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(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR
BUFFERING GRAPHICS DATA IN A
GRAPHICS SYSTEM**

(75) Inventors: **Farhad Fouladi**, Los Altos Hills, CA
(US); **Robert Moore**, Heathrow, FL
(US)

(73) Assignee: **Nintendo Co., Ltd.**, Kyoto (JP)

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See application file for complete search history.

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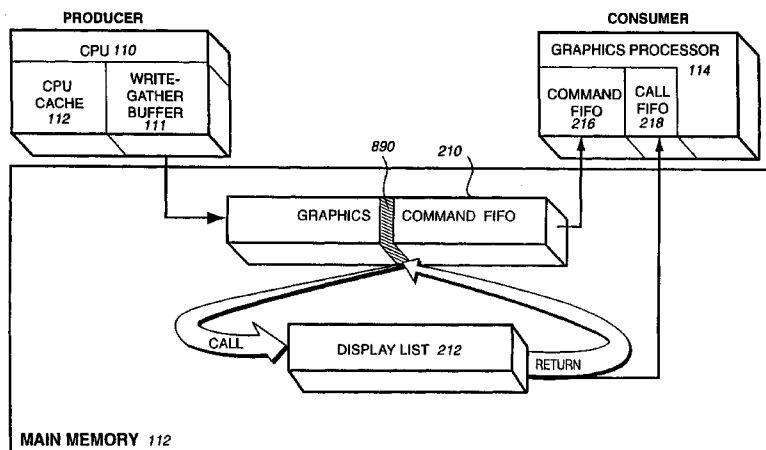
Assistant Examiner—Joni Hsu

(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm*—Nixon & Vanderhye P.C.

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A graphics system including a custom graphics and audio processor produces exciting 2D and 3D graphics and surround sound. The system includes a graphics and audio processor including a 3D graphics pipeline and an audio digital signal processor. Techniques for efficiently buffering graphics data between a producer and a consumer within a low-cost graphics systems such as a 3D home video game overcome the problem that a small-sized FIFO buffer in the graphics hardware may not adequately load balance a producer and consumer—causing the producer to stall when the consumer renders bit primitives. One aspect of the invention solves this invention by allocating part of main memory to provide a variable number of variable sized graphics commands buffers. Applications can specify the number of buffers and the size of each. All writes to the graphics FIFO can be routed a buffer in main memory. The producer and consumer independently maintain their own read and write pointers, decoupling the producer from the consumer. The consumer does not write to the buffer, but uses its write pointer to keep track of data valid positions within the buffer. The producer can write a read command to a buffer that directs the consumer to read a string of graphics commands (e.g., display list) stored elsewhere in the memory, and to subsequently return to reading the rest of the buffer. Display lists can be created by simply writing a command that redirects the output of the producer to a display list buffer.

68 Claims, 15 Drawing Sheets



EXAMPLE DISPLAY LIST CALL FROM COMMAND FIFO

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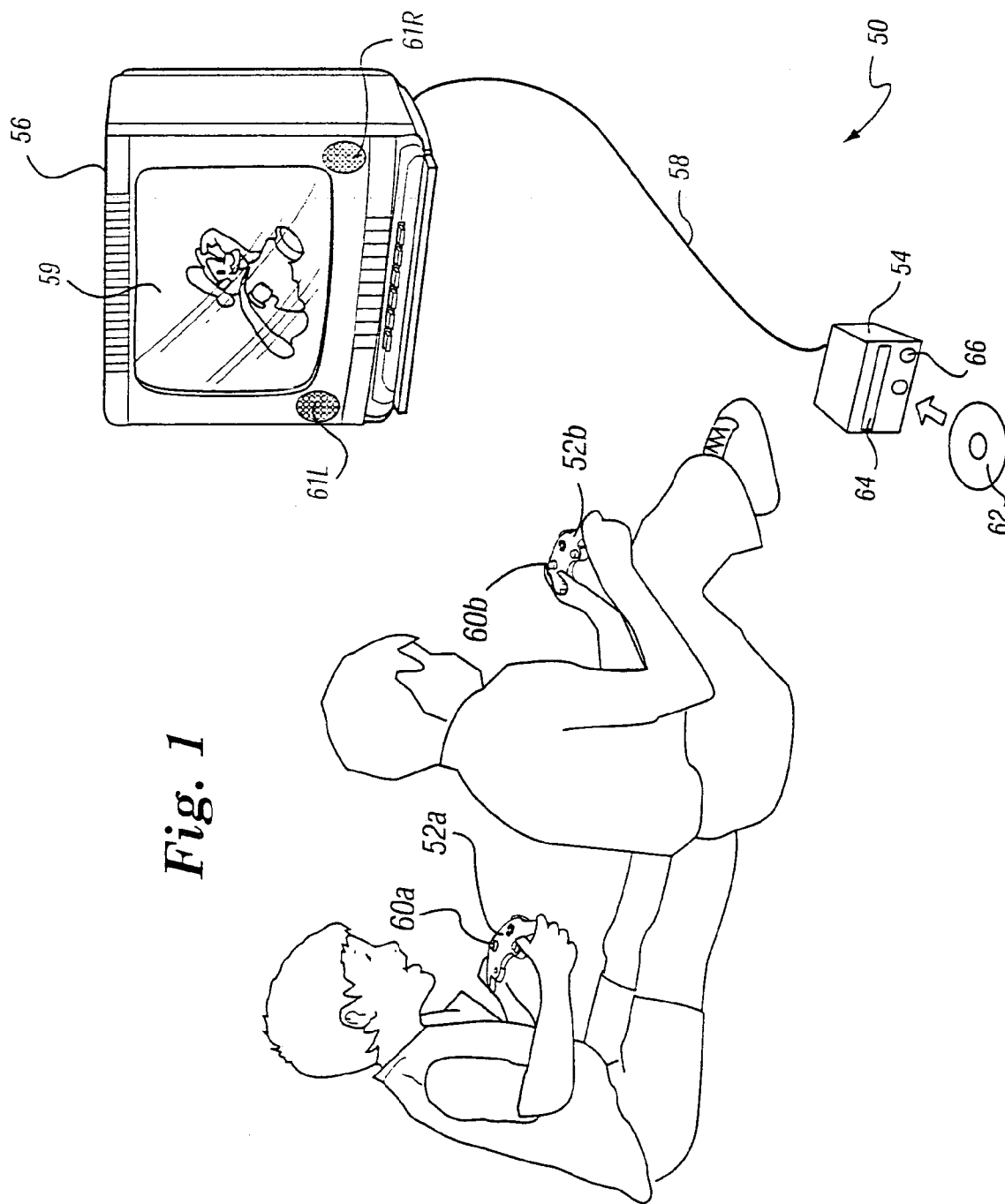
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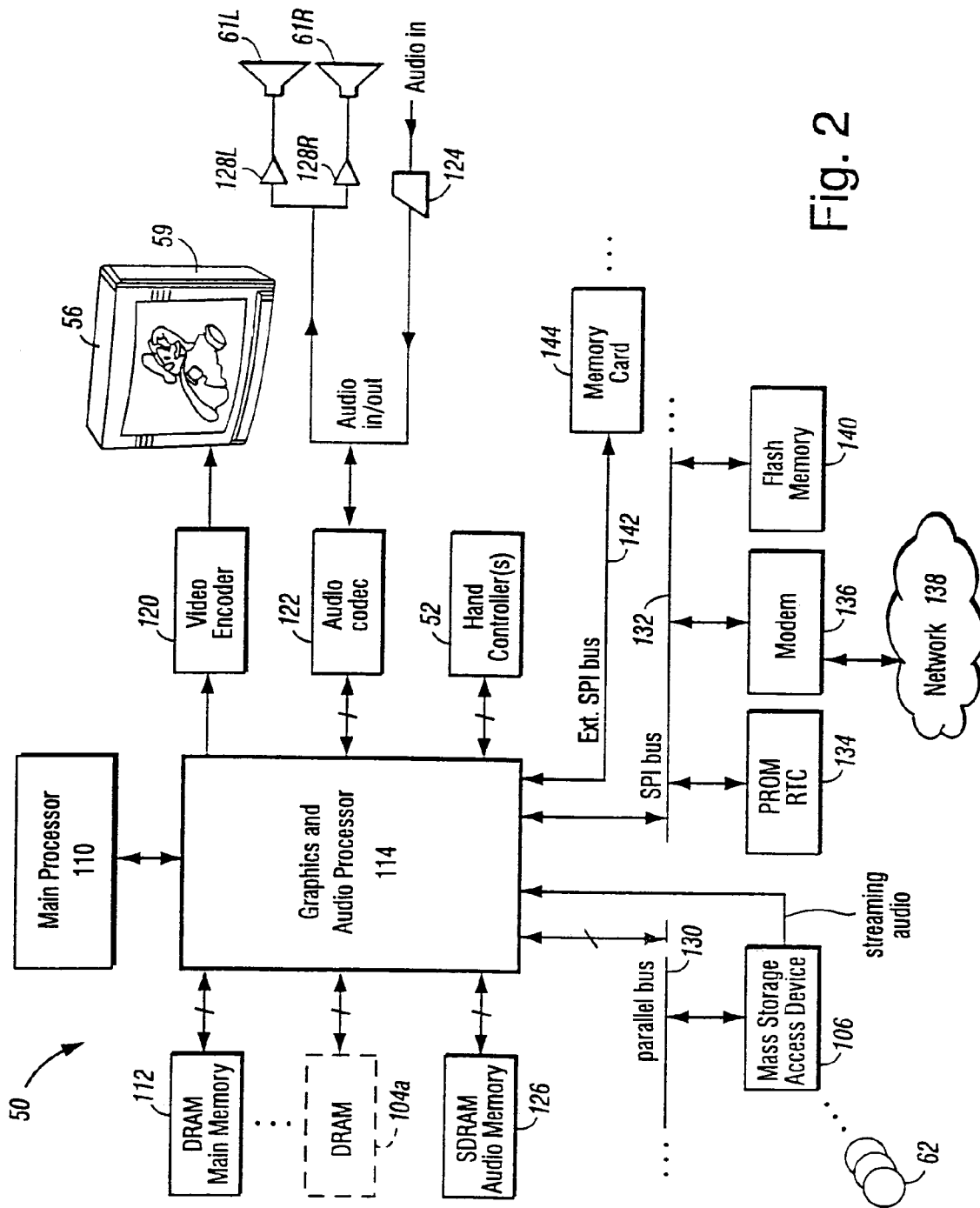


Fig. 2

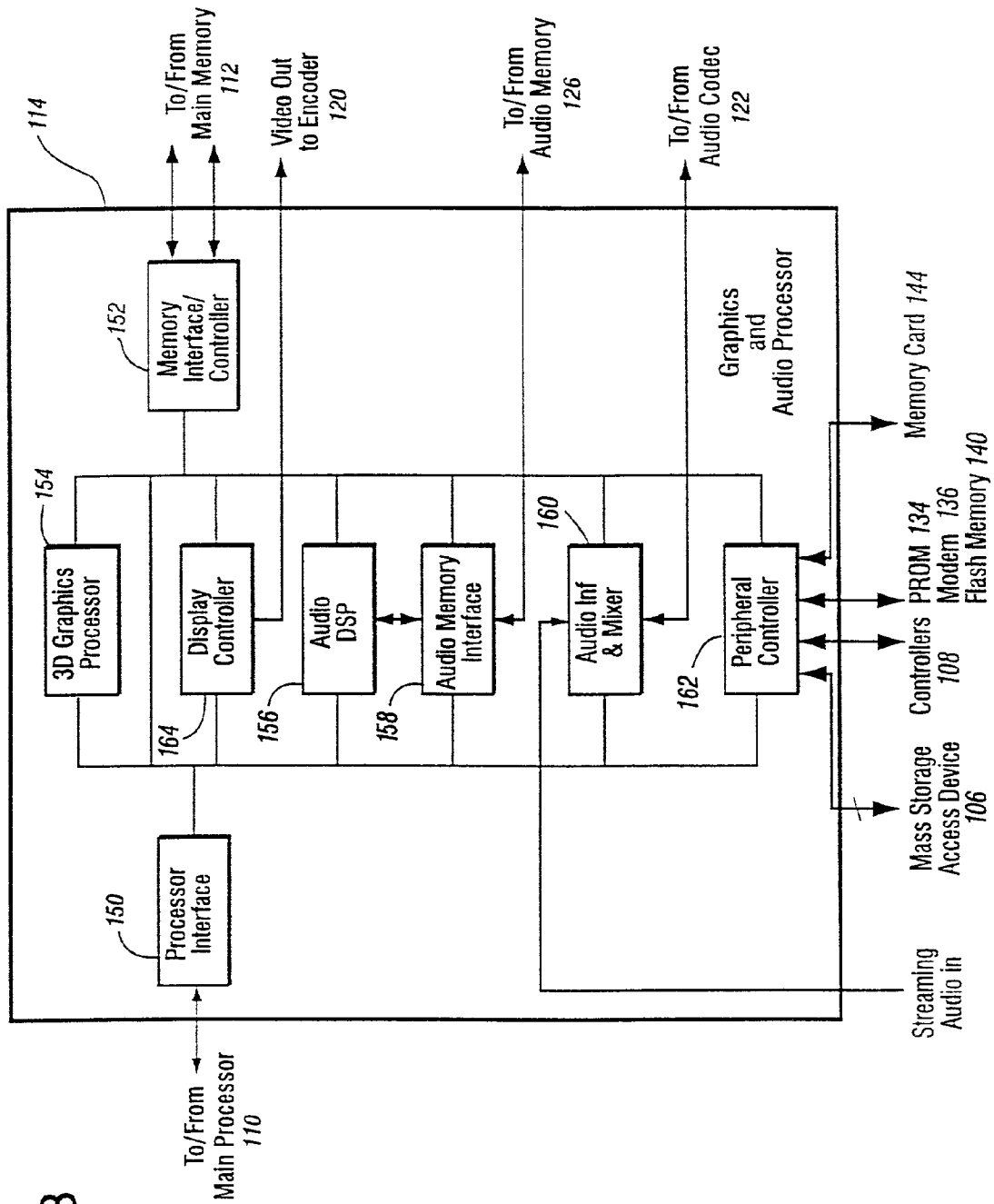


Fig. 3

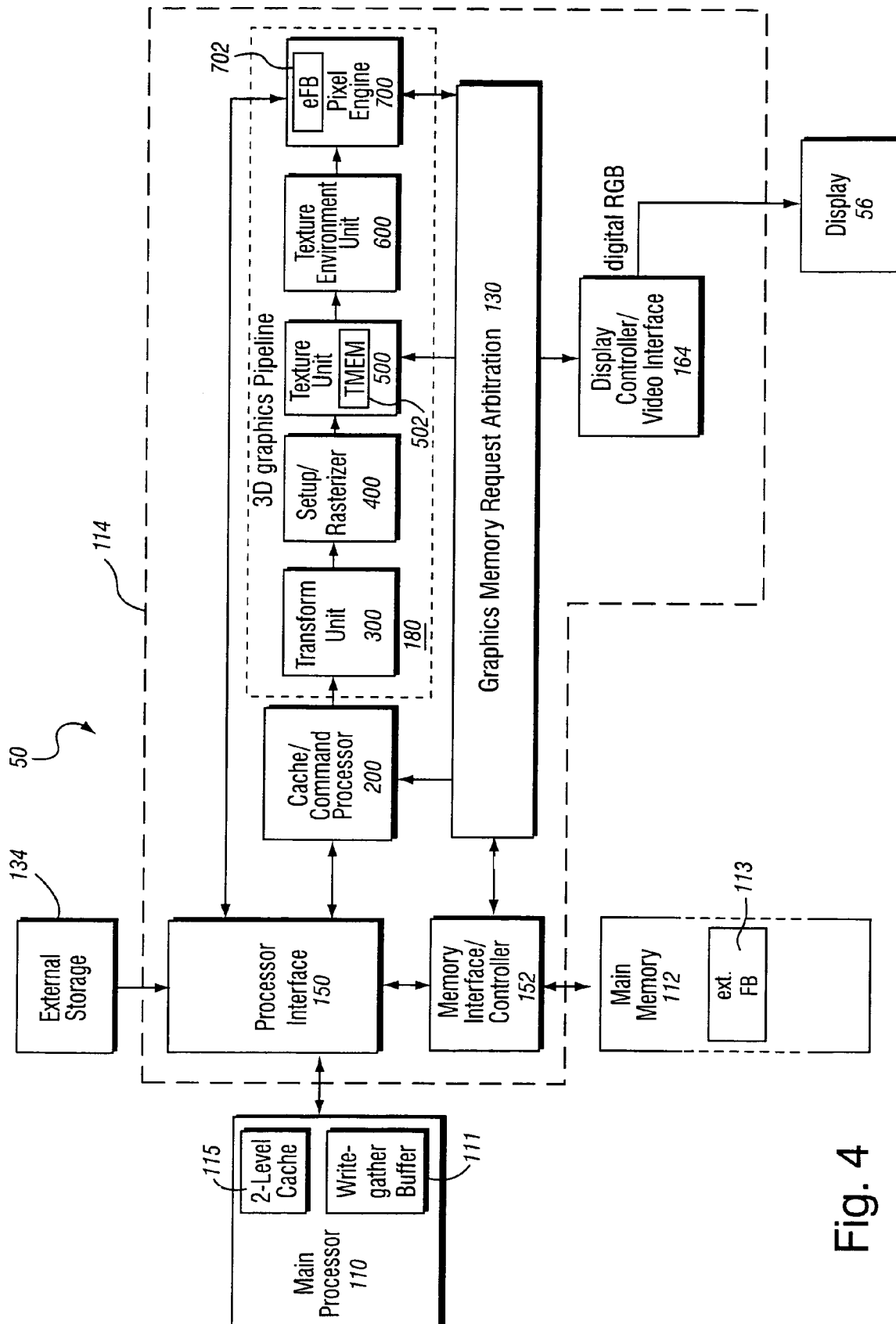


Fig. 4

Fig. 5 EXAMPLE GRAPHICS PROCESSOR FLOW

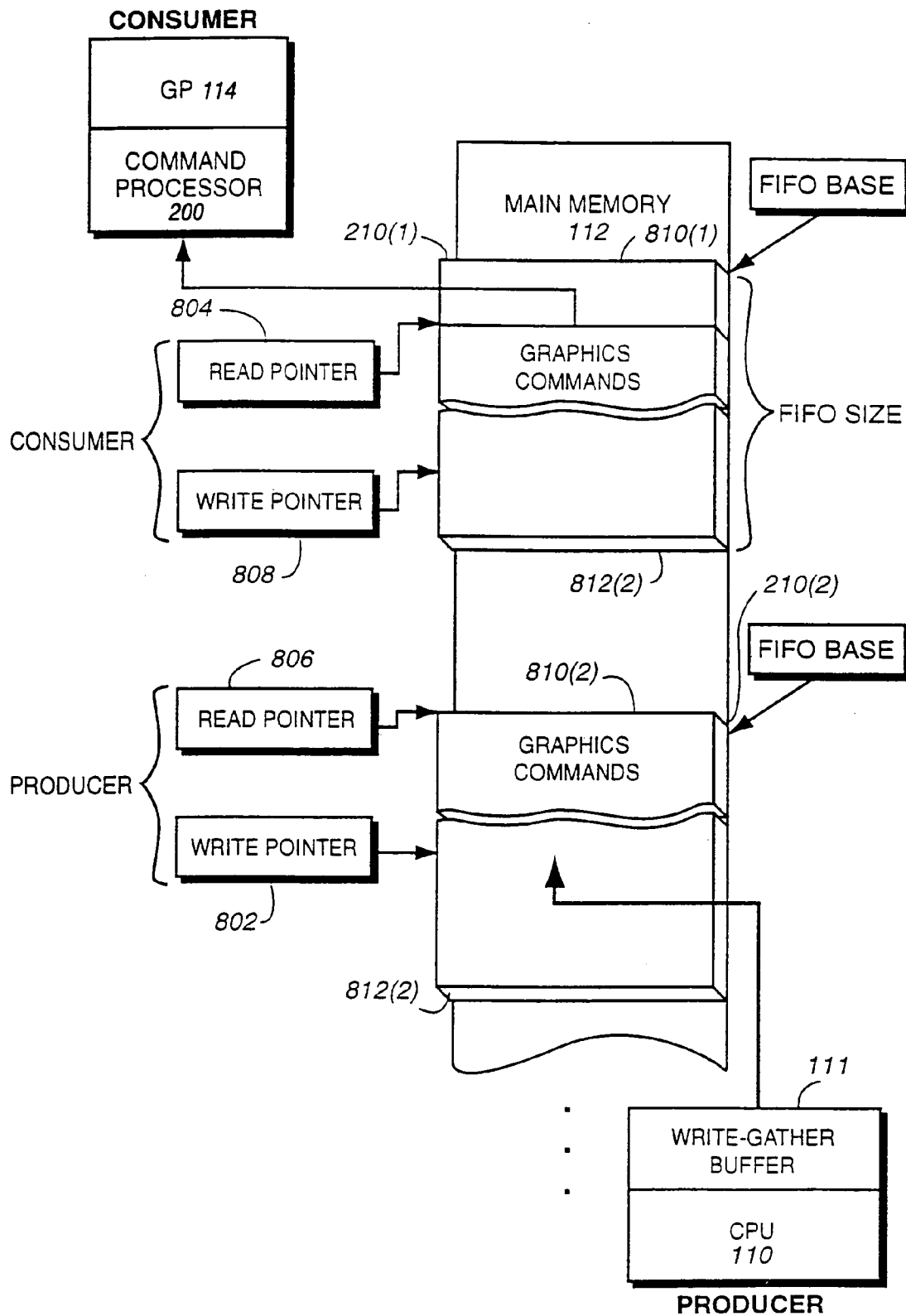


Fig. 6 EXAMPLE MULTI - BUFFERING

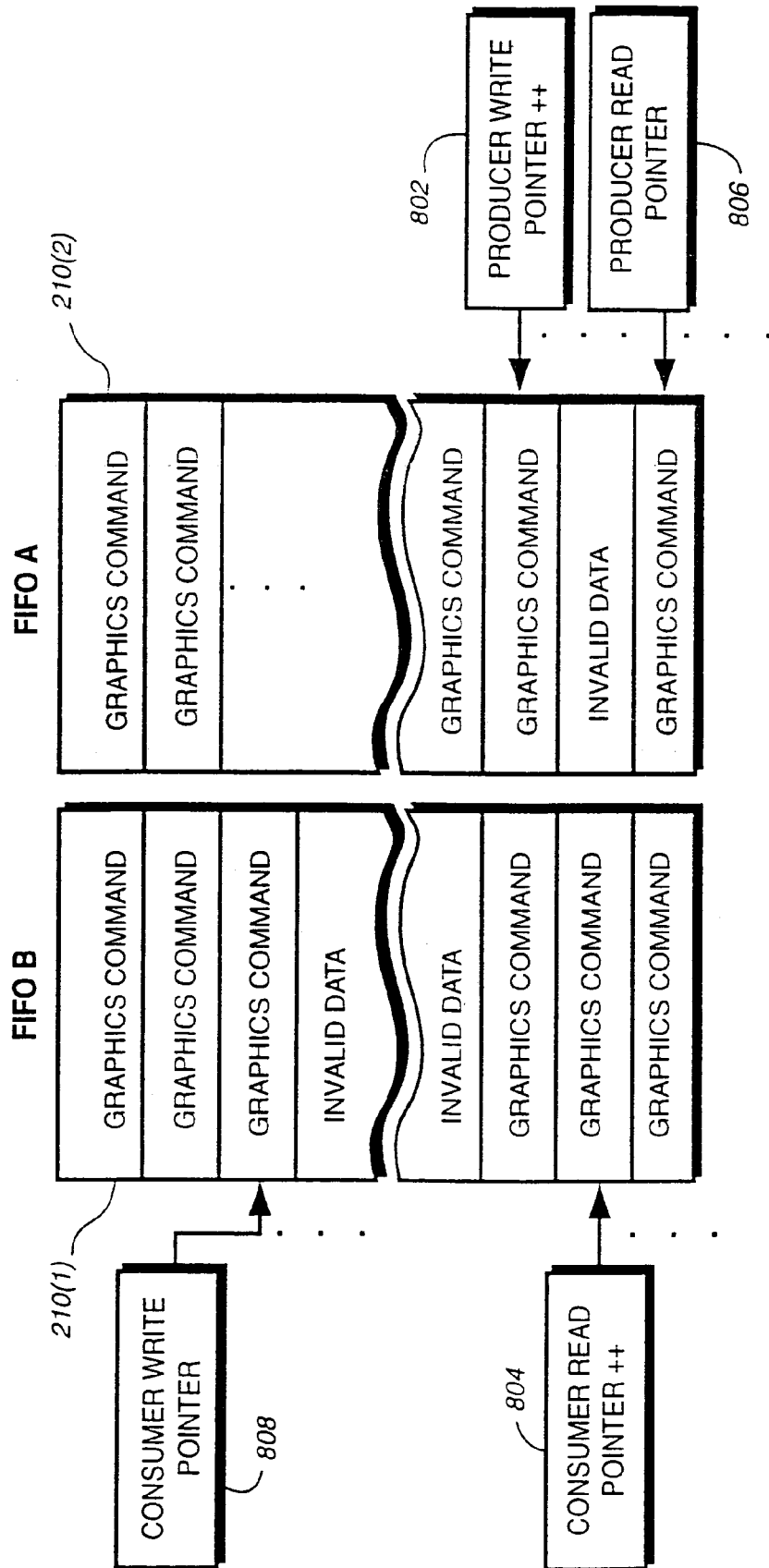


Fig. 7 EXAMPLE INDEPENDENT CONSUMER AND PRODUCER
READ AND WRITE POINTERS

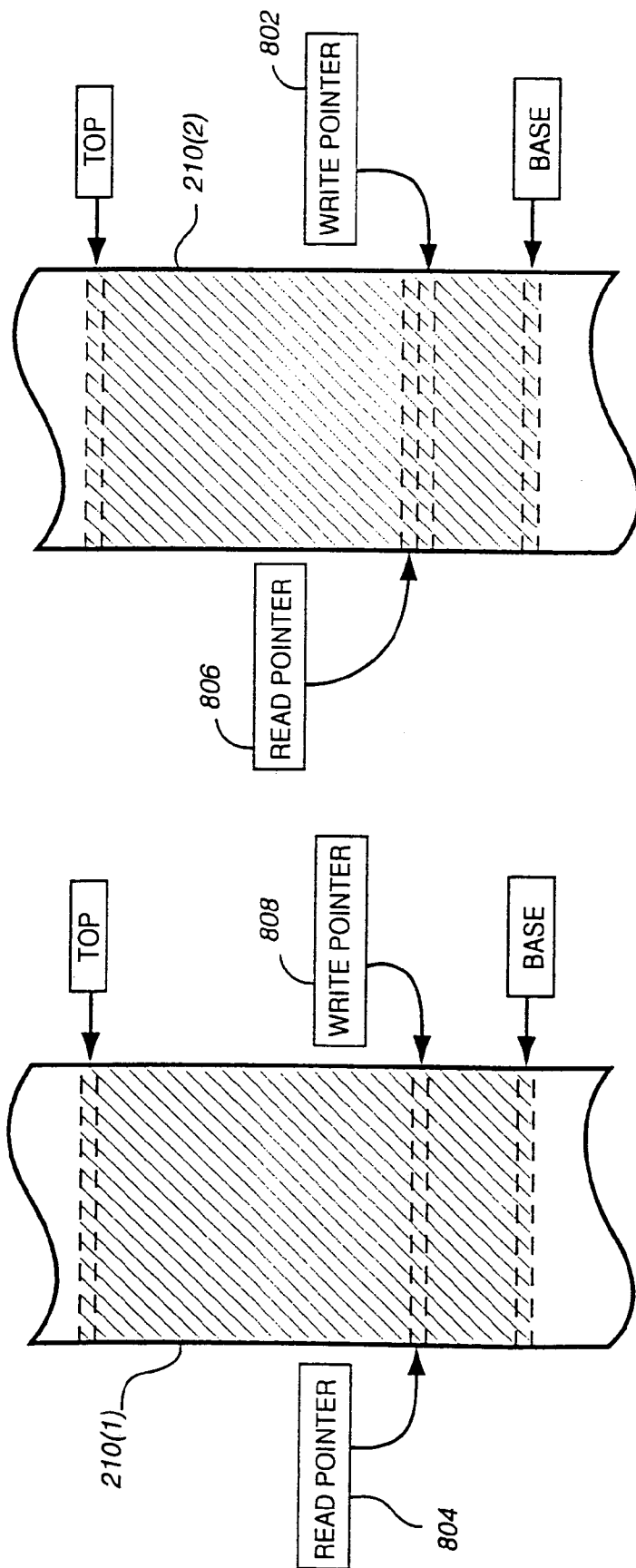


Fig. 8A EMPTY CONDITION

Fig. 8B FULL CONDITION

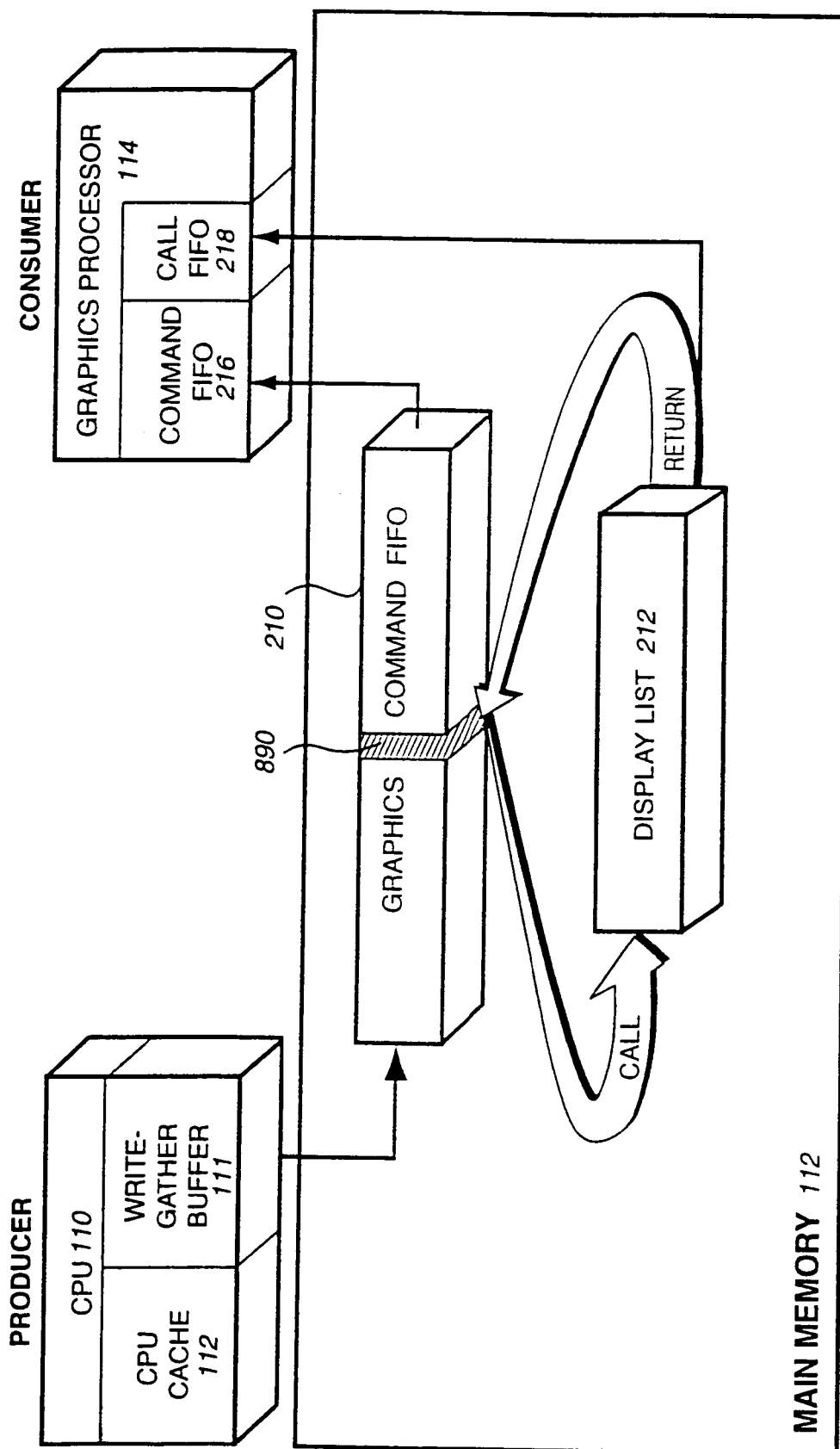


Fig. 9 EXAMPLE DISPLAY LIST CALL FROM COMMAND FIFO

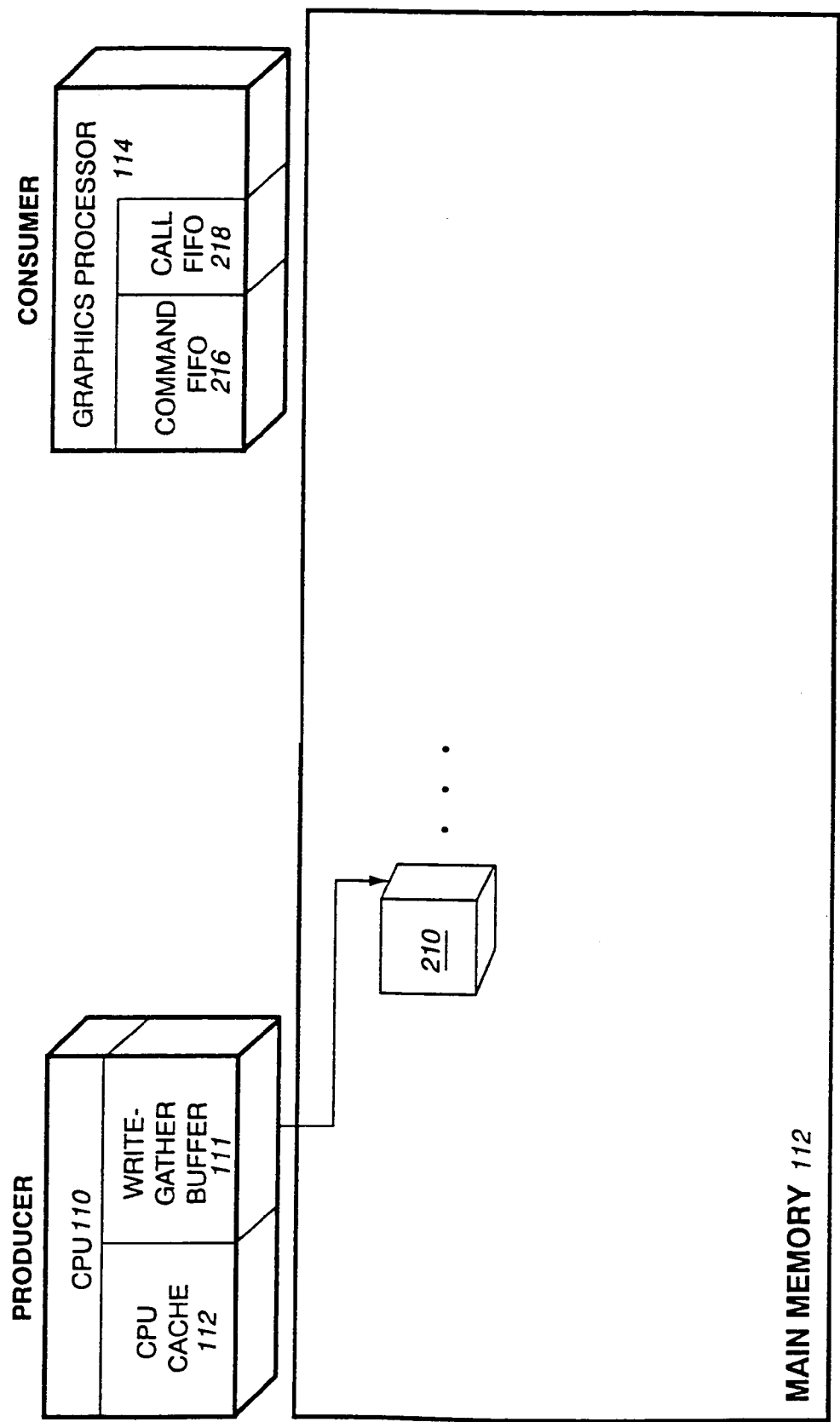


Fig. 10A EXAMPLE WRITE TO FIFO BUFFER

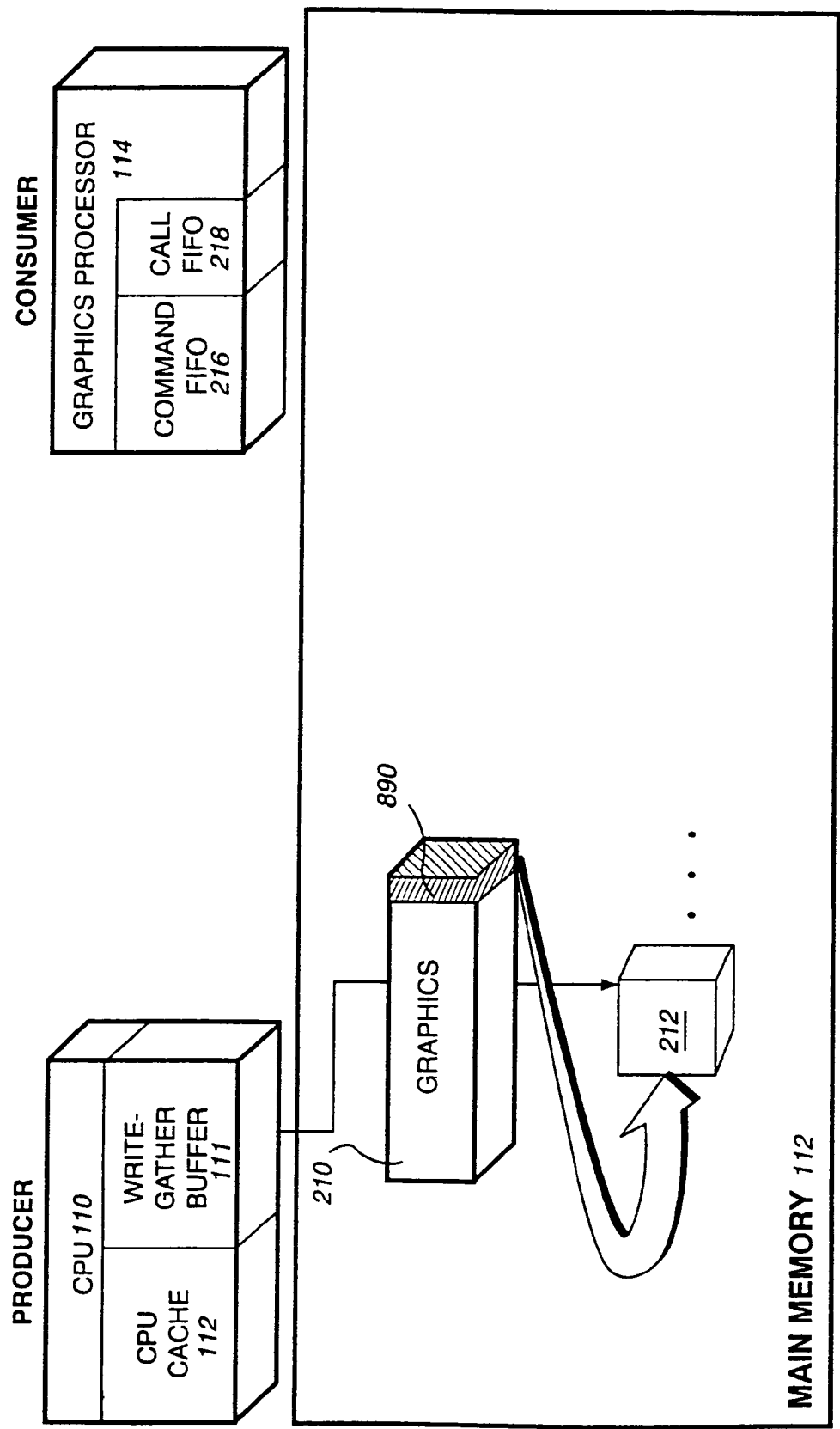


Fig. 10B EXAMPLE BEGIN DISPLAY LIST COMMAND

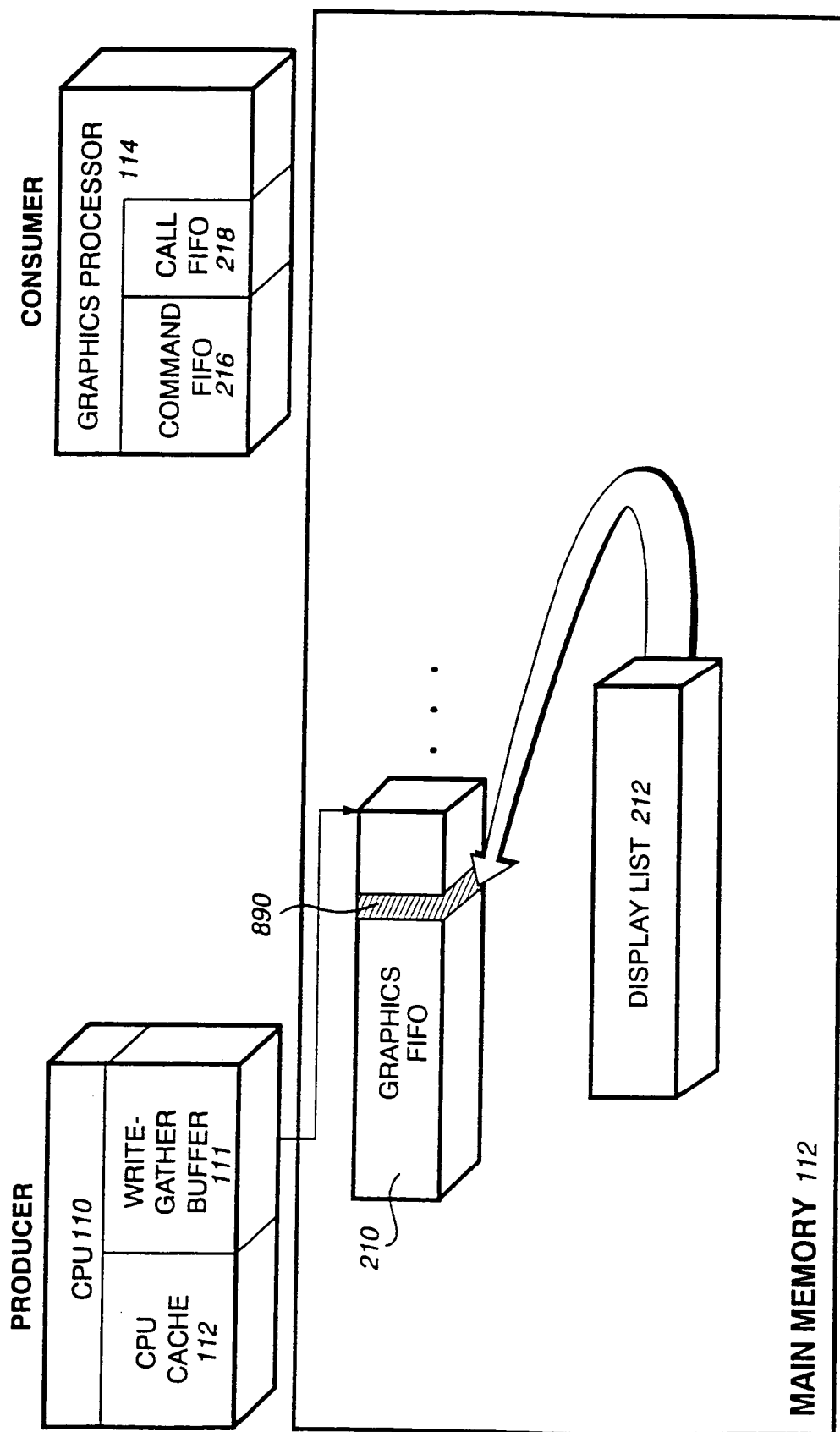


Fig. 10C EXAMPLE END DISPLAY LIST COMMAND

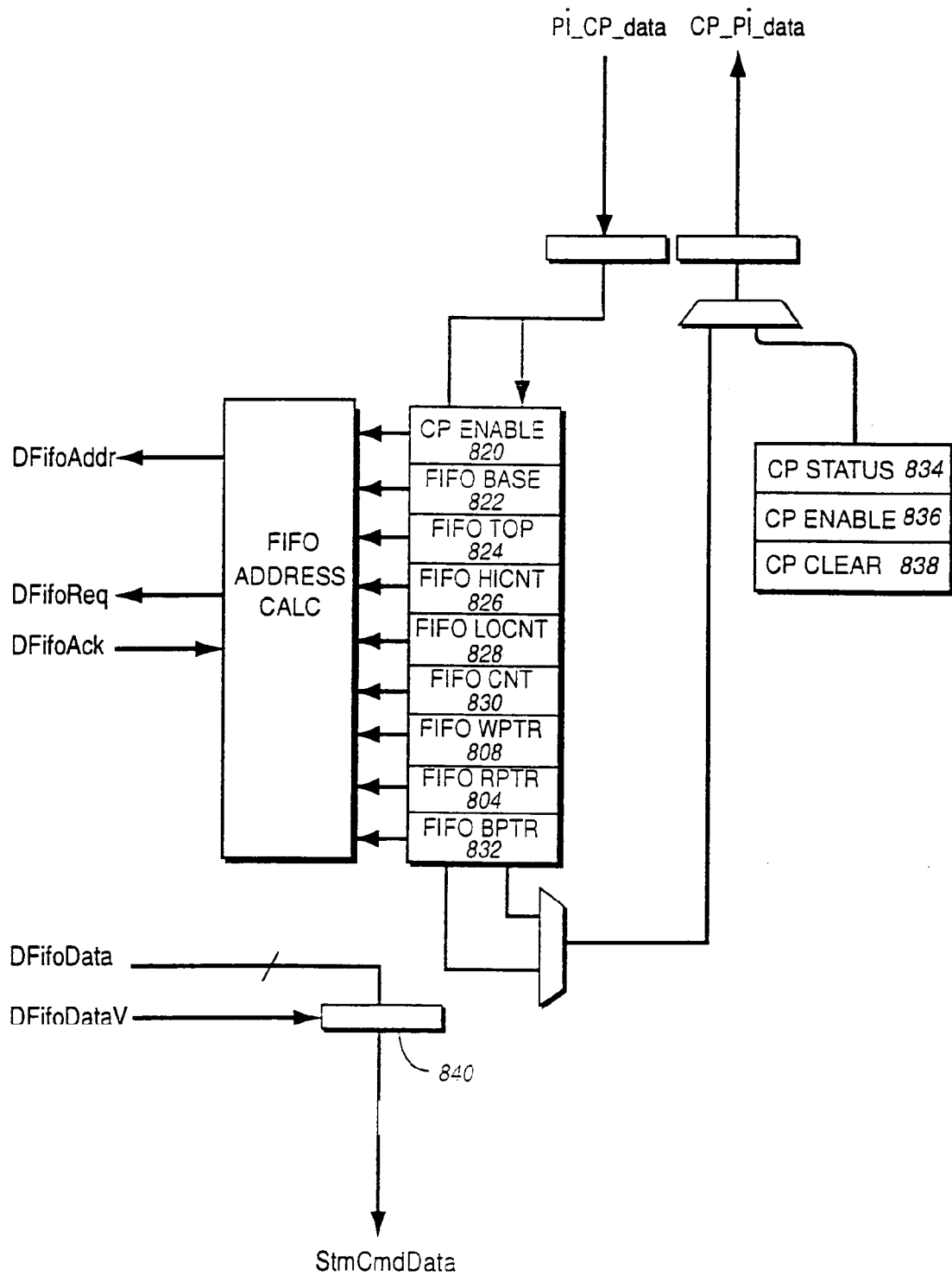


Fig. 11 EXAMPLE FIFO MANAGER

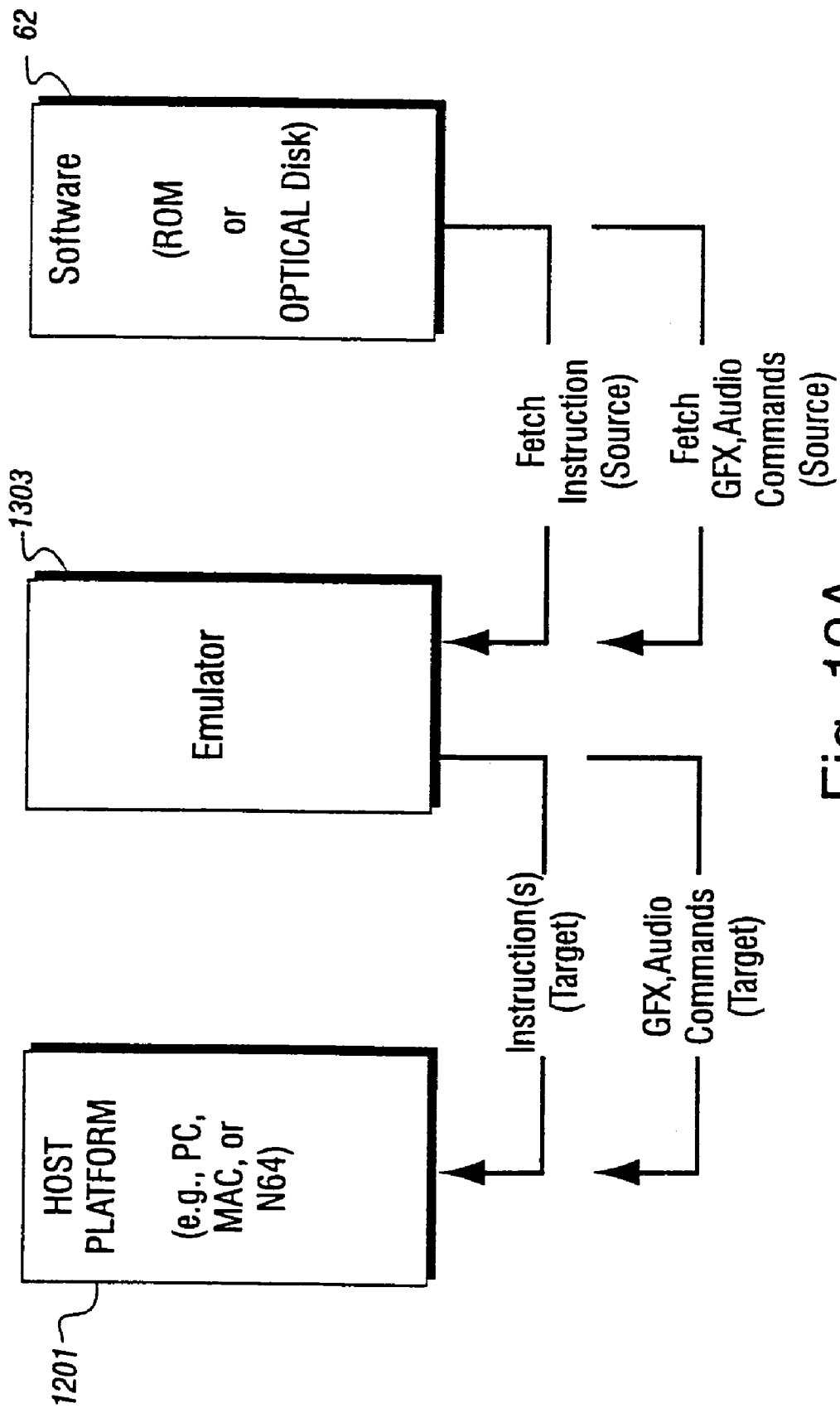


Fig. 12A

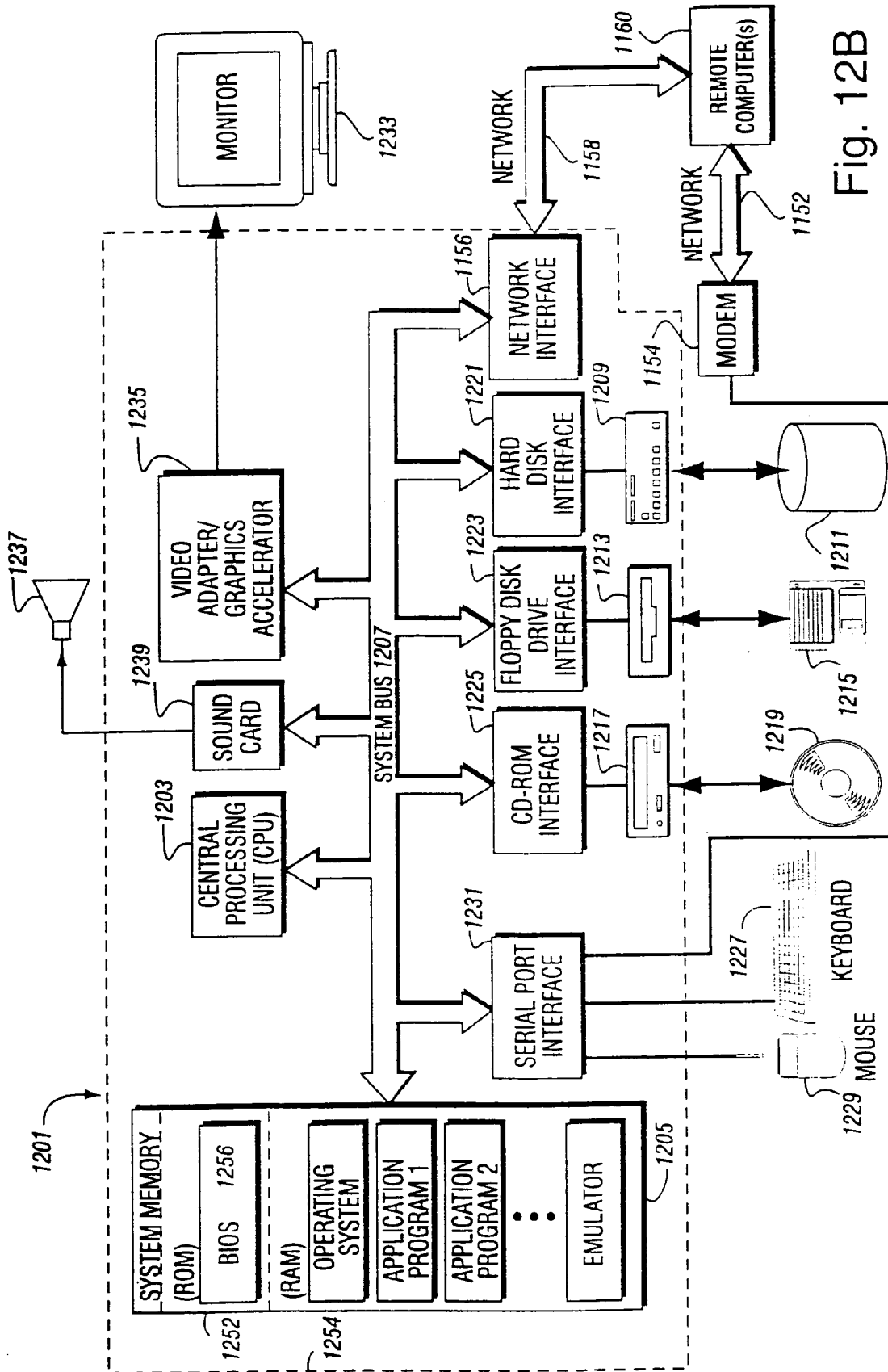


Fig. 12B

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METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR BUFFERING GRAPHICS DATA IN A GRAPHICS SYSTEM

This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/226,912, filed Aug. 23, 2000, the entire content of which is hereby incorporated by reference in this application.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates to computer graphics, and more particularly to interactive graphics systems such as home video game platforms. Still more particularly, this invention relates to efficient graphics command buffering between a graphics command producer and a graphics command consumer.

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Many of us have seen films containing remarkably realistic dinosaurs, aliens, animated toys and other fanciful creatures. Such animations are made possible by computer graphics. Using such techniques, a computer graphics artist can specify how each object should look and how it should change in appearance over time, and a computer then models the objects and displays them on a display such as your television or a computer screen. The computer takes care of performing the many tasks required to make sure that each part of the displayed image is colored and shaped just right based on the position and orientation of each object in a scene, the direction in which light seems to strike each object, the surface texture of each object, and other factors.

Because computer graphics generation is complex, computer-generated three-dimensional graphics just a few years ago were mostly limited to expensive specialized flight simulators, high-end graphics workstations and supercomputers. The public saw some of the images generated by these computer systems in movies and expensive television advertisements, but most of us couldn't actually interact with the computers doing the graphics generation. All this has changed with the availability of relatively inexpensive 3D graphics platforms such as, for example, the Nintendo 64® and various 3D graphics cards now available for personal computers. It is now possible to interact with exciting 3D animations and simulations on relatively inexpensive computer graphics systems in your home or office.

A problem graphics system designers confronted in the past was how to efficiently buffer graphics commands between a graphics command producer and a graphics command consumer. Various solutions to this problem were offered. For example, it is well known to provide a buffer memory between a graphics command producer and a graphics command consumer. Often, this buffer memory is connected as part of the graphics command consumer (for example, on board a graphics chip). The graphics command producer writes graphics commands into the buffer memory, and the graphics command consumer reads those graphics commands from the buffer memory. It is typical for such a buffer memory to be structured as a first-in-first-out (FIFO) buffer so that the graphics command consumer reads the graphics command in the same sequence that they were written into the buffer by the graphics command producer.

Placing such a buffer between the producer and the consumer relaxes the degree to which the producer and consumer must be synchronized. The producer can write

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commands into the buffer at an instantaneous rate that is independent of the instantaneous rate at which the consumer reads commands from the buffer. Even if the consumer suffers a momentary delay in reading from the buffer (e.g., as may occur when the producer asks the consumer to draw large or complex primitives), the producer will not stall unless/until it fills the buffer and has no more memory space to write new commands. Similarly, momentary delays of the producer in writing new graphics commands into the buffer will not cause the consumer to stall unless the consumer consumes all of the graphics commands in the buffer before the producer has an opportunity to write additional graphics commands.

A potential problem encountered in the past relates to the size of the buffer. Because of limitations on chip size and complexity, it is often not possible to put a very large command buffer memory on the graphics chip. A small sized FIFO buffer in the graphics hardware may not adequately load balance between the producer and the consumer, causing the producer to stall when the consumer renders big primitives. Thus, while significant work has been done in the past, further improvements are possible.

The present invention solves this problem by providing techniques and arrangements that more efficiently buffer graphics commands between a graphics command producer and a graphics command consumer. In accordance with one aspect of the invention, a part of main memory shared between the producer and consumer is allocated to a variable number of variable sized graphics command buffers. The producer can specify the number of buffers and the size of each. Writes to the graphics consumer can be routed to any of the buffers in main memory. A buffer can be attached simultaneously to the consumer and the producer, or different buffers can be attached to the consumer and the producer. In the multi-buffering approach where different buffers are attached to the consumer and the producer, the producer can write to one buffer while the consumer reads from another buffer.

To further decouple the consumer from the producer, the producer and consumer independently maintain their own read and write pointers in accordance with another aspect of the invention. Even though the consumer may not write to the buffer, it nevertheless maintains a write pointer which it uses to keep track of data valid position within the buffer. Similarly, even though the producer may not read from the buffer it is attached to, it maintains a read pointer which it uses to keep track of data valid position within the buffer. The effect of this pointer arrangement is to further decouple the producer from the consumer—reducing the synchronization requirements between the two.

In accordance with another aspect provided by this invention, the producer can write a "call display list" command to a FIFO buffer that directs the consumer to read a string of graphics commands (e.g., a display list) stored elsewhere in memory, and to subsequently return to reading the rest of the buffer. This ability to call an out-of-line graphics command string from a FIFO buffer provides additional flexibility and further decreases synchronization requirements.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, the graphics command producer can write a graphics command stream to a FIFO buffer that includes a command which automatically redirects succeeding commands to a display list buffer. One way to visualize this is to picture the graphics command producer as a redirectable fire hose that continually produces a stream of graphics commands. The fire hose normal streams the graphics command into a FIFO buffer. However, the producer can include, within the stream, a

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“Begin Display List” command that causes graphics commands following the command to be written to a display list instead. An “End Display List” command inserted further on in the stream can terminate the display list and redirect the graphics command stream back to the same (or different) FIFO buffer. This feature has the advantage of allowing the graphics command producer to efficiently create reusable display lists with very low overhead.

In accordance with another aspect provided by this invention, the graphics command producer can insert a break point into any of multiple FIFO buffers. The break point can cause the consumer to interrupt. Such break points can help to synchronize the producer and the consumer when close synchronization is required.

In accordance with yet another aspect provided by this invention, the graphics system includes a producer that outputs graphics commands, a consumer that consumes the graphics commands outputted by the producer, and a storage device coupled between the producer and the consumer. The storage device stores plural variable sized buffers disposed at variable locations within the storage device. Each of the variable sized buffers receives and temporarily stores graphics commands outputted by the producer for delivery to the consumer.

In accordance with a further aspect provided by the invention, the consumer is incapable of writing to at least an active one of the plural buffers, but nevertheless maintains—independently of the producer—a write pointer for at least the active one of the plural buffers. The producer provides a producer read pointer and a producer write pointer associated with a first of the plural buffers, and the consumer independently maintains a consumer read pointer and a consumer write pointer associated with that same buffer. The consumer may increment the consumer read pointer as the consumer reads from an active buffer and suspends reading from the active buffer when the incremented consumer read pointer has a predetermined relationship with a consumer write pointer. The consumer may selectively increment the consumer write pointer in response to the producer writing to the active buffer.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, a buffer includes a read command that controls the consumer to consume a set of graphics commands the producer stores elsewhere within the storage device, and to resume consuming graphics commands from the buffer after consuming the graphics commands stored elsewhere. The read command may specify a starting address and a length of a display list. The read command controls the consumer to read the display list of the specified length beginning at the specified starting address.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, any of the plural buffers may provide either circular or linear first-in-first-out access.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, any of the plural buffers can be selectively attached to both the producer and the consumer simultaneously—or one of the buffers can be attached to the producer while another buffer is attached to the consumer.

In accordance with still another aspect provided by the invention, the producer allocates the size of each of the plural buffers. Such allocation is provided so that each buffer is capable of storing at least a frame of graphics commands.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, the producer may write a break point into any of the plural buffers. The consumer may suspend consumption of graphics commands upon encountering the break point.

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In accordance with yet another aspect of the invention, each buffer may provide an overflow status indicator indicating when the producer overwrites a location in the buffer.

In accordance with yet another aspect of the invention, a status register or other indicator may indicate the status of at least one of the plural buffers. The status register may indicate, for example:

- producer writer pointer position,
- producer read pointer position,
- consumer write pointer position, and
- consumer read pointer position.

In accordance with yet another aspect provided by this invention, a graphics system includes:

- a storage buffer that receives and temporarily stores graphics commands,
- a producer that writes graphics commands into the buffer, the producer maintaining a producer write pointer and a producer read pointer associated with the buffer, and
- a consumer that consumes graphics commands stored within the buffer, the consumer maintaining a consumer write pointer that is independent of the producer write pointer and a consumer read pointer that is independent of the producer read pointer.

In accordance with yet another aspect of this invention, a graphics system includes a graphics command producer that writes graphics commands into a buffer based on a producer write pointer, and a graphics commands consumer that reads graphics commands from the buffer based on a consumer read pointer. In accordance with this aspect of the invention, the consumer write pointer is independently maintained by the consumer and indicates the extent of valid data the producer has written into the buffer. The consumer ceases to consume graphics commands from the buffer upon the consumer read pointer having a predetermined relationship to the consumer write pointer.

In accordance with yet another aspect provided by this invention, an interactive graphics system includes a processor module executing an application, a graphics processor module, and at least one memory coupled to the processor module and to the graphics processor module. The method of controlling the flow of graphics commands between the processor module and the graphics processor module comprises:

- dynamically establishing, under control of the application, a variable number of FIFO buffers in the memory, the application specifying the size of each of the FIFO buffers,
- the application controlling the processor module to write graphics commands into at least a first of the plurality of FIFO buffers, and
- the application sending graphics commands to the graphics processor module that control the graphics processor module to read graphics commands from the first FIFO buffer.

The processor module may provide a processor module read pointer and processor module write pointer associated with the first of plurality of buffers. The graphics processor module may independently maintain a graphics processor module read pointer and a graphics processor module write pointer associated with the first buffer. The graphics processor module may increment the graphics processor read pointer each time the graphics processor module reads from the first buffer, and may suspend reading from the first buffer when the graphics processor module read pointer has a predetermined relationship with the graphics processor module write pointer. Graphics processor module may selec-

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tively auto increment the graphics processor write pointer in response to the processor writing to the first buffer.

In accordance with yet another aspect of the invention, a method of controlling the flow of graphics data comprises: writing graphics data into plural variable sized FIFO buffers each having plural storage locations, setting a break point associated with at least one of the plural storage locations, reading graphics data from the plural buffers in a predetermined order, temporarily suspending the reading step upon encountering the at least one location associated with the break point, and generating an interrupt, and resuming the reading step in response to receipt of a clear interrupt command.

In accordance with yet another aspect provided by this invention, a graphics system includes:

- a storage device that receives and temporarily stores graphics commands,
- a producer that writes commands into a buffer within the storage device, the commands including a first set of graphics commands and a read command referring to a second set of graphics commands stored elsewhere in the storage device, and
- a consumer that consumes the first set of graphics commands stored within the buffer and, in response to encountering the read command, consumes the second set of graphics commands and subsequently consumes additional commands from the buffer.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

These and other features and advantages provided by the invention will be better and more completely understood by referring to the following detailed description of presently preferred embodiments in conjunction with the drawings, of which:

FIG. 1 is an overall view of an example interactive computer graphics system;

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of the FIG. 1 example computer graphics system;

FIG. 3 is a block diagram of the example graphics and audio processor shown in FIG. 2;

FIG. 4 is a block diagram of the example 3D graphics processor shown in FIG. 3;

FIG. 5 is an example logical flow diagram of the FIG. 4 graphics and audio processor;

FIG. 6 shows example multi-buffering;

FIG. 7 shows example independent consumer and producer read and write pointers;

FIGS. 8A and 8B show, respectively, example empty and full buffer conditions;

FIG. 9 shows an example call of a display list from an FIFO buffer;

FIGS. 10A–10C show example display list creation; and

FIG. 11 shows an example FIFO manager implementation; and

FIGS. 12A and 12B show example alternative compatible implementations.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EXAMPLE EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

FIG. 1 shows an example interactive 3D computer graphics system 50. System 50 can be used to play interactive 3D video games with interesting stereo sound. It can also be used for a variety of other applications.

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In this example, system 50 is capable of processing, interactively in real time, a digital representation or model of a three-dimensional world. System 50 can display some or all of the world from any arbitrary viewpoint. For example, system 50 can interactively change the viewpoint in response to real time inputs from handheld controllers 52a, 52b or other input devices. This allows the game player to see the world through the eyes of someone within or outside of the world. System 50 can be used for applications that do not require real time 3D interactive display (e.g., 2D display generation and/or non-interactive display), but the capability of displaying quality 3D images very quickly can be used to create very realistic and exciting game play or other graphical interactions.

To play a video game or other application using system 50, the user first connects a main unit 54 to his or her color television set 56 or other display device by connecting a cable 58 between the two. Main unit 54 produces both video signals and audio signals for controlling color television set 56. The video signals are what controls the images displayed on the television screen 59, and the audio signals are played back as sound through television stereo loudspeakers 61L, 61R.

The user also needs to connect main unit 54 to a power source. This power source may be a conventional AC adapter (not shown) that plugs into a standard home electrical wall socket and converts the house current into a lower DC voltage signal suitable for powering the main unit 54. Batteries could be used in other implementations.

The user may use hand controllers 52a, 52b to control main unit 54. Controls 60 can be used, for example, to specify the direction (up or down, left or right, closer or further away) that a character displayed on television 56 should move within a 3D world. Controls 60 also provide input for other applications (e.g., menu selection, pointer/cursor control, etc.). Controllers 52 can take a variety of forms. In this example, controllers 52 shown each include controls 60 such as joysticks, push buttons and/or directional switches. Controllers 52 may be connected to main unit 54 by cables or wirelessly via electromagnetic (e.g., radio or infrared) waves.

To play an application such as a game, the user selects an appropriate storage medium 62 storing the video game or other application he or she wants to play, and inserts that storage medium into a slot 64 in main unit 54. Storage medium 62 may, for example, be a specially encoded and/or encrypted optical and/or magnetic disk. The user may operate a power switch 66 to turn on main unit 54 and cause the main unit to begin running the video game or other application based on the software stored in the storage medium 62. The user may operate controllers 52 to provide inputs to main unit 54. For example, operating a control 60 may cause the game or other application to start. Moving other controls 60 can cause animated characters to move in different directions or change the user's point of view in a 3D world. Depending upon the particular software stored within the storage medium 62, the various controls 60 on the controller 52 can perform different functions at different times.

Example Electronics of Overall System

FIG. 2 shows a block diagram of example components of system 50. The primary components include:

- a main processor (CPU) 110,
- a main memory 112, and
- a graphics and audio processor 114.

In this example, main processor 110 (e.g., an enhanced IBM Power PC 750) to receives inputs from handheld

controllers **108** (and/or other input devices) via graphics and audio processor **114**. Main processor **110** interactively responds to user inputs, and executes a video game or other program supplied, for example, by external storage media **62** via a mass storage access device **106** such as an optical disk drive. As one example, in the context of video game play, main processor **110** can perform collision detection and animation processing in addition to a variety of interactive and control functions.

In this example, main processor **110** generates 3D graphics and audio commands and sends them to graphics and audio processor **114**. The graphics and audio processor **114** processes these commands to generate interesting visual images on display **59** and interesting stereo sound on stereo loudspeakers **61R**, **61L** or other suitable sound-generating devices.

Example system **50** includes a video encoder **120** that receives image signals from graphics and audio processor **114** and converts the image signals into analog and/or digital video signals suitable for display on a standard display device such as a computer monitor or home color television set **56**. System **50** also includes an audio codec (compressor/decompressor) **122** that compresses and decompresses digitized audio signals and may also convert between digital and analog audio signaling formats as needed. Audio codec **122** can receive audio inputs via a buffer **124** and provide them to graphics and audio processor **114** for processing (e.g., mixing with other audio signals the processor generates and/or receives via a streaming audio output of mass storage access device **106**). Graphics and audio processor **114** in this example can store audio related information in an audio memory **126** that is available for audio tasks. Graphics and audio processor **114** provides the resulting audio output signals to audio codec **122** for decompression and conversion to analog signals (e.g., via buffer amplifiers **128L**, **128R**) so they can be reproduced by loudspeakers **61L**, **61R**.

Graphics and audio processor **114** has the ability to communicate with various additional devices that may be present within system **50**. For example, a parallel digital bus **130** may be used to communicate with mass storage access device **106** and/or other components. A serial peripheral bus **132** may communicate with a variety of peripheral or other devices including, for example:

- a programmable read-only memory and/or real time clock **134**,
- a modem **136** or other networking interface (which may in turn connect system **50** to a telecommunications network **138** such as the Internet or other digital network from/to which program instructions and/or data can be downloaded or uploaded), and
- flash memory **140**.

A further external serial bus **142** may be used to communicate with additional expansion memory **144** (e.g., a memory card) or other devices. Connectors may be used to connect various devices to busses **130**, **132**, **142**.

Example Graphics And Audio Processor

FIG. **3** is a block diagram of an example graphics and audio processor **114**. Graphics and audio processor **114** in one example may be a single-chip ASIC (application specific integrated circuit). In this example, graphics and audio processor **114** includes:

- a processor interface **150**,
- a memory interface/controller **152**,
- a 3D graphics processor **154**,
- an audio digital signal processor (DSP) **156**,
- an audio memory interface **158**,

an audio interface and mixer **160**,
a peripheral controller **162**, and
a display controller **164**.

3D graphics processor **154** performs graphics processing tasks. Audio digital signal processor **156** performs audio processing tasks. Display controller **164** accesses image information from main memory **112** and provides it to video encoder **120** for display on display device **56**. Audio interface and mixer **160** interfaces with audio codec **122**, and can also mix audio from different sources (e.g., streaming audio from mass storage access device **106**, the output of audio DSP **156**, and external audio input received via audio codec **122**). Processor interface **150** provides a data and control interface between main processor **110** and graphics and audio processor **114**.

Memory interface **152** provides a data and control interface between graphics and audio processor **114** and memory **112**. In this example, main processor **110** accesses main memory **112** via processor interface **150** and memory interface **152** that are part of graphics and audio processor **114**. Peripheral controller **162** provides a data and control interface between graphics and audio processor **114** and the various peripherals mentioned above. Audio memory interface **158** provides an interface with audio memory **126**.

Example Graphics Pipeline

FIG. **4** shows a more detailed view of an example 3D graphics processor **154**. 3D graphics processor **154** includes, among other things, a command processor **200** and a 3D graphics pipeline **180**. Main processor **110** communicates streams of data (e.g., graphics command streams and display lists) to command processor **200**. Main processor **110** has a two-level cache **115** to minimize memory latency, and also has a write-gathering buffer **111** for uncached data streams targeted for the graphics and audio processor **114**. The write-gathering buffer **111** collects partial cache lines into full cache lines and sends the data out to the graphics and audio processor **114** one cache line at a time for maximum bus usage.

Command processor **200** receives display commands from main processor **110** and parses them—obtaining any additional data necessary to process them from shared memory **112**. The command processor **200** provides a stream of vertex commands to graphics pipeline **180** for 2D and/or 3D processing and rendering. Graphics pipeline **180** generates images based on these commands. The resulting image information may be transferred to main memory **112** for access by display controller/video interface unit **164**—which displays the frame buffer output of pipeline **180** on display **56**.

FIG. **5** is a logical flow diagram of graphics processor **154**. Main processor **110** may store graphics command streams **210**, display lists **212** and vertex arrays **214** in main memory **112**, and pass pointers to command processor **200** via bus interface **150**. The main processor **110** stores graphics commands in one or more graphics first-in-first-out (FIFO) buffers **210** it allocates in main memory **110**. The command processor **200** fetches:

- command streams from main memory **112** via an on-chip FIFO memory buffer **216** that receives and buffers the graphics commands for synchronization/flow control and load balancing,
- display lists **212** from main memory **112** via an on-chip call FIFO memory buffer **218**, and
- vertex attributes from the command stream and/or from vertex arrays **214** in main memory **112** via a vertex cache **220**.

Command processor **200** performs command processing operations **200a** that convert attribute types to floating point format, and pass the resulting complete vertex polygon data to graphics pipeline **180** for rendering/rasterization. A programmable memory arbitration circuitry **130** (see FIG. 4) arbitrates access to shared main memory **112** between graphics pipeline **180**, command processor **200** and display controller/video interface unit **164**.

FIG. 4 shows that graphics pipeline **180** may include:

- a transform unit **300**,
- a setup/rasterizer **400**,
- a texture unit **500**,
- a texture environment unit **600**, and
- a pixel engine **700**.

Transform unit **300** performs a variety of 2D and 3D transform and other operations **300a** (see FIG. 5). Transform unit **300** may include one or more matrix memories **300b** for storing matrices used in transformation processing **300a**. Transform unit **300** transforms incoming geometry per vertex from object space to screen space; and transforms incoming texture coordinates and computes projective texture coordinates (**300c**). Transform unit **300** may also perform polygon clipping/culling **300d**. Lighting processing **300e** also performed by transform unit **300b** provides per vertex lighting computations for up to eight independent lights in one example embodiment. Transform unit **300** can also perform texture coordinate generation (**300c**) for embossed type bump mapping effects, as well as polygon clipping/culling operations (**300d**).

Setup/rasterizer **400** includes a setup unit which receives vertex data from transform unit **300** and sends triangle setup information to one or more rasterizer units (**400b**) performing edge rasterization, texture coordinate rasterization and color rasterization.

Texture unit **500** (which may include an on-chip texture memory (TMEM) **502**) performs various tasks related to texturing including for example:

- retrieving textures **504** from main memory **112**,
- texture processing (**500a**) including, for example, multi-texture handling, post-cache texture decompression, texture filtering, embossing, shadows and lighting through the use of projective textures, and BLIT with alpha transparency and depth,
- bump map processing for computing texture coordinate displacements for bump mapping, pseudo texture and texture tiling effects (**500b**), and
- indirect texture processing (**500c**).

Texture unit **500** outputs filtered texture values to the texture environment unit **600** for texture environment processing (**600a**). Texture environment unit **600** blends polygon and texture color/alpha/depth, and can also perform texture fog processing (**600b**) to achieve inverse range based fog effects. Texture environment unit **600** can provide multiple stages to perform a variety of other interesting environment-related functions based for example on color/alpha modulation, embossing, detail texturing, texture swapping, clamping, and depth blending.

Pixel engine **700** performs depth (z) compare (**700a**) and pixel blending (**700b**). In this example, pixel engine **700** stores data into an embedded (on-chip) frame buffer memory **702**. Graphics pipeline **180** may include one or more embedded DRAM memories **702** to store frame buffer and/or texture information locally. Z compares **700a** can also be performed at an earlier stage in the graphics pipeline **180** depending on the rendering mode currently in effect (e.g., z compares can be performed earlier if alpha blending is not required). The pixel engine **700** includes a copy operation

700c that periodically writes on-chip frame buffer **702** to main memory **112** for access by display/video interface unit **164**. This copy operation **700c** can also be used to copy embedded frame buffer **702** contents to textures in the main memory **112** for dynamic texture synthesis effects. Anti-aliasing and other filtering can be performed during the copy-out operation. The frame buffer output of graphics pipeline **180** (which is ultimately stored in main memory **112**) is read each frame by display/video interface unit **164**. Display controller/video interface **164** provides digital RGB pixel values for display on display **102**.

FIFO Buffers Allocated in Shared Memory

In this example, the command FIFO buffer **216** (which may be a small dual ported RAM streaming buffer) on board the graphics and audio processor **114** is too small, by itself, to do a good job of load balancing between the processor **110** and the graphics pipeline **180**. This may result in the processor **110** becoming stalled when the graphics and audio processor **114** is rendering big primitives. To remedy this problem, we use part of the main memory **112** shared between processor **110** and graphics and audio processor **114** as a command FIFO buffer **210**. The use of buffers **210** allows the main processor **110** and the graphics processor **114** to operate in parallel at close to their peak rates.

There are (at least) two methods of using buffers **210** to achieve parallelism: immediate mode and multi-buffer mode. When a single buffer **210** is attached to both the main processor **110** and the graphics processor **114**, the system **50** is operating in the immediate mode. As the main processor **110** writes graphics commands to the buffer **210**, the graphics processor **114** processes them in order. Hardware support provides flow control logic to prevent writes from overrunning reads and to wrap the read and write pointers of the buffer **210** back to the first address to provide circular buffer operation.

In the preferred embodiment, it is also possible to connect one buffer **210** to the main processor **110** while the graphics and audio processor **114** is reading from a different buffer **210(1)** in a multi-buffered mode. In this case, the buffers **210(1)**, **210(2)** are managed more like buffers than traditional FIFOs since there are no simultaneous reads and writes to any particular buffer **210**. Multi-buffer mode may be used, for example, if dynamic memory management of the buffers is desirable.

FIG. 6 shows how a portion of shared memory **112** can be allocated to provide multiple FIFO command buffers **210(1)**, **210(2)**, . . . , **210(n)** to buffer graphics (and audio) commands between the producer **110** and the consumer **114**. In the example shown in FIG. 6, each of buffers **210** receives graphics (and/or audio) commands from main processor **110**, and provides those commands to graphics and audio processor **114**. Main processor **110** allocates portions of main memory **112** for use as these buffers **210**. A buffer data structure describing a region of main memory can be allocated by an application running on main processor **110**.

Main processor **110** writes graphics commands into the buffers using a write pointer **802**. Graphics and audio processor **114** reads commands from buffers **210** using a read pointer **804**. Write pointer **802** and read pointer **804** can point to the same or different buffers. In this way, the same buffer **210** may be "attached" to both the main processor **110** and the graphics and audio processor **114** simultaneously—or different buffers may be attached to the producer and consumer at different times.

In the multi-buffering example shown in FIG. 6, the main processor **110** and the graphics and audio processor **114**

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don't necessarily agree on where "the" FIFO buffer **210** is located. In the example shown, the main processor **110** is using buffer **210(2)** as its current buffer for writing graphics commands to, whereas the graphics and audio processor **114** uses a different buffer **210(1)** as its current buffer for obtaining graphics commands. Buffers **210** can be dynamically attached to main processor **110**, graphics and audio processor **114**, or both. When a buffer is attached to the main processor **110**, the main processor will write graphics commands into the buffer **210**. In the example embodiment, there is always one and only one buffer **210** attached to main processor **110** at any one time. When a buffer **210** is attached to the graphics processor **114**, the graphics processor will read and process graphics commands from the attached buffer **210**. Only one buffer **210** can be attached to the graphics processor **114** at any one time in this example.

Independent Consumer and Producer Read and Write Pointers

Even though main processor **110** acting as graphics command producer does not need to read from the buffer **210(2)** to which it is attached, it nevertheless maintains a producer read pointer **806** in this FIG. 6 example. Similarly, even though the graphics and audio processor **114** acts as a consumer of graphics commands and therefore does not need to write to the buffer **210(1)** to which it is attached, it nevertheless maintains a consumer write pointer **808** in the FIG. 6 example. These additional pointers **806**, **808** allow the producer and consumer to independently maintain the respective buffer **210** to which it is attached.

The additional pointer **806** maintained by main processor **110** and the additional pointer **808** maintained by graphics and audio processor **114** are used to provide overlap detection. These extra pointers indicate where valid data exists within the buffer **210**. For example, the main processor **110** may treat the buffer **210(2)** to which it is attached as a circular buffer, and "wrap" its write pointer around to the "beginning" of the buffer **810** once it reaches the "end" of the buffer **812**. However, once the producer write pointer **802** encounters the producer read pointer **806**, it will cease writing to attached buffer **210(2)** to avoid overwriting valid, previously written data that the graphics and audio processor **114** has not yet read. Similarly, the graphics and audio processor consumer **114** may continue to increment its read pointer **804** as it progressively reads graphics instructions from its attached buffer **210(1)**, but will cease this incrementing procedure when the read pointer **804** encounters the write pointer **808**—since the consumer is using the write pointer as indicating the last valid data within the buffer **210(1)**.

Pointers **802**, **804**, **806**, and **808** can point to any location within buffers **210**. Valid data may thus exist anywhere within these buffers—not necessarily at the beginning or at the end of the buffer. In fact, if buffers **210** are operated in a circular mode, there is no concept of "beginning" or "end" since the end of the buffer wraps around to the beginning and the buffer is therefore a logically continuous loop.

FIG. 7 provides a simplified explanation of the independent consumer and producer read and write pointers. In the FIG. 7 example, consumer **114** uses an auto-incrementing read pointer **804** to read graphics commands from the buffer **210(1)** to which it is attached. Consumer **114** also maintains a consumer write pointer **808** that points to the last valid graphics command within buffer **210(1)**. In this example, consumer **114** will continue to read graphics commands from buffer **210(1)**, and increment its read pointer **804** after each graphics command read, until the read pointer points to

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the same location that the write pointer points to (see FIG. 8A). When the consumer **114** has incremented its read pointer **804** so that it points to the location adjacent the one that the write pointer **808** points to, the consumer "knows" that it has read all of the valid graphics commands from buffer **210(1)** and has thus emptied the buffer. This condition indicates that the consumer **114** either needs to wait for more graphics commands from producer **110** (if the buffer **210(1)** is also attached to the producer simultaneously), or it needs direction as to a different buffer **210** it should begin reading from (if multi-buffering is in effect).

Similarly, the producer **110** may continue to write graphics commands into its attached buffer **210(2)** and similarly continues to auto-increment its producer write pointer **802** until the write pointer points to the location in the buffer that is just before the location the producer read pointer **806** points to (see FIG. 8B). In this example, coincidence (actually, close proximity) between the write pointer **802** and read pointer **806** indicates that the buffer **210(2)** is full. If multi-buffering is in effect, producer **110** may at this point cease writing to buffer **210(2)** and "save" (close) it, instruct the consumer **114** to read (now or later) the contents of that "closed" buffer, and begin writing additional graphics commands to yet another buffer **210** it can allocate within main memory **112**. If the producer **110** and consumer **114** are attached to the same buffer **210**, then the producer may need to wait until the consumer reads some commands before writing any more commands to the buffer. As explained below, to avoid frequent context switching, the preferred embodiment can provides a programmable hysteresis effect that requires the buffer to be emptied by a certain amount before the producer **110** is allowed to resume writing to the buffer, and requires the buffer to be filled by a certain amount before the consumer is allowed to resume reading from the buffer.

In the preferred embodiment, the main processor **110** writes graphics commands to the buffer **210** to which it is attached in 32-byte transfers. Main processor **110** provides a write-gathering buffer/function **111** (see FIG. 4) that automatically packs graphics commands into 32-byte words. Graphics processor **114** reads graphics commands from the buffer **210** to which it is attached in 32-byte transfers.

Call Display List from FIFO Buffer

FIG. 9 shows an example technique provided by the preferred example embodiment whereby an entry in a FIFO buffer **210** can call a display list—almost as if it were a function call. In this example, a command **890** is inserted into the graphics command FIFO **210** that calls a display list **212** stored elsewhere in memory. Upon encountering this command **890**, the graphics processor **114** temporarily ceases reading graphics commands from FIFO buffer **210** and instead begins reading commands from a display list **212** stored elsewhere in main memory **112**. Upon reaching the end of the display list **212**, the graphics processor **114** returns to read the next sequential command from the graphics FIFO **210**. This technique is quite useful in allowing multiple frames to call the same display list **212** (e.g., to render geometry which remains static from frame to frame) without requiring the main processor **112** to rewrite the display list for each frame.

FIGS. 10A through 10C show how main processor **110** can automatically create a display list **212** by writing to a graphics command FIFO **210**. As shown in FIG. 10A, main processor **110** begins by writing a graphics command stream to a graphics command FIFO **210** it allocates in main memory **112**. At any point in this writing process, the main

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processor **110** can insert a "Begin Display List" command **890** into the FIFO buffer **210** that causes further writes from the main processor to be directed to a display list **212**. FIG. **10C** shows that once main processor **110** is finished writing display list **212**, it may issue an "End Display List" command that has the effect of automatically terminating the display list and redirecting the main processor command stream output back to FIFO buffer **210**. One can visualize main processor **110** providing a redirectable "fire hose" command stream output that can gush graphics commands into FIFO buffer **210**, display list **212**, and back to the same or different FIFO buffer **212**. The display lists **212** created in this manner can remain in memory **112** and reused for parts of images that remain static over several frames or frame portions.

Example Implementation Details

A processor to graphics interface unit portion **202** of the graphics and audio processor **114** command processor **200** contains the control logic for managing the FIFO buffers **210** in main memory **112**. FIG. **11** shows an example implementation. In the example shown, all CPU, **110** writes to the graphics and audio processor **114** will be routed to the main memory **112**. There are two registers that define the portion of the main memory **112** that has been allocated to the graphics FIFO **210** attached to the graphics and audio processor **114**:

- the FIFO BASE register **822**, and
- the FIFO TOP register **824**.

The FIFO_BASE register **822** defines the base address of the FIFO **210**. The FIFO_TOP register **824** defines the last address in the FIFO.

Command processor **200** keeps track of the read and write pointers for FIFO **210** in hardware. Since all data written into the FIFO are cache line sized, there is no need to keep track of valid bytes. The write pointer **808** is incremented by 32 bytes every a cache line is written to an address that is between FIFO_BASE and FIFO_TOP (5LSBs are 0). Reading of the FIFO **210** is also performed one cache line at a time. The read pointer is incremented by 32 after a cache line has been read.

Initially, read pointer **804** and write pointer **808** are initialized to point to the same location, which means the FIFO is empty (see FIG. **8A**). The FIFO full condition is (read pointer—1)=(write pointer) (see FIG. **8B**). Write pointer **808** wraps around to the FIFO_BASE **204(2)** address after it reaches FIFO_TOP. The read pointer **804** also wraps around when it reaches FIFO_TOP **824**. The read pointer **804** is controlled by the hardware to make sure it doesn't get ahead of the write pointer **808**, even in the wrap around cases. The application running on processor **110** makes sure that the write pointer **808** doesn't surpass the read pointer **804** after wrapping around.

Data from two (or more) different frames can be resident in the same FIFO **210**. A break point mechanism can be used to prevent the command processor **200** from executing the second frame before the first frame can be copied out of the embedded DRAM **702**. When FIFO break point (register) **832** is enabled, command processor **200** will not read past the CP_FIFO_BRK register. The CPU **100** can program this register **832** at the end of a frame. CPU **110** has to flush the write-buffer on the graphics and audio processor **114** and then read the FIFO write pointer **808**. It then writes the value into the FIFO break register **832** and enables the break point.

If the size of the FIFO **210** is big enough to hold all the data sent in one frame, then the FIFO full condition shown in FIG. **8B** will never occur. However, this could mean

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allocating 2 to 4 Mbytes of main memory **112** for the FIFO buffer **210**. Some application developers might not want to use that much memory for FIFO **210**. In that case, the application should implement a flow control technique. Registers **826**, **828** can be used to provide such flow control. Flow control is done in the example embodiment by having graphics and audio processor **114** generate an interrupt back to the CPU **110** when the number of cache lines in the main memory **110** surpasses FIFO_IHCNT **826**. The processor **110** will take the interrupt and spin or do other non-graphical tasks, until the number of cache-lines in the FIFO is less than a FIFO_LOCNT **828**. The reason for providing such a hysteresis effect is that interrupt overhead is high and one does not want to bounce in and out of the interrupt routine just by checking that the contents of the FIFO **210** has gone below the "high water mark". Interrupts can also be generated when the FIFO count goes below the LOCNT **828**. This way, the application can perform other tasks and return when interrupted.

Example FIFO Buffer Allocation

In the preferred embodiment, the graphics API declares a static GXFifoObj structure internally. This structure is initialized when GXInit is called:

```
GXFifoObj* GXInit (void* base, u32 size);
```

The FIFO base pointer is aligned to 32b in the preferred embodiment. The application is responsible for allocating the memory for the FIFO. The size parameter for allocation is the size of the FIFO in bytes (the minimum FIFO size is 64 KB, and size is a multiple of 32B). By default, GXInit sets up the FIFO for immediate mode graphics; that is: both the CPU **10** and graphics processor **114** are attached to the FIFO, the read and write pointers are initialized to the base pointer, and high and low water marks are enabled. GXInit returns a pointer to the initialized GXFifoObj to the application.

If the application wants to operate in multi-buffered mode, then additional FIFOs must be allocated. Any number of such additional FIFO buffers **210** can be allocated. The application allocates the memory for each additional FIFO and initializes a GXFifoObj as well. The following example functions can be used to initialize the GXFifoObj:

```
void GXInitFifoBase(
    GXFifoObj*      fifo,
    void*           base,
    u32             size);

void GXInitFifoPtrs(
    GXFifoObj*      fifo,
    void*           read_ptr,
    void*           write_ptr);

void GXInitFifoLimits(
    GXFifoObj*      fifo,
    u32             hi_water_mark,
    u32             lo_water_mark);
```

Normally, the application only needs to initialize the FIFO read and write pointers to the base address of the FIFO. Once initialized, the system hardware will control the read and write pointers automatically.

Attaching and Saving FIFOs

Once a FIFO has been initialized, it can be attached to the CPU **110** or the graphics processor **114** or both. Only one FIFO may be attached to either the CPU **110** or graphics processor **114** at the same time. Once a FIFO is attached to the CPU **110**, the CPU may issue GX commands to the

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FIFO. When a FIFO is attached to the graphics processor **114**, it will be enabled to read graphics commands from the FIFO. The following example functions attach FIFOs:

```
void GXSetCPUFifo(GXFifoObj* fifo );
```

```
void GXSetGPFifo(GXFifoObj* fifo );
```

```
GXFifoObj* GXGetCPUFifo ( void );
```

```
GXFifoObj* GXGetGPFifo ( void );
```

One may also inquire which FIFO objects are currently attached with these example functions:

```
GXFifoObj* GXGetCPUFifo ( void );
```

```
GXFifoObj* GXGetGPFifo ( void );
```

When in multi-buffer mode, and the CPU **110** is finished writing GX commands, the FIFO should be “saved” before switching to a new FIFO. The following example function “saves” the CPU FIFO: void GXSaveCPUFifo (FXFifoObj* fifo);

When a FIFO is saved, the CPU write-gather buffer **111** is flushed to make sure all graphics commands are written to main memory **112**. In addition, the current FIFO read and write pointers are stored in the GXFifoObj structure.

Notice that there is no save function for the graphics processor **114**. Once a graphics processor is attached, graphics commands will continue to be read until either:

- the FIFO is empty,
- a FIFO breakpoint is encountered, or
- the GP is preempted.

FIFO Status

The following example functions can be used to read the status of a FIFO and the GP:

```
void GXGetFifoStatus(
    GXFifoObj*      fifo,
    GXBool*         overhi,
    GXBool*         underlo,
    u32*            fifo_cnt,
    GXBool*         cpu_write,
    GXBool*         gp_read,
    GXBool*         fifowrap );
void GXGetGPStatus(
    GXBool*         overhi,
    GXBool*         underlow,
    GXBool*         readIdle,
    GXBool*         cmdIdle,
    GXBool*         brkpt );
```

GXGetFifoStatus gets the status of a specific FIFO. If the FIFO is currently attached to the CPU **110**, the parameter cpu_write will be GX_TRUE. When the FIFO is currently attached to the graphics processor **114**, the parameter gp_read will be GX_TRUE. When a FIFO is attached to either the CPU **110** or the graphics processor **114**, the status will be read directly from the hardware’s state. If the FIFO is not attached, the status will be read from the GXFifoObj. GXGetFifoStatus reports whether the specified FIFO has over flowed or has enough room to be written to. In general, the hardware cannot detect when a FIFO overflows, i.e., when the amount of data exceeds the size of the FIFO.

Although there is no general way to detect FIFO overflows, the hardware can detect when the CPU write pointer reaches the top of the FIFO. If this condition has occurred, the “fifowrap” argument will return GX_TRUE. The “fifowrap” argument can be used to detect FIFO overflows if the CPU’s write pointer is always initialized to the base of the FIFO. “fifowrap” is set if the FIFO is currently attached to the CPU **110**.

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GXGetGPStatus can be used to get the status of the graphics processor **114** (regardless of the FIFO that attached to it). The minimum requirement to meet before attaching a new graphics processor FIFO is to wait for the graphics processor **114** to be idle (but additional constraints may also exist). The undertow and overhi statuses indicate where the write pointer is, relative to the high and low water marks.

Example FIFO Flow Control

When a FIFO is attached to both the CPU and GP (immediate mode), care must be taken so that the CPU **110** stops writing commands when the FIFO is too full. A “high water mark” defines how full the FIFO can get before graphics commands will no longer be written to the FIFO. In the preferred embodiment, there may be up to 16 KB of buffered graphics commands in the CPU, so it is recommended to set the high water mark to the (FIFO size—16 KB).

When the high water mark is encountered, the program will be suspended, but other interrupt-driven tasks such as audio will still be service. The programmer may also wish to specify which particular thread in a multi-threaded program should be suspended.

A “low water mark” defines how empty the FIFO must get after reaching a “high water mark” before the program (or thread) is allowed to continue. The low water mark is recommended to be set to (FIFO size/2). The low water mark prevents frequent context switching of the program, since it does not need to poll some register or constantly receive overflow interrupts when the amount of new command data stays close to the high water mark.

When in multi-buffered mode, the high and low water marks are disabled. When a FIFO is attached to the CPU **110**, and the CPU writes more commands than the FIFO will hold, the write pointer will be wrapped from the last address back to the base address. Previous graphics commands in the FIFO will be overwritten. It is possible to detect when the write pointer wraps over the top of the FIFO (which indicates an overflow only if the FIFO write pointer was initialized to the base of the FIFO before commands were sent). See GXGetFifoStatus above.

In order to prevent FIFO (buffer) overflow in multi-buffered mode, a software-based checking scheme may be used. The program running on main processor **110** should keep its own counter of the buffer size, and before any group of commands is added to the buffer, the program may check and see if there is room. If room is available, the size of the group may be added to the buffer size. If room is not available, the buffer may be flushed and a new one allocated.

Using Display List Calls

To call a display list from a FIFO buffer **110** in the preferred embodiment, the application first allocates space in memory in which to store the display list. Once the memory area has been set up, the application can then call for example:

```
void GXBeginDisplayList (
    void                *list
    u32                  size);
```

Where the “list” argument is the starting address for where the display list will be stored and the “size” argument indicates the number of bytes available in the allocated space for writing display list commands to allow the system to check for overflow.

Once “GXBeginDisplayList” has been called, further GX commands are written to the display list instead of to the normal command FIFO. The “GXEndDisplayList” com-

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mand signals the end of the display list, and it returns the command stream to the FIFO to which it had been directed previously. The "GXEndDisplayList" command also returns the actual size of the created display list as a multiple of 32 bytes in the example embodiment.

In the example embodiment, display lists cannot be nested. This means that once a GXBeginDisplayList has been issued, it is illegal to issue either another GXBeginDisplayList or a GXCallDisplayList command until a GXEndDisplayList command comes along. However, in alternate embodiments it would be possible to provide display list nesting to any desired nesting level.

Example Graphics FIFO Functions

The following example functions provide management of the graphics FIFO:

GXSetFifoBase:		
Argument:		
u32	Base Ptr;	//Set base address of fifo in main memory.
u32	Size;	//Size of the fifo in bytes. (a 32 bytes multiple).
GXBool	Set Defaults	//Setup default fifo state.

Sets the graphics fifo limits. This function is called at initialization time. The fifo address can not be changed unless the graphics pipe is flushed. If SetDefault flag is set, then the fifo is reset (i.e. read/write pointers at fifo base) and interrupts are disabled. By default, the high water mark is set to $\frac{2}{3}$ of the size and the low water mark is set to $\frac{1}{3}$ of the size.

GXSetFifoLimits:		
Argument		
u32	HiWaterMark;	//Hi-water mark for the fifo.
u32	LoWaterMark;	//Low water mark.
u32	RdBreakMark;	//Read pointer break point.

This function sets the fifo limits. When the read pointer goes below low water mark or when write pointer goes above high water mark, the graphics hardware will interrupt the CPU. The RdBreakMark is used for setting read pointer break point.

GXSetInterrupts:		
Argument		
GXBool	Underflow;	//Enable/Disable low water mark interrupt.
GXBool	Overflow;	//Enable/Disable high water mark interrupt.
GXBool	BreakPoint;	//Enable/Disable fifo read break point.

Enables or disables fifo related interrupts. The BreakPoint is a feature that can be used to halt fifo reads by the CP while a previous frame is still being copied.

GXCLEARInterrupts:		
Argument:		
GXBool	Underflow;	//Clear low water mark interrupt
GXBool	Overflow;	//Clear high water mark interrupt.
GXBool	BreakPoint	//Clear fifo read break point.

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Clears a pending interrupt.

GXSetFifoPtrs:		
Argument:		
u32	WritePtr;	//Sets write pointer for fifo.
u32	ReadPtr;	//Sets read pointer.

Sets fifo read and write pointers. These pointers are maintained by the hardware. This function will override the hardware values (e.g., for display list compilation).

GXGetFifoStatus:		
Argument:		
GXBool	*Underflow;	//Fifo count is below low water mark.
GXBool	*Overflow;	//Fifo count is above high water mark.
GXBool	*BreakPoint;	//Fifo read pointer is at break point.
u32	*FifoCount;	//Number of cachelines (32 bytes) in Fifo.

Returns fifo status and count.

Example Display List Functions

A display list is an array of pre-compiled commands and data for the graphics pipe. The following example commands are inserted into a FIFO buffer **210** to manipulate display lists.

GXBeginDisplayList:		
Argument:		
void*	BasePtr;	//Address of a buffer in for storing display list data.
u32	nBytes;	//Size of the buffer.

This function creates and starts a display list. The API is put in display list mode. All API functions, except any of the display list functions, following this call until EndDisplayList, send their data and commands to the display list buffer instead of graphics pipe. A display list can not be nested in this example, i.e., no display list functions can be called between a BeginDisplayList and EndDisplayList. The memory for the display list is allocated by the application.

GXEndDisplayList:		
Argument:		
None.		
Return:		
u32	nBytes	//Number of bytes used for the display list.

This function ends currently opened display object and puts the system back in immediate mode.

GXCallDisplayList:	
Argument:	
void*	BasePtr; //Address of a buffer in for storing display list data.
u32	aBytes; //Size of the buffer

This function executes the display list.

Example Register Formats:

The following table shows example registers in the command processor **200** that are addressable by CPU **110**:

Register Name	Bit Fields:	Description
CP_STATUS Register 834	0:	FIFO overflow (fifo_count > FIFO_HICNT)
	1:	FIFO underflow (fifo_count < FIFO_LOCNT)
	2:	FIFO read unit idle
	3:	CP idle
	4:	FIFO reach break point (cleared by disable FIFO break point)
CP_ENABLE Register 836	0:	Enable FIFO reads, reset value is "0" disable
	1:	FIFO break point enable bit, reset value is "0" disable
	2:	FIFO overflow interrupt enable, reset value is "0" disable
	3:	FIFO underflow interrupt enable, reset value is "0" disable
	4:	FIFO write pointer increment enable, reset value is "1" enable
	5:	FIFO break point interrupt enable, reset value is "0" disable
CP_CLEAR Register 838	0:	clear FIFO overflow interrupt
	1:	clear FIFO underflow interrupt
CP_STM_LOW Register 840	7:0	bits 7:0 of the Streaming Buffer low water mark in 32 bytes increment, default (reset) value is "0x0000"
CP_FIFO_BASEL 822	15:5	bits 15:5 of the FIFO base address in memory
CP_FIFO_BASE 822	9:0	bits 25:16 of the FIFO base address in memory
CP_FIFO_TOPL 824	15:5	bits 15:5 of the FIFO top address in memory
CP_FIFO_TOPH 824	9:0	bits 25:16 of the FIFO top address in memory
CP_FIFO_HICNTL 826	15:5	bits 15:5 of the FIFO high water count
CP_FIFO_HICNTH 826	9:0	bits 25:16 of the FIFO high water count
CP_FIFO_LOCNTRL 828	15:5	bits 15:5 of the FIFO low water count
CP_FIFO_LOCNTH 828	9:0	bits 25:16 of the FIFO low water count
CP_FIFO_COUNTL 830	15:5	bits 15:5 of the FIFO_COUNT (entries currently in FIFO)
CP_FIFO_COUNTH 830	9:0	bits 25:16 of the FIFO_COUNT (entries currently in FIFO)
CP_FIFO_WPTRL 808	15:5	bits 15:5 of the FIFO write pointer
CP_FIFO_WPTRH 808	9:0	bits 25:15 of the FIFO write pointer
CP_FIFO_RPTRL 804	15:5	bits 15:5 of the FIFO read pointer
CP_FIFO_RPTRH 804	9:0	bits 25:15 of the FIFO read pointer
CP_FIFO_BRKL 832	15:5	bits 15:5 of the FIFO read address break point
CP_FIFO_BRKH 832	9:0	bits 9:0 of the FIFO read address break point

Other Example Compatible Implementations

Certain of the above-described system components **50** could be implemented as other than the home video game console configuration described above. For example, one could run graphics application or other software written for system **50** on a platform with a different configuration that emulates system **50** or is otherwise compatible with it. If the other platform can successfully emulate, simulate and/or provide some or all of the hardware and software resources of system **50**, then the other platform will be able to successfully execute the software.

As one example, an emulator may provide a hardware and/or software configuration (platform) that is different from the hardware and/or software configuration (platform) of system **50**. The emulator system might include software and/or hardware components that emulate or simulate some or all of hardware and/or software components of the system for which the application software was written. For example, the emulator system could comprise a general purpose digital computer such as a personal computer, which executes a software emulator program that simulates the hardware and/or firmware of system **50**.

Some general purpose digital computers (e.g., IBM or Macintosh personal computers and compatibles) are now equipped with 3D graphics cards that provide 3D graphics pipelines compliant with OpenGL, DirectX or other standard 3D graphics command APIs. They may also be equipped with stereophonic sound cards that provide high quality stereophonic sound based on a standard set of sound commands. Such multimedia-hardware-equipped personal computers running emulator software may have sufficient performance to approximate the graphics and sound performance of system **50**. Emulator software controls the hardware resources on the personal computer platform to simulate the processing, 3D graphics, sound, peripheral and other capabilities of the home video game console platform for which the game programmer wrote the game software.

FIG. 12A illustrates an example overall emulation process using a host platform **1201**, an emulator component **1303**, and a game software executable binary image provided on a storage medium **62**. Host **1201** may be a general or special purpose digital computing device such as, for example, a personal computer, a video game console, or any other platform with sufficient computing power. Emulator **1303** may be software and/or hardware that runs on host platform **1201**, and provides a real-time conversion of commands, data and other information from storage medium **62** into a form that can be processed by host **1201**. For example, emulator **1303** fetches "source" binary-image program instructions intended for execution by system **50** from storage medium **62** and converts these program instructions to a target format that can be executed or otherwise processed by host **1201**.

As one example, in the case where the software is written for execution on a platform using an IBM PowerPC or other specific processor and the host **1201** is a personal computer using a different (e.g., Intel) processor, emulator **1303** fetches one or a sequence of binary-image program instructions from storage medium **1305** and converts these program instructions to one or more equivalent Intel binary-image program instructions. The emulator **1303** also fetches and/or generates graphics commands and audio commands intended for processing by the graphics and audio processor **114**, and converts these commands into a format or formats that can be processed by hardware and/or software graphics and audio processing resources available on host **1201**. As one example, emulator **1303** may convert these commands

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into commands that can be processed by specific graphics and/or or sound hardware of the host **1201** (e.g., using standard DirectX, OpenGL and/or sound APIs).

Certain emulators of system **50** might simply “stub” (i.e., ignore) some or all of the buffering and flow control techniques described above since they might have much more memory resources than the example hardware implementation described above. Such emulators will typically respond to requests for buffer allocation by allocating memory resources, but might provide different flow control processing. Status and flow control requests as described above could be emulated by maintaining an emulated state of the hardware, and using that state to respond to the status requests.

An emulator **1303** used to provide some or all of the features of the video game system described above may also be provided with a graphic user interface (GUI) that simplifies or automates the selection of various options and screen modes for games run using the emulator. In one example, such an emulator **1303** may further include enhanced functionality as compared with the host platform for which the software was originally intended.

FIG. **12B** illustrates an emulation host system **1201** suitable for use with emulator **1303**. System **1201** includes a processing unit **1203** and a system memory **1205**. A system bus **1207** couples various system components including system memory **1205** to processing unit **1203**. System bus **1207** may be any of several types of bus structures including a memory bus or memory controller, a peripheral bus, and a local bus using any of a variety of bus architectures. System memory **1207** includes read only memory (ROM) **1252** and random access memory (RAM) **1254**. A basic input/output system (BIOS) **1256**, containing the basic routines that help to transfer information between elements within personal computer system **1201**, such as during start-up, is stored in the ROM **1252**. System **1201** further includes various drives and associated computer-readable media. A hard disk drive **1209** reads from and writes to a (typically fixed) magnetic hard disk **1211**. An additional (possible optional) magnetic disk drive **1213** reads from and writes to a removable “floppy” or other magnetic disk **1215**. An optical disk drive **1217** reads from and, in some configurations, writes to a removable optical disk **1219** such as a CD ROM or other optical media. Hard disk drive **1209** and optical disk drive **1217** are connected to system bus **1207** by a hard disk drive interface **1221** and an optical drive interface **1225**, respectively. The drives and their associated computer-readable media provide nonvolatile storage of computer-readable instructions, data structures, program modules, game programs and other data for personal computer system **1201**. In other configurations, other types of computer-readable media that can store data that is accessible by a computer (e.g., magnetic cassettes, flash memory cards, digital video disks, Bernoulli cartridges, random access memories (RAMs), read only memories (ROMs) and the like) may also be used.

A number of program modules including emulator **1303** may be stored on the hard disk **1211**, removable magnetic disk **1215**, optical disk **1219** and/or the ROM **1252** and/or the RAM **1254** of system memory **1205**. Such program modules may include an operating system providing graphics and sound APIs, one or more application programs, other program modules, program data and game data. A user may enter commands and information into personal computer system **1201** through input devices such as a keyboard **1227**, pointing device **1229**, microphones, joysticks, game controllers, satellite dishes, scanners, or the like. These and

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other input devices can be connected to processing unit **1203** through a serial port interface **1231** that is coupled to system bus **1207**, but may be connected by other interfaces, such as a parallel port, game port Fire wire bus or a universal serial bus (USB). A monitor **1233** or other type of display device is also connected to system bus **1207** via an interface, such as a video adapter **1235**.

System **1201** may also include a modem **1154** or other network interface means for establishing communications over a network **1152** such as the Internet. Modem **1154**, which may be internal or external, is connected to system bus **123** via serial port interface **1231**. A network interface **1156** may also be provided for allowing system **1201** to communicate with a remote computing device **1150** (e.g., another system **1201**) via a local area network **1158** (or such communication may be via wide area network **1152** or other communications path such as dial-up or other communications means). System **1201** will typically include other peripheral output devices, such as printers and other standard peripheral devices.

In one example, video adapter **1235** may include a 3D graphics pipeline chip set providing fast 3D graphics rendering in response to 3D graphics commands issued based on a standard 3D graphics application programmer interface such as Microsoft’s DirectX 7.0 or other version. A set of stereo loudspeakers **1237** is also connected to system bus **1207** via a sound generating interface such as a conventional “sound card” providing hardware and embedded software support for generating high quality stereophonic sound based on sound commands provided by bus **1207**. These hardware capabilities allow system **1201** to provide sufficient graphics and sound speed performance to play software stored in storage medium **62**.

All documents referenced above are hereby incorporated by reference.

While the invention has been described in connection with what is presently considered to be the most practical and preferred embodiment, it is to be understood that the invention is not to be limited to the disclosed embodiment, but on the contrary, is intended to cover various modifications and equivalent arrangements included within the scope of the appended claims.

We claim:

1. A 3D graphics system including:

- a producer that outputs graphics commands, said producer comprising a microprocessor;
 - a consumer that consumes the graphics commands outputted by the producer, said consumer comprising graphics hardware including a cache/command processor and pipelined graphics components that transform and rasterize polygons for display; and
 - a shared memory coupled to the producer and to the consumer, the shared memory having plural buffers allocated therein, said plural buffers each receiving and temporarily storing graphics commands outputted by the producer for delivery to the consumer, at least some of said commands comprising polygon vertex commands, wherein the producer and the consumer are capable of accessing each said buffer independently of one another,
- wherein said buffers store inline commands calling display lists comprising further graphics commands including polygon vertex commands for execution by said graphics hardware, said display lists being stored elsewhere in said shared memory,
- wherein said polygon vertex commands are provided to said pipelined graphics components, said pipelined

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graphics components generating images based at least in part on said polygon vertex commands.

2. A graphics system as in claim 1 wherein the producer and the consumer have independent read and/or write pointers.

3. The graphics system of claim 2 wherein the consumer selectively increments the consumer write pointer in response to the producer writing to the active buffer.

4. The graphics system of claim 3 wherein the consumer increments the consumer read pointer as the consumer reads from an active buffer, and suspends reading from the active buffer when the incremented consumer read pointer has a predetermined relationship with the consumer write pointer.

5. A graphics system as in claim 1 wherein the shared memory stores plural variable sized buffers disposed at selected locations within the shared memory.

6. A graphics system as in claim 1 wherein the shared memory stores plural buffers each of which can be independently accessed by the producer and/or the consumer.

7. The graphics system of claim 6 wherein the consumer is incapable of writing to at least an active one of the plural buffers, but maintains, independently of the producer, a write pointer for at least said active one of the plural buffers.

8. The graphics system of claim 6 wherein the producer provides a producer read pointer and a producer write pointer associated with a first of said plural buffers, and the consumer independently maintains a consumer read pointer and a consumer write pointer associated with said first of said plural buffers.

9. The graphics system of claim 6 wherein a first of the plural buffers includes a read command controlling the consumer to consume the display list which the producer has stored elsewhere within the shared memory, and to resume consuming graphics commands from the first buffer after consuming the display list stored elsewhere.

10. The graphics system of claim 9 wherein the read command specifies a starting address and a length of the display list, the read command controlling the consumer to read the display list of the specified length beginning at the specified starting address.

11. The graphics system of claim 1 wherein at least one of said buffers provides circular first-in-first-out access.

12. The graphics system of claim 1 wherein at least one of said buffers provides first-in-first-out access.

13. The graphics system of claim 1 wherein at least one of the buffers can be selectively attached to both the producer and the consumer simultaneously.

14. The graphics system of claim 1 wherein at least one of the buffers is attached to the producer while a further of said plural buffers is attached to the consumer.

15. The system of claim 1 wherein at least one of the buffers is first attached to the producer, and is subsequently detached from the producer and attached to the consumer.

16. The system of claim 1 wherein at least one of the buffers can be attached to the producer, the consumer, or both.

17. The system of claim 1 wherein only one of said plural buffers is attached to the producer at a time.

18. The system of claim 1 wherein only one of said plural buffers is attached to the consumer at a time.

19. The system of claim 1 wherein each of the buffers has a maximum size of 16 KB.

20. The system of claim 1 wherein the producer sets the size of the buffers.

21. The system of claim 1 wherein at least one of the buffers is dynamically sized to store a frame of graphics commands.

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22. The system of claim 1 wherein the producer declares the plural buffers by issuing graphics buffer initialization commands specifying buffer starting address and buffer length.

23. The system of claim 1 wherein at least one of the buffers has a length that is a multiple of 32 bytes and has a minimum size of 64 KB.

24. The graphics system of claim 1 wherein the producer may write a breakpoint into at least one of the buffers, the consumer suspending consumption of graphics commands upon encountering the breakpoint.

25. The system of claim 1 wherein at least one of the buffers has an overflow status indicator indicating when the producer overwrites a location therein.

26. The system of claim 1 further including a hardware status register that indicates the status of at least one of the plural buffers.

27. The system of claim 26 wherein the status register includes the following parameters:

- position of a producer write pointer relative to buffer full and buffer empty;
- buffer overflow;
- whether the producer is currently writing into the at least one buffer; and
- whether the consumer is currently reading from the at least one buffer.

28. The system of claim 1 further including a hardware controller coupled to at least one of the plural buffers, the hardware controller providing flow control logic to prevent writes from overrunning reads.

29. The system of claim 1 further including a hardware controller coupled to at least one of the buffers, the hardware controller wrapping read and write pointers from a last location to a first location thereof.

30. The system of claim 1 wherein the producer dynamically allocates said buffers within the shared memory.

31. A 3D graphics system including:

- a memory shared between a producer and a consumer;
- a storage buffer allocated within said shared memory, said storage buffer receiving and temporarily storing graphics commands;
- a producer that writes graphics commands into said buffer, said producer maintaining a producer write pointer and a producer read pointer associated with the buffer, said producer comprising a microprocessor; and
- a consumer that consumes the graphics commands stored within the buffer, said consumer comprising graphics hardware including a cache/command processor and pipelined graphics components that transform and rasterize polygons for display, the consumer maintaining a consumer write pointer that is independent of the producer write pointer, and a consumer read pointer that is independent of the producer read pointer, wherein said buffer stores an inline command calling a display command list stored elsewhere in said shared memory for execution by said consumer, said display command list comprising polygon vertex commands that control said pipelined graphics components to draw polygons for display.

32. The graphics system of claim 31 wherein the consumer increments the consumer read pointer each time the consumer consumes from the buffer, and suspends consumption from the buffer when the consumer read pointer has a predetermined relationship with the consumer write pointer.

33. The graphics system of claim 31 wherein the consumer selectively auto-increments the consumer write pointer in response to the producer writing to the buffer.

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34. A graphics system including:

a storage buffer that receives and temporarily stores graphics commands;

a producer that writes graphics commands into said buffer, said producer maintaining a producer write pointer and a producer read pointer associated with the buffer; and

a consumer that consumes the graphics commands stored within the buffer, the consumer maintaining a consumer write pointer that is independent of the producer write pointer, and a consumer read pointer that is independent of the producer read pointer,

wherein the producer sends the consumer a configuration command specifying whether the consumer should auto-increment the consumer write pointer in response to producer writes to the buffer.

35. In a 3D graphics system including a graphics command producer that writes graphics commands into a buffer based on a producer write pointer, said command producer allocating said buffer within a memory shared by said command producer and a graphics command consumer, the graphics command consumer reading graphics commands from the buffer based on a consumer read pointer, said graphics command consumer comprising graphics hardware including a cache/command processor and pipelined graphics components that transform and rasterize polygons for display,

an improvement comprising:

a consumer write pointer independently maintained by the consumer, the consumer write pointer indicating the extent of valid data the producer has written into said buffer, the consumer ceasing to consume graphics commands from the buffer upon the consumer read pointer having a predetermined relationship to the consumer write pointer,

wherein said buffer stores an inline command calling a list of graphics commands stored elsewhere in said shared memory for execution by said consumer, said called list of graphics commands including polygon vertex commands that command said pipelined graphics components to draw polygons for display.

36. In an interactive 3D graphics system including a processor module executing an application, a graphics processor module and at least one memory coupled to the processor module and to the graphics processor module, a method of controlling the flow of graphics commands between the processor module and the graphics processor module comprising:

dynamically establishing, under control of the application, a variable number of FIFO buffers in the memory, the application specifying the size of each of the FIFO buffers;

the application controlling the processor module to write graphics commands into at least a first of the plurality of FIFO buffers; and

the application sending graphics commands to the graphics processor module that control the graphics processor module to read, independently of said processor writes, the graphics command from the first FIFO buffer,

wherein said application stores, into at least one of the FIFO buffers, an inline command calling a list of graphics commands stored elsewhere in said memory for execution by said graphics module, said called list of graphics commands including polygon vertex commands that command said graphics module to draw polygons for display.

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37. The graphics system of claim 36 wherein the processor module provides a processor module read pointer and a processor module write pointer associated with a first of said plurality of buffers, and the graphics processor module independently maintains a graphics processor module read pointer and a graphics processor module write pointer associated with said first buffer.

38. The graphics system of claim 36 wherein the graphics processor module increments the graphics processor module read pointer each time the graphics processor module reads from the first buffer, and suspends reading from the first buffer when the graphics processor module read pointer has a predetermined relationship with the graphics processor module write pointer.

39. The graphics system of claim 36 wherein the graphics processor module selectively auto-increments the graphics processor module write pointer in response to the processor module writing to the first buffer.

40. The graphics system of claim 36 wherein the graphics processor module maintains, independently of the processor module, a write pointer for at least an active one of the plurality of buffers.

41. The method of claim 36 further including setting a breakpoint, and at least temporarily suspending the graphics processor module from reading a buffer in response to the graphics processor module encountering the breakpoint.

42. The method of claim 36 wherein the selectively controlling step includes suspending the processor module from writing to the buffer upon detection of an overflow.

43. A 3D graphics system including:

a shared memory that receives and temporarily stores graphics commands;

a producer that writes commands into a buffer within said shared memory, said producer comprising a microprocessor, said commands including a first set of graphics commands and a command referencing a second set of graphics commands stored elsewhere within said shared memory; and

a consumer that consumes the first set of graphics commands stored within the buffer and, in response to encountering the referencing command, consumes the second set of graphics commands referenced thereby and subsequently returns to the buffer to consume additional commands therefrom, said consumer comprising graphics hardware including a cache/command processor and further graphics pipeline components that transform and rasterize polygons for display,

wherein said buffer stores an inline command calling a list of display commands stored elsewhere in said shared memory for execution by said consumer, said called list of graphics commands including polygon vertex commands that command said graphics pipeline components to draw polygons for display.

44. The graphics system of claim 43 wherein the buffer is a circular buffer.

45. The graphics system of claim 43 wherein the consumer is incapable of writing to the buffer, but maintains, independently of the producer, a write pointer for the buffer.

46. A graphics system including:

a storage device that receives and temporarily stores graphics commands;

a producer that writes commands into a buffer within said storage device, said commands including a first set of graphics commands and a command referencing a second set of graphics commands stored elsewhere within said storage device; and

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a consumer that consumes the first set of graphics commands stored within the buffer and, in response to encountering the referencing command, consumes the second set of graphics commands referenced thereby and subsequently returns to the buffer to consume additional commands therefrom,

wherein the referencing command specifies a starting address of a display list, the referencing command controlling the consumer to read the display list beginning at the specified starting address.

47. A 3D graphics system including:

a storage device that receives and temporarily stores graphics commands;

a producer that writes commands into a buffer within said storage device, said commands including a first set of graphics commands and a command referencing a second set of graphics commands stored elsewhere within said storage device; and

a consumer that consumes the first set of graphics commands stored within the buffer and, in response to encountering the referencing command, consumes the second set of graphics commands referenced thereby and subsequently returns to the buffer to consume additional commands therefrom,

wherein the referencing command specifies a number of data units the consumer is to consume.

48. In a 3D graphics system, a method for passing graphics commands from a producer of graphics commands, said producer comprising a microprocessor, to a consumer of graphics commands, said consumer comprising graphics hardware including a cache/command processor and further graphics pipeline components that transform and rasterize polygons for display, the method comprising:

creating plural variable sized buffers disposed at variable locations within a memory coupled to the producer and the consumer,

temporarily storing graphics commands produced by the producer in the variable sized buffers;

writing, into at least one said buffers, an inline command calling a list of display commands stored elsewhere in the memory;

consuming the graphics commands from the variable sized buffers with the consumer by accessing the buffers independently of the producer;

executing the list of display commands in response to said inline command within said at least one buffer, said list of display commands including polygon vertex commands specifying vertices of polygons to draw within a graphics image;

after consuming the list of display commands, accessing further graphics command within said buffer having said inline command calling said display list written therein; generating at least a part of said graphics image based at least in part on the consumed graphics commands and said executed display list; and outputting the generated part of said graphics image to a display.

49. The method of claim 48 wherein the consumer is incapable of writing to at least an active one of the plural buffers, and the method further includes the consumer maintaining, independently of the producer, a write pointer for at least said active one of the plural buffers.

50. The method of claim 48 further including maintaining, with the producer, a producer read pointer and a producer write pointer associated with a first of said plural buffers, and the independently maintaining, with the consumer, a consumer read pointer and a consumer write pointer associated with said first of said plural buffers.

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51. The method of claim 50 further including incrementing, with the consumer, a consumer read pointer as the consumer reads from an active buffer, and suspending reading from the active buffer when the incremented consumer read pointer has a predetermined relationship with the consumer write pointer.

52. The method of claim 51 further including selectively incrementing the consumer write pointer in response to the producer writing to the active buffer.

53. The method of claim 48 wherein a first of the plural buffers includes a read command, and the method further includes:

(a) consuming the display list the producer has stored elsewhere within the memory in response to encountering the read command, and

(b) resuming consumption of graphics commands from the first buffer after consuming the display list stored elsewhere.

54. The method of claim 53 wherein the read command specifies a starting address and a length of the display list, and step (a) includes controlling the consumer to read the display list of the specified length beginning at the specified starting address.

55. The method of claim 48 wherein a first of the plural buffers provides circular first-in-first-out access.

56. The method of claim 48 wherein a first of the plural buffers provides first-in-first-out access.

57. The method of claim 48 further including selectively attaching any of the plural buffers to both the producer and the consumer simultaneously.

58. The method of claim 48 further including attaching a first of the plural buffers to the producer and attaching a second of the plural buffers to the consumer.

59. The method of claim 48 further including attaching a first of the plural buffers to the producer, and subsequently detaching the first buffer from the producer and attaching the first buffer to the consumer.

60. The method of claim 48 further including attaching any of the plural buffers to the producer, the consumer, or both.

61. The method of claim 48 further including attaching only one of the plural buffers to the producer at a time.

62. The method of claim 48 further including attaching only one of the plural buffers to the consumer at a time.

63. A method for producing 3D images including:

maintaining a producer write pointer and a producer read pointer associated with a buffer allocated within a memory shared by the producer and a consumer;

writing graphics commands, including an inline display list call, into the buffer, and updating at least the write pointer in response to the writing;

maintaining, in association with the buffer, a consumer write pointer that is independent of the producer write pointer, and a consumer read pointer that is independent of the producer read pointer;

the consumer consuming the graphics commands stored within the buffer, including accessing a display list comprising polygon vertex graphics commands stored elsewhere within said memory in response to encountering said inline display list call within said buffer, updating at least the read pointer in response to the consuming, and, after executing the display list, accessing and consuming further graphics command disposed sequentially within said buffer after the inline display list call; producing at least a part of a graphics image at

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least in part in response to the consuming and executing step; and outputting the generated part of said graphics image to a display.

64. A method of producing 3D images including:
 writing commands into a buffer within a shared memory, 5
 said commands including a first set of graphics commands and a command referring to a display list stored elsewhere within said shared memory;
 consuming the first set of graphics commands stored within the buffer; 10
 in response to encountering the referring command, executing polygon vertex commands in the display list and subsequently automatically returning to consume additional commands from the buffer; generating at least a part of an image at least in part in response to the consumed first set of graphics commands and said display list; and outputting the generated part of said graphics image to a display. 15
65. A method of supplying 3D graphics commands to a 3D graphics command consumer comprising: 20
 (a) storing a command sequence beginning at a predetermined storage location;
 (b) supplying a graphics command stream through a FIFO buffer to the consumer, the stream including at least one command that refers the command consumer to a display list comprising polygon vertex commands stored beginning at the predetermined storage location; and 25
 (c) the graphics command consumer executing said display list polygon vertex commands beginning at the predetermined storage location in response to encountering said at least one command that refers the command consumer to the display list, 30
 wherein the producer returns to access additional portions of said graphics command stream from the FIFO buffer after consuming the command sequence beginning at the predetermined storage location; wherein the graphics command consumer executes said display list polygon vertex commands to generate at least a part of a graphics image and outputting the generated part of said graphics image to a display. 40
66. A method of efficiently generating successive graphics images on a display device, comprising:
 writing commands into a memory buffer, said commands including at least a first set of graphics commands and at least one calling command that calls a further, prestored list of display commands; 45
 consuming, with a 3D graphics engine, at least some of the first set of graphics commands to generate at least a portion of a first image in a frame buffer memory;

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in response to encountering the calling command, reading the stored display commands in the display list with the 3D graphics engine and responsively generating at least a further portion of said first image in said frame buffer memory;

the 3D graphics engine subsequently automatically returning from said called display list to consume additional ones of the first set of graphics commands stored in said memory buffer to generate at least an additional portion of the first graphics display image in the frame buffer memory;

displaying the first graphics display image on the display device;

writing additional commands into the same or different memory buffer, said additional commands including at least a second set of graphics commands and at least one calling command that calls the same further, prestored list of display commands;

consuming, with the 3D graphics engine, at least some of the second set of graphics commands to generate at least a portion of a second image in the same or different frame buffer memory;

in response to encountering the calling command, reading the commands in said prestored display list with the 3D graphics engine and responsively generating at least a further portion of said second image in said same or different frame buffer memory, thereby reusing said further, stored list of display commands to generate said second image;

subsequently automatically returning from said called display list to consume, with the 3D graphics engine, additional ones of the second set of graphics commands stored in said memory buffer to generate at least an additional portion of the second graphics display image in the same or different frame buffer memory; and

displaying the second graphics display image on the display device based on the contents of said same or different frame buffer memory.

67. The method of claim 66 wherein said consuming comprises consuming in a first-in-first-out order, thereby relaxing the degree to which the 3D graphics engine needs to be synchronized to the graphics command producer.

68. The method of claim 66 further including allocating a variable number of variable sized memory buffers for receiving and storing graphics command sets.

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