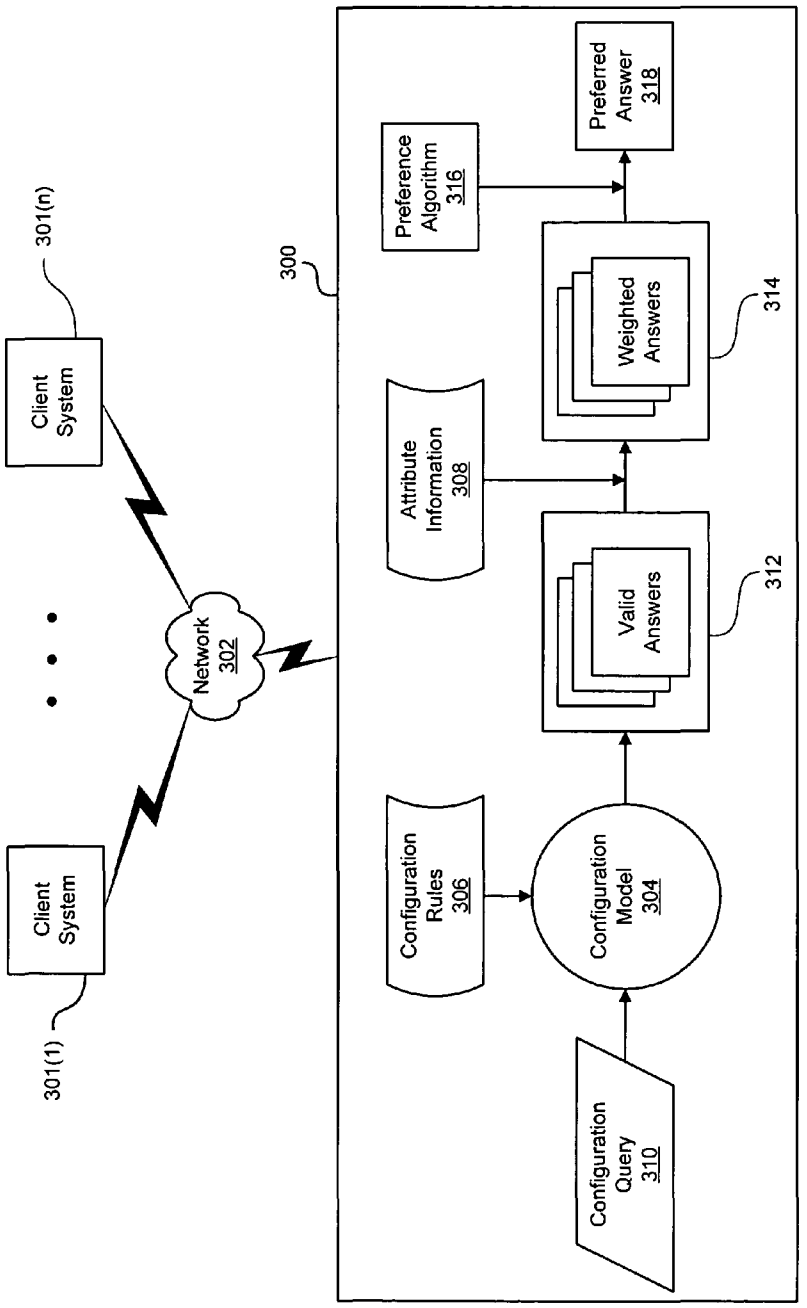


Figure 3 (prior art)

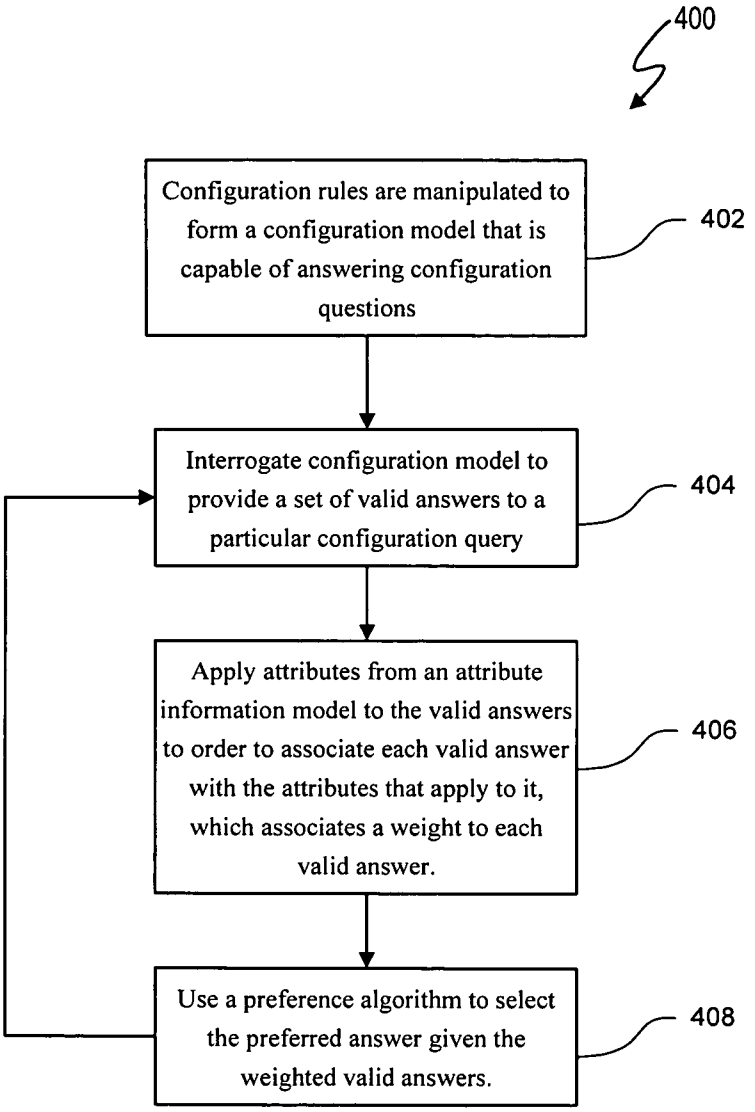


Figure 4 (prior art)

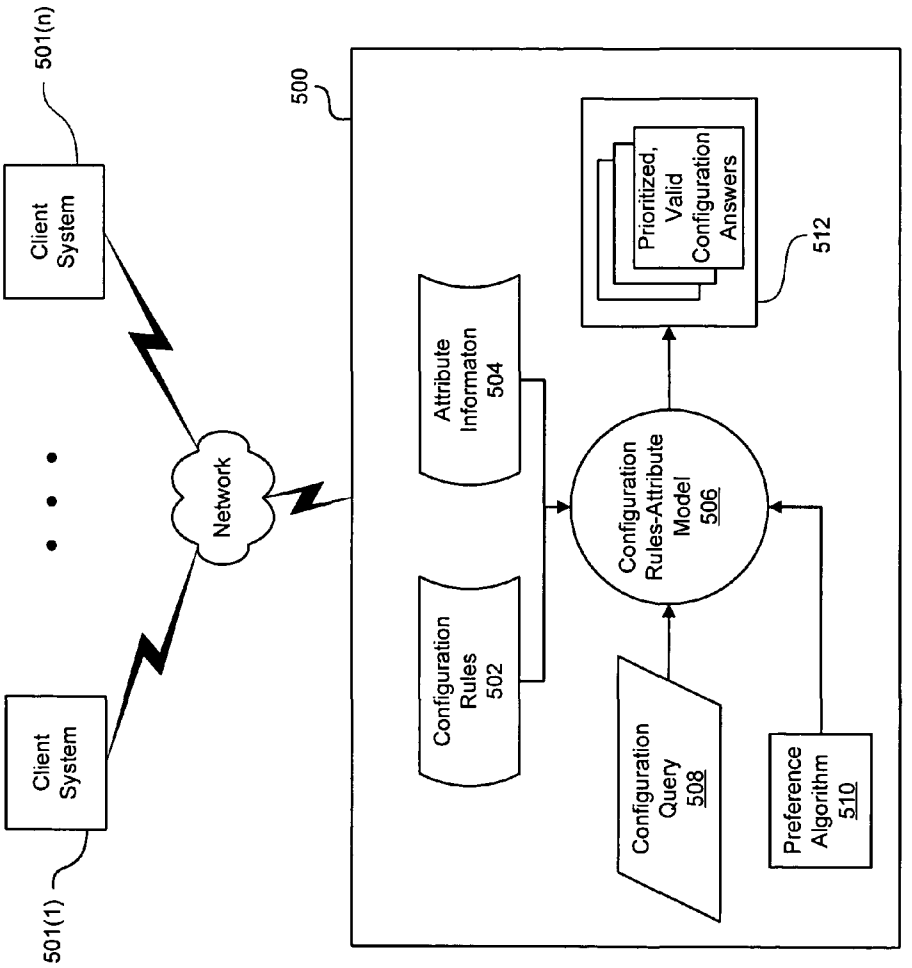

501(n)
Client System
500
Prioritized, Valid Configuration Answers
512
Attribute Informaton 504
Network
Configuration Rules-Attribute Model 506
Configuration Rules 502
Configuration Query 508
Preference Algorithm 510
Client System
501(1)

Figure 5

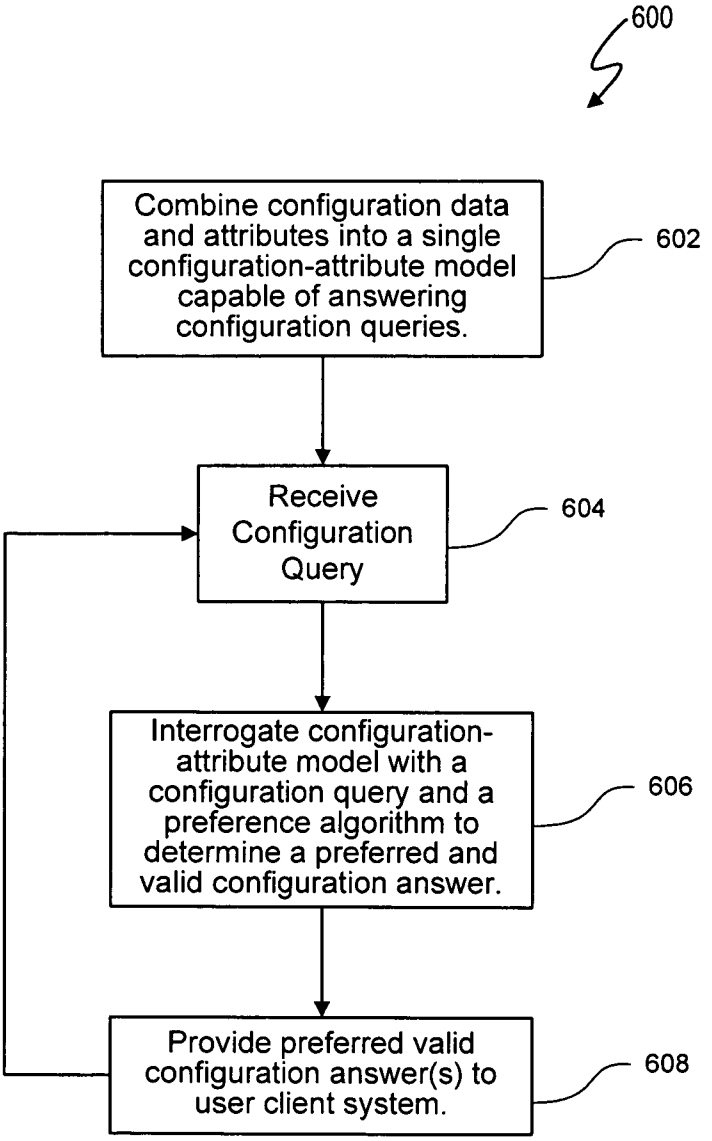

600
Combine configuration data and attributes into a single configuration-attribute model capable of answering configuration queries.
602
Receive Configuration Query
604
Interrogate configuration-attribute model with a configuration query and a preference algorithm to determine a preferred and valid configuration answer.
606
Provide preferred valid configuration answer(s) to user client system.
608

Figure 6

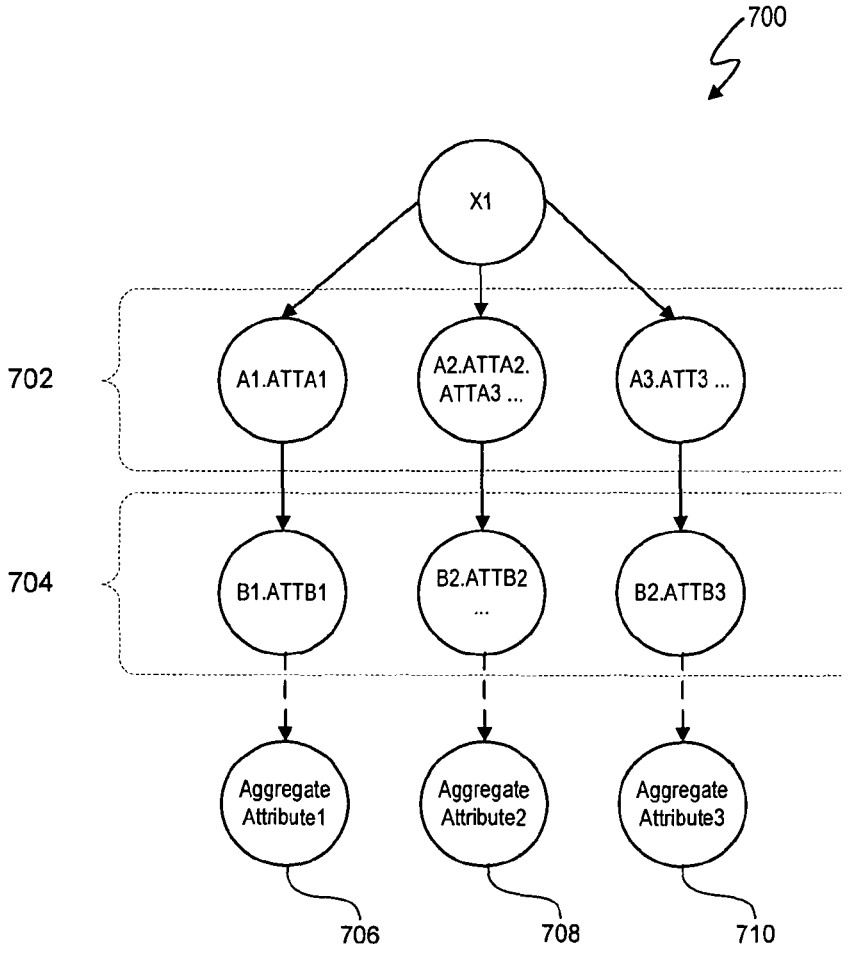

700
X1
A1.ATTA1
A2.ATTA2.
ATTA3 ...
A3.ATT3 ...
702
704
B1.ATTB1
B2.ATTB2
...
B2.ATTB3
Aggregate
Attribute1
Aggregate
Attribute2
Aggregate
Attribute3
706
708
710

Figure 7

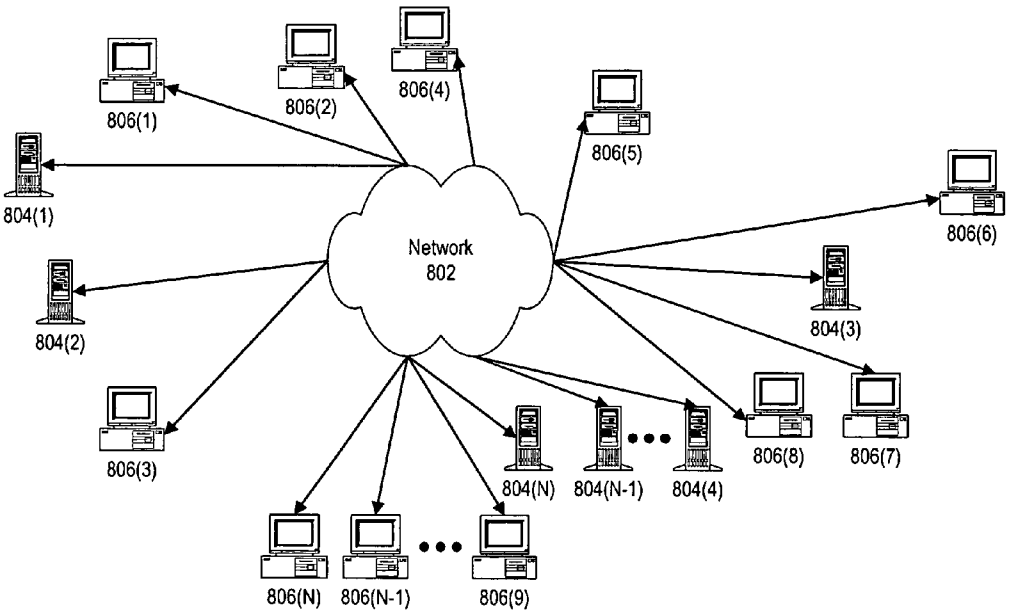

806(1)
806(2)
806(4)
806(5)
806(6)
804(1)
Network
802
804(2)
804(3)
806(3)
806(8)
806(7)
804(N)
804(N-1)
804(4)
806(N)
806(N-1)
806(9)

Figure 8

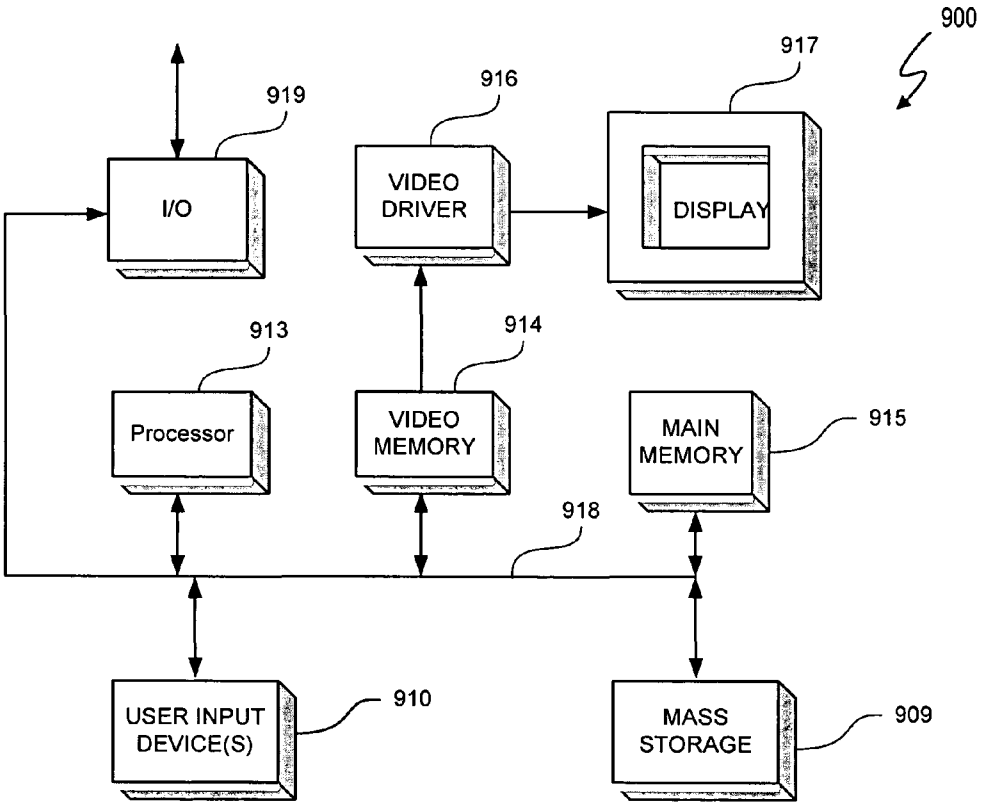

900
917
916
919
I/O
VIDEO DRIVER
DISPLAY
913
914
Processor
VIDEO MEMORY
MAIN MEMORY
915
918
USER INPUT DEVICE(S)
910
MASS STORAGE
909

Figure 9

ATTRIBUTE PRIORITIZED CONFIGURATION USING A COMBINED CONFIGURATION-ATTRIBUTE DATA MODEL

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates in general to the field of information processing, and more specifically to a system and method for prioritizing configuration using a combined configuration-attribute data model.

2. Description of the Related Art

Computer assisted product configuration continues to offer substantial benefits to a wide range of users and industries. FIG. **1** depicts a conventional product configuration process **100** performed by a configuration engine **101**. The configuration process **100** represents one embodiment of an inference procedure. In one embodiment of a conventional inference procedure, configuration query **102** is formulated based on user configuration input, a configuration engine performs the configuration query **102** using a configuration model **104**, and the configuration engine provides an answer **106** to the configuration query **102** based on the configuration query **102** and the contents of the configuration model **104**. The answer **106** represents a particular response to the configuration query **102**.

A configuration model **104** uses, for example, data, rules, and/or constraints (collectively referred to as "data") to define compatibility relationships between parts (also commonly referred to as "features") contained in a specific type of product. A part represents a single component or attribute from a larger, more complex system. Parts may be combined in different ways in accordance with rules and/or constraints to define different instances of the more complex system. For example, "V6 engine" or the exterior color "red" can be parts on a vehicle, and a specific hard disk drive can be a part on a computer. A part group, also called a group or family, represents a collection of related parts. For example, an "Engines" group might contain the parts "V6 engine" and "4 cylinder engine". A product configuration is a set of parts that define a product. For example, a vehicle configuration containing the parts "V6 engine" and "red" represents a physical vehicle that has a red exterior and a V6 engine. A product can be a physical product such as a vehicle, computer, or any other product that consists of a number of configurable features such as an insurance product. Additionally, a product can also represent a service such as financial services, insurance services, or consulting services.

An attribute represents a particular detail about a part or part group. Attributes describe details about the part or part group. A single part or part group can have many attributes. For example, the part "V6 engine" might have a price attribute of "$500", a weight attribute of "1,000 lbs" and a description attribute of "Six cylinder gas engine." Also, an attribute for a given part or part group may change depending on context (what other parts or attributes are present). For example, the price attribute for the "V6 engine" might be "$500" when the "XLT trim" part is present and the price attribute for the "V6 Engine" might be "$800" when the "XL trim" part is present.

A configuration query (also referred to as a "query") is essentially a question that is asked about the parts, relationships, and attributes in a configuration model. The answer returned from a configuration query will depend on the data in the configuration model, the approach used for answering the question, and the specifics of the question itself. For example, one possible configuration query, translated to an English sentence, is the following: For the given configuration model, are the parts "red" and "V6 engine" compatible with each other? Another possible configuration query is the following: For the given configuration model, is the "V6 engine" part standard or optional when in the presence of the "XLT trim", "XL trim", "USA", and "Canada" parts, wherein "standard" and "optional" are attributes?

The configuration model **104** can be used to determine, for example, which parts are compatible with other parts, and provide additional details around specific relationships. For example, a vehicle configuration model can indicate that "red" (a part) is the standard feature from the color part group for a specific vehicle and "red" is not compatible with "V6 engine" (a part). Configuration model **104** may also contain additional information needed to support specific product related queries. Configuration models can be developed in any number of ways. U.S. Pat. No. 5,825,651 entitled "Method and Apparatus for Maintaining and Configuring Systems", inventors Gupta et al., and assigned to Trilogy Development Group, Inc., describes an example configuration engine and rules based configuration model. U.S. Pat. No. 5,825,651 (referred to herein as the "Gupta Patent") is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. U.S. Pat. No. 5,515,524 entitled "Method and Apparatus for Configuring Systems", inventors John Lynch and David Franke, and assigned to Trilogy Development Group, Inc., describes another example configuration engine and constraint based configuration model. U.S. Pat. No. 5,515,524 (referred to herein as the "Lynch Patent") is also incorporated by reference in it entirety.

FIG. **2** depicts an example configuration model **200** of a product represented in a graphical, tree based form. The product can be configured to include part combinations A1, B1 or B2, C1, X1 or X2, and Y1 or configured to include part combinations A2, B2, C2, X2, and Y1 or Y2. The configuration model **200** includes rules to define these part relationships. Table 1 represents an example rule set, wherein "S" represents "standard" and "O" represents optional. Configuration model **200** represents a relatively non-complex configuration model. Actual configuration models for a single product can include hundreds of thousands or more parts, rules, and attributes.

TABLE 1

Example Configuration Rules for a Product
A1 S ALL
A2 O ALL
B1 S A1
B2 S A2
B2 O A1
C1 S A1
C2 S A2
X1 S C1
X2 S C2
X2 O C1
Y1 S C1
Y1 S C2
Y2 O C2

Many configuration queries are formulated with respect to attribute values. Such processing is referred to herein as "attribute-based configuration" Attributes can (1) be used to find "preferred" answers to configuration queries (such queries are referred to herein as "attribute-prioritized queries"), (2) be an output of a configuration query (such queries are referred to herein as "attribute queries"), and (3) be used in a query that is both an attribute-prioritized query and an

attribute query. An example of an attribute-prioritized query is the following: "Given a set of configured parts, return the part with the lowest cost that is compatible with the given parts, according to the rules in a given configuration model". An example of an attribute query is the following: "Given a configuration model and a fully specified configuration, determine the sum of the price attributes for all of the parts in that configuration." Attribute-based configuration processing has conventionally suffered from scale and performance issues, an example of which is described below.

Example: A Conventional Approach to Attribute-Prioritized Solutions

When more than one answer to a configuration query is valid, the attributes of each configuration answer can be used to assign a preference weighting to the valid answers. For example, there may be many answers that satisfy the configuration query of "Add parts to the list of 'red' and 'V6 engine' until a complete vehicle is specified." However, attribute values can be used to identify preferred valid answers such as the least expensive vehicle, the most expensive vehicle, the heaviest vehicle, etc.

FIG. **3** depicts a conventional attribute based priority configuration system **300** (also referred to as a "conventional attribute based priority configuration engine"), and FIG. **4** depicts a conventional attribute based priority solution process **400** to determine an attribute based priority solution. Client systems **301**(**1**) through **301**(*n*) access the conventional attribute based priority solution system **300** via a network **302**, such as the Internet. The system **300** and process **400** are typically implemented configured as a server computer system.

Conventionally, a configuration model **304** is driven solely by configuration rules **306**. Thus, in operation **402**, configuration rules **306** are manipulated to form a configuration model **304** that is capable of answering configuration questions. The configuration model **304** is separated from attribute information **308** and, thus, the configuration model **304** is not used to process attribute related data. In operation **404**, the conventional attribute based priority solution process **400** answers an attribute specific configuration query **310** to determine an attribute based priority solution by querying configuration model **304** for the set of valid answers **312**. The valid answers **312** represent product configurations that conform to the configuration model **304**. Operation **404** interrogates the configuration model **304** to find the preferred answer from the set of valid answers. Operation **406** then applies attribute information **308** to the valid answers **312** to associate each valid answer with the attributes that apply to the valid answer. A weight can be derived from the applied attribute information **308** to generate weighted answers **314**. For example, for the attributes "standard" and "optional", the weight can be the total number of standard features or the total number optional features in each answer. Operation **408** uses a preference algorithm **316**, e.g. search for the valid answer with the most standard features and lowest price, to select the preferred valid answer **318** given the weighted valid answers. The particular preference algorithm is a matter of system usage. Once a preferred answer is selected, conventional attribute based priority solution process **400** can determine answers for the next configuration query.

A software application developed by Trilogy Development Group, Inc. and referred to as "MCC Config" implemented the conventional attribute based priority configuration system **300** using a modified attribute based priority solution process **400**. MCC Config solved a configuration problem by taking partial configuration answers as input data and over iterative processes, provided a complete configuration output. The modified process was an iterative process that created a single, preferred complete configuration over multiple iterations, rather than providing all valid complete configurations and choosing a preferred one. For each iteration the configuration model **304** provided a set of part selections. The set of part selections formed a subset of all of the part selections that needed to be made to generate a preferred, complete configuration. The modified process then used the attribute information **308** and the preference algorithm **316** to make the part selections provided by the configuration model **304**. Part selections answers were then fed back into the configuration model **304** and added to the partial configuration answers. The partial configuration answers were then used by the configuration model **304** to generate the next set of part selections that needed to be made, and so on until the configuration was completed. For example, in an automotive configuration context, a user could initially select: engine=V6 and color=red. The configuration engine could determine that, for example, 2 different transmissions and 6 different body styles were compatible with engine=V6 and color=red. The modified process would then select a transmission and body style from the set of transmissions and body styles provided according to the preference algorithm **316**. If "standard" was the controlling preference in the preference algorithm **316**, the modified process would select the standard transmission and body style, if possible, from the available choices. The selected transmission and body style would then be added to the initial user selections and the process would repeat until a complete configuration was attained.

Process **400** exhibits the drawback of expending effort to determine valid answers that will eventually be ignored if they are not preferred by the attribute model. Also, the number of valid answers can be so large that calculating the full set and identifying the preferred answer is often computationally infeasible.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In one embodiment of the present invention, a method for using computer assisted configuration technology to generate one or more attribute prioritized configuration answers to one or more configuration queries includes receiving one or more configuration queries from a client system. The method further includes processing the one or more configuration queries using a combined configuration rules-attributes model to determine valid configuration answers prioritized by one or more predetermined attributes and providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system.

In another embodiment of the present invention, a computer system to generate one or more attribute prioritized configuration answers to one or more configuration queries includes a processor and a storage medium having data encoded therein. The data includes processor executable code for:

- receiving one or more configuration queries from a client system;
- processing the one or more configuration queries using a combined configuration rules-attributes model to determine valid configuration answers prioritized by one or more predetermined attributes; and
- providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system.

In another embodiment of the present invention, a computer storage medium includes data embedded therein to cause a computer system to generate one or more attribute prioritized configuration answers to one or more configuration queries. The data includes processor executable code for:

receiving one or more configuration queries from a client system;

processing the one or more configuration queries using a combined configuration rules-attributes model to determine valid configuration answers prioritized by one or more predetermined attributes; and

providing the valid configuration answers to the client system.

In another embodiment of the present invention, a computer system to generate one or more attribute prioritized configuration answers to one or more configuration queries includes means for receiving one or more configuration queries from a client system. The computer system further includes means for processing the one or more configuration queries using a combined configuration rules-attributes model to determine valid configuration answers prioritized by one or more predetermined attributes and means for providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention may be better understood, and its numerous objects, features and advantages made apparent to those skilled in the art by referencing the accompanying drawings. The use of the same reference number throughout the several figures designates a like or similar element.

FIG. **1** (prior art) depicts a conventional product configuration process.

FIG. **2** (prior art) depicts a configuration model in graphical, tree based form.

FIG. **3** (prior art) depicts a conventional attribute based priority solution system.

FIG. **4** (prior art) depicts a conventional attribute based priority solution process.

FIG. **5** depicts a combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system.

FIG. **6** depicts a combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process.

FIG. **7** depicts an example trie implementation of a configuration rules-attributes model.

FIG. **8** depicts a block diagram illustrating a network environment in which the system and process of FIGS. **5** and **6** may be practiced.

FIG. **9** depicts an example data processing system used in the network of FIG. **8**.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

A combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system uses an integrated configuration model to efficiently identify and attribute prioritize valid configuration answers to attribute-prioritized configuration queries. Submitting an attribute-based configuration query to the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system allows the query to be answered in a single step. The combined configuration rules and attribute information guide product configuration processing and minimize configuration processing by, for example, calculating only the valid configuration answers that are candidates for the preferred valid answer(s). Thus, the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system can minimize the number of valid configuration answers to be considered for presentation to a client system or other user of the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system.

FIG. **5** depicts combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** communicatively coupled to client systems **501**(**1**) through **501**(*n*) via a network such as the Internet, wherein n≥1. The combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** can also be referred to as a configuration engine. Combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** operates in accordance with combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600**. Operation **602** integrates configuration rules **502** and attribute information **504** into a configuration rules-attribute model **506**. Configuration rules **502** are any type of configuration rules data such as the configuration rules described with reference to Table 1. As described above, attributes can represent any particular detail about a part or part group. Table 2 sets forth example attribute types. An attribute can also be an aggregate of other attributes. For example, a part group price may be an aggregate of prices for other parts and/or part groups.

TABLE 2

Example Attribute Types
Standard
Optional
Price
Weight
Towing Capacity
Description
Warranty
Fuel Efficiency

The implementation of configuration rules-attributes model **506** is a matter of design choice. In one embodiment, the configuration rules-attributes model **506** is implemented as a trie, and trie operations are used to manipulate the data. Example tries and trie operations are set forth in U.S. Pat. No. 7,200,582, issued Apr. 3, 2007, entitled "Configuration Model Consistency Checking Using Flexible Rule Space Subsets", inventor Shawn A. P. Smith, filing date Mar. 31, 2003, and assigned to Trilogy Development Group, Inc. U.S. Pat. No. 7,200,582 is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

FIG. **7** depicts an example trie implementation of configuration rules-attributes model **506**. The trie implemented configuration rules-attributes model **700** includes a root node X1 and two part groups **702** and **704**. Each complete branch of the model **700** represents a valid configuration. A trie-based representation can be used to represent the valid combinations in a compact and precise manner. Nodes in part group **702** contain parts A1, A2, and A3. Each of the parts A1, A2, and A3 may be annotated with one or more associated attributes such as ATTA1, ATTA2, and ATTA3. Each of the parts B1 and B2 may include one or more attributes such as ATTB1 and ATTB2. The attributes associated with different parts may be the same or may be different. Model **700** additionally includes leaf nodes **706**, **708**, and **710** with associated aggregate attribute values. For example, each leaf node could include the total number of standard parts in the product represented by the valid configuration branch to which the leaf node is attached and/or could include the price of the product represented by the valid configuration branch to which the leaf node is attached.

In one embodiment, "release" attributes are combined with configuration rules to form the configuration rules-attributes model **506**. "Release" attributes describe how a part is available within a valid configuration context. For example, release attributes could specify that the "V6 engine is the 'standard' engine" and the "V8 engine is an 'optional' engine." Thus, in one embodiment, the configuration rules-

attributes model **506** not only represents which combinations of parts are valid together but also how those parts are released.

Referring to FIGS. **5**, **6**, and **7**, client systems **501**(**1**) through **501**(*n*) each access combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** to configure a product by submitting a respective configuration query **508**. The particular data structure(s) used to represent configuration query **508** is a matter of design choice and depends upon, for example, configuration engine specifications, etc. In one example, the configuration query **508** results from the selection of a particular feature displayed via a web browser application executed by client system **501**(*i*), wherein i is an element of the set {1, . . . , n}. The combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** receives the configuration query **508** in operation **604**. In operation **606**, combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** interrogates configuration rules-attributes model **506** with configuration query **508** and an attribute based preference algorithm **510** to determine a set of one or more attribute prioritized, valid configuration answers **512**. In one embodiment, combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** processes the configuration query **508** and configuration rules of configuration rules-attributes model **506** in accordance with the Gupta Patent or the Lynch Patent.

The preference algorithm **510** is a matter of system usage and depends upon which preferences are anticipated to be consistent with the user preferences of client system **501**(*i*). For example, the user of client **501**(*i*) could select the preference(s) for valid configuration answers or some or all of the preference(s) could be predetermined by combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500**. In one embodiment, a preference is for maximizing the number of standard parts. Thus, only valid configurations with a maximum number of standard parts or a number of standard parts that is greater than or equal to a predetermined threshold are determined to be valid answers. In another embodiment, only valid configurations that have a towing capacity greater than or equal to a predetermined threshold are determined to be valid answers. The preference algorithm can then prioritize valid configurations based upon evaluation of more than one type of attribute. For example, only valid configuration answers with a maximum number of standard parts, a fuel efficiency greater than or equal to a predetermined threshold, and a price less than or equal to a predetermined threshold are presented to a user. The valid answers can be prioritized in accordance with one or more attribute values. For example, valid answers can be ordered based on lowest to highest price.

Thus, operation **606** uses the configuration rules-attributes model **506** to process each configuration query **508** with valid answers determined in accordance with preference algorithm **510**. For example, the preference algorithm could prefer valid configurations that maximize the combined number of standard-attribute features in the answer. For example, the configuration query **506** might be to "Find the complete configuration that contains that parts "red" and "V6" and maximizes the number of standard-attribute parts." There could be many possible configurations that contain "red" and "V6" but the configuration rules-attributes model **506** allows operation **606** to single out the valid answers that meet the preference algorithm. Thus, operation **606** does not spend resources calculating other "red" and "V6" configurations that do not contain the maximal number of standard parts.

Once operation **606** determines one or more prioritized, valid configuration answers **512**, operation **608** provides the attribute prioritized, valid configuration answer(s) **512** to the client system **501**(*i*) that submitted the configuration query **508**. The number of prioritized, valid configuration answers can be a predefined number or a user selected number. For example, if "standard" and "price" are the controlling preferences, only "X" valid configuration answers **512** are provided to the user, where X is the predefined or user selected number. The combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600** then returns to operation **604** to process a subsequent configuration query **508**.

Thus, it is often the case that a single set of configuration rules and a single set of attributes will be used to perform many configuration queries. By using a configuration rules-attributes model **506** to perform product configurations in accordance with configuration query **508**, the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600** is able to realize several performance and complexity benefits.

Using a combined configuration rules-attributes model **506** to process configuration queries allows the performance impact of combining multiple attributes, e.g. maximizing the number(s) of a certain attribute(s) or totaling the values of certain attributes, to be minimized by pre-processing combinations of multiple attributes of valid configurations and amortizing the preprocessed combinations over many queries. Thus, attributes and rules may be static while the configuration query **508** and preference algorithm **510** may change more quickly. If the process of combining multiple attributes (e.g. adding the number of standard attributes) is slow, the combinations of multiple attributes can be precalculated, stored in memory, and then used for many different configuration query/preference algorithm pairs.

By processing a single query against the combined configuration rules-attributes model **506**, the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600** does not need to evaluate non-preferred answers, which increases the performance of combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** and lowers the resources necessary to process a configuration query **506**.

The number of preferred configuration answers provided to the user can be limited to reduce the amount of information provided to the user that has a low probability of relevancy to the user.

FIG. **8** is a block diagram illustrating a network environment in which a combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** and combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600** may be practiced. Network **802** (e.g. a private wide area network (WAN) or the Internet) includes a number of networked server computer systems **804**(**1**)-(N) that are accessible by client computer systems **806**(**1**)-(N), where N is the number of server computer systems connected to the network. Communication between client computer systems **806**(**1**)-(N) and server computer systems **804**(**1**)-(N) typically occurs over a network, such as a public switched telephone network over asynchronous digital subscriber line (ADSL) telephone lines or high-bandwidth trunks, for example communications channels providing T1 or OC3 service. Client computer systems **806**(**1**)-(N) typically access server computer systems **804**(**1**)-(N) through a service provider, such as an internet service provider ("ISP") by executing application specific software, commonly referred to as a browser, on one of client computer systems **806**(**1**)-(N).

Client computer systems **806**(**1**)-(N) and/or server computer systems **804**(**1**)-(N) may be, for example, computer systems of any appropriate design, including a mainframe, a mini-computer, a personal computer system including notebook computers, a wireless, mobile computing device (including personal digital assistants). These computer systems are typically information handling systems, which are

designed to provide computing power to one or more users, either locally or remotely. Such a computer system may also include one or a plurality of input/output ("I/O") devices coupled to the system processor to perform specialized functions. Mass storage devices such as hard disks, compact disk ("CD") drives, digital versatile disk ("DVD") drives, and magneto-optical drives may also be provided, either as an integrated or peripheral device. One such example computer system is shown in detail in FIG. **9**.

Embodiments of combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** and combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600** can be implemented on a computer system such as a general-purpose computer **900** illustrated in FIG. **9**. Input user device(s) **910**, such as a keyboard and/or mouse, are coupled to a bi-directional system bus **918**. The input user device(s) **910** are for introducing user input to the computer system and communicating that user input to processor **913**. The computer system of FIG. **9** generally also includes a video memory **914**, main memory **915** and mass storage **909**, all coupled to bi-directional system bus **918** along with input user device(s) **910** and processor **913**. The mass storage **909** may include both fixed and removable media, such as other available mass storage technology. Bus **918** may contain, for example, 32 address lines for addressing video memory **914** or main memory **915**. The system bus **918** also includes, for example, an n-bit data bus for transferring DATA between and among the components, such as CPU **909**, main memory **915**, video memory **914** and mass storage **909**, where "n" is, for example, 32 or 64. Alternatively, multiplex data/address lines may be used instead of separate data and address lines.

I/O device(s) **919** may provide connections to peripheral devices, such as a printer, and may also provide a direct connection to remote server computer systems via a telephone link or to the Internet via an ISP. I/O device(s) **919** may also include a network interface device to provide a direct connection to remote server computer systems via a direct network link to the Internet via a POP (point of presence). Such connection may be made using, for example, wireless techniques, including digital cellular telephone connection, Cellular Digital Packet Data (CDPD) connection, digital satellite data connection or the like. Examples of I/O devices include modems, sound and video devices, and specialized communication devices such as the aforementioned network interface.

Computer programs and data are generally stored as instructions and data in mass storage **909** until loaded into main memory **915** for execution. Computer programs may also be in the form of electronic signals modulated in accordance with the computer program and data communication technology when transferred via a network.

The processor **913**, in one embodiment, is a microprocessor manufactured by Motorola Inc. of Illinois, Intel Corporation of California, or Advanced Micro Devices of California. However, any other suitable single or multiple microprocessors or microcomputers may be utilized. Main memory **915** is comprised of dynamic random access memory (DRAM). Video memory **914** is a dual-ported video random access memory. One port of the video memory **914** is coupled to video amplifier **916**. The video amplifier **916** is used to drive the display **917**. Video amplifier **916** is well known in the art and may be implemented by any suitable means. This circuitry converts pixel DATA stored in video memory **914** to a raster signal suitable for use by display **917**. Display **917** is a type of monitor suitable for displaying graphic images.

The computer system described above is for purposes of example only. The combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** and combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600** may be implemented in any type of computer system or programming or processing environment. It is contemplated that the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** and combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600** might be run on a stand-alone computer system, such as the one described above. The combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** and combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600** might also be run from a server computer systems system that can be accessed by a plurality of client computer systems interconnected over an intranet network. Finally, the combined configuration rules-attribute configuration system **500** and combined configuration rules-attribute configuration process **600** may be run from a server computer system that is accessible to clients over the Internet.

Many embodiments of the present invention have application to a wide range of industries and products including the following: computer hardware and software manufacturing and sales, professional services, financial services, automotive sales and manufacturing, telecommunications sales and manufacturing, medical and pharmaceutical sales and manufacturing, and construction industries.

Although the present invention has been described in detail, it should be understood that various changes, substitutions and alterations can be made hereto without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for using computer assisted configuration technology to generate one or more attribute prioritized configuration answers to one or more attribute-based configuration queries, the method comprising:

performing by a computer system programmed with code stored in a memory and executable by a processor of the computer system to configure the computer system into a machine for:

receiving one or more attribute-based configuration queries from a client system, wherein the attribute-based configuration queries include a selection of one or more parts of a product;

processing the one or more attribute-based configuration queries, configuration rules, and attribute based preference algorithm using a combined configuration rules-attributes model and a configuration-rules processing engine to calculate valid configuration answers in accordance with the combined configuration rules-attributes model, wherein a plurality of the configuration rules define relationships between parts of the product and a plurality of attributes represent details about the parts;

predetermining values of one or more combinations of attributes associated with respective configuration answers;

storing the predetermined values;

retrieving the stored predetermined values associated with a particular valid configuration answer if the particular valid configuration is an answer to one or more of the attribute-based configuration queries;

receiving a selection of at least one of the one or more product attributes to be prioritized;

prioritizing the valid configuration answers by one or more of the plurality of attributes in the combined configuration rules-attributes model; and

providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system, wherein the provided

valid configuration answers are prioritized by one or more of the plurality of attributes.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein to calculate valid configuration answers prioritized by one or more predetermined attributes comprises:

processing valid configuration answers with an attribute based preference algorithm.

3. The method of claim 1 wherein providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system comprises providing a predetermined number of attribute-prioritized valid configuration answers to a user.

4. The method of claim 1 wherein providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system comprises providing a user selected number of attribute-prioritized valid configuration answers to a user.

5. The method of claim 1 wherein the one or more attribute-based configuration queries comprise attribute-based configuration queries to configure at least one of the products from the group comprising: vehicles, computers, and financial products.

6. A computer system to generate one or more attribute prioritized configuration answers to one or more attribute-based configuration queries, the system comprising:

a processor; and

a storage medium, coupled to the processor, having data encoded therein, the data comprising code executable by the processor to configure the computer system into a machine for:

receiving one or more attribute-based configuration queries from a client system;

processing the one or more attribute-based configuration queries, configuration rules, and attribute based preference algorithm using a combined configuration rules-attributes model and a configuration-rules processing engine to calculate valid configuration answers in accordance with the combined configuration rules-attributes model, wherein a plurality of the configuration rules define relationships between parts of the product and a plurality of attributes represent details about the parts;

predetermining values of one or more combinations of attributes associated with respective configuration answers;

storing the predetermined values;

retrieving the stored predetermined values associated with a particular valid configuration answer if the particular valid configuration is an answer to one or more of the attribute-based configuration queries;

receiving a selection of at least one of the one or more product attributes to be prioritized;

prioritizing the valid configuration answers by one or more of the plurality of attributes in the combined configuration rules-attributes model; and

providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system, wherein the provided valid configuration answers are prioritized by one or more of the plurality of attributes.

7. The computer system of claim 6 wherein the data further comprises processor executable code for:

processing valid configuration answers with an attribute based preference algorithm.

8. The computer system of claim 6 wherein the code for providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system further comprises code for providing a predetermined number of attribute-prioritized valid configuration answers to a user.

9. The computer system of claim 6 wherein the code for providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system further comprises code for providing a user selected number of attribute-prioritized valid configuration answers to a user.

10. The computer system of claim 6 wherein the one or more attribute-based configuration queries comprise attribute-based configuration queries to configure at least one of the products from the group comprising: vehicles, computers, and financial products.

11. A non-transitory computer storage medium comprising data embedded therein to cause a computer system to generate one or more attribute prioritized configuration answers to one or more attribute-based configuration queries, wherein the data comprises code that is executable by a processor of the computer system to configure the computer system into a machine for:

receiving one or more attribute-based configuration queries from a client system;

processing the one or more attribute-based configuration queries, configuration rules, and attribute based preference algorithm using a combined configuration rules-attributes model and a configuration-rules processing engine to calculate valid configuration answers in accordance with the combined configuration rules-attributes model, wherein a plurality of the configuration rules define relationships between parts of the product and a plurality of attributes represent details about the parts;

predetermining values of one or more combinations of attributes associated with respective configuration answers;

storing the predetermined values;

retrieving the stored predetermined values associated with a particular valid configuration answer if the particular valid configuration is an answer to one or more of the attribute-based configuration queries;

receiving a selection of at least one of the one or more product attributes to be prioritized;

prioritizing the valid configuration answers by one or more of the plurality of attributes in the combined configuration rules-attributes model; and

providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system, wherein the provided valid configuration answers are prioritized by one or more of the plurality of attributes.

12. The computer storage medium of claim 11 wherein the data further comprises processor executable code for:

processing valid configuration answers with an attribute based preference algorithm.

13. The computer storage medium of claim 11 wherein the code for providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system further comprises code for providing a predetermined number of attribute-prioritized valid configuration answers to a user.

14. The computer storage medium of claim 11 wherein the code for providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system further comprises code for providing a user selected number of attribute-prioritized valid configuration answers to a user.

15. The computer storage medium of claim 11 wherein the one or more attribute-based configuration queries comprise attribute-based configuration queries to configure at least one of the products from the group comprising: vehicles, computers, and financial products.

16. A computer system to generate one or more attribute prioritized configuration answers to one or more attribute-based configuration queries, the system comprising:

means for receiving one or more attribute-based configuration queries from a client system;

means for processing the one or more attribute-based configuration queries, configuration rules, and attribute based preference algorithm using a combined configuration rules-attributes model and a configuration-rules processing engine to calculate valid configuration answers in accordance with the combined configuration rules-attributes model, wherein a plurality of the configuration rules define relationships between parts of the product and a plurality of attributes represent details about the parts;

means for predetermining values of one or more combinations of attributes associated with respective configuration answers;

means for storing the predetermined values;

means for retrieving the stored predetermined values associated with a particular valid configuration answer if the particular valid configuration is an answer to one or more of the attribute-based configuration queries;

means for receiving a selection of at least one of the one or more product attributes to be prioritized;

means for prioritizing the valid configuration answers by one or more of the plurality of attributes in the combined configuration rules-attributes model; and

means for providing at least a subset of the valid configuration answers to the client system, wherein the provided valid configuration answers are prioritized by one or more of the plurality of attributes.

17. The method of claim **1**:

wherein prioritizing the valid configuration answers by one or more product attributes in the combined configuration rules-attributes model further comprises prioritizing the valid configuration answers by each selected product attribute, wherein the valid configuration answers represent configurations of the product that conform to the combined configuration rules-attributes model.

18. The computer system of claim **6**:

wherein prioritizing the valid configuration answers by one or more product attributes in the combined configuration rules-attributes model further comprises prioritizing the valid configuration answers by each selected product attribute, and wherein the valid configuration answers represent configurations of the product that conform to the combined configuration rules-attributes model.

19. The computer storage medium of claim **11**:

wherein prioritizing the valid configuration answers by one or more product attributes in the combined configuration rules-attributes model further comprises prioritizing the valid configuration answers by each selected product attribute, and wherein the valid configuration answers represent configurations of the product that conform to the combined configuration rules-attributes model.

20. The computer system of claim **16** wherein the system further comprises:

means for receiving a selection of at least one of the one or more product attributes to be prioritized; and

means for prioritizing the valid configuration answers by each selected product attribute, wherein the valid configuration answers represent configurations of the product that conform to the combined configuration rules-attributes model.

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