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(54) **PROVIDING LOAD BALANCED SECURE MEDIA CONTENT AND DATA DELIVERY IN A DISTRIBUTED COMPUTING ENVIRONMENT**

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(60) Provisional application No. 60/259,503, filed on Jan. 2, 2001, provisional application No. 60/262,529, filed on Jan. 17, 2001.

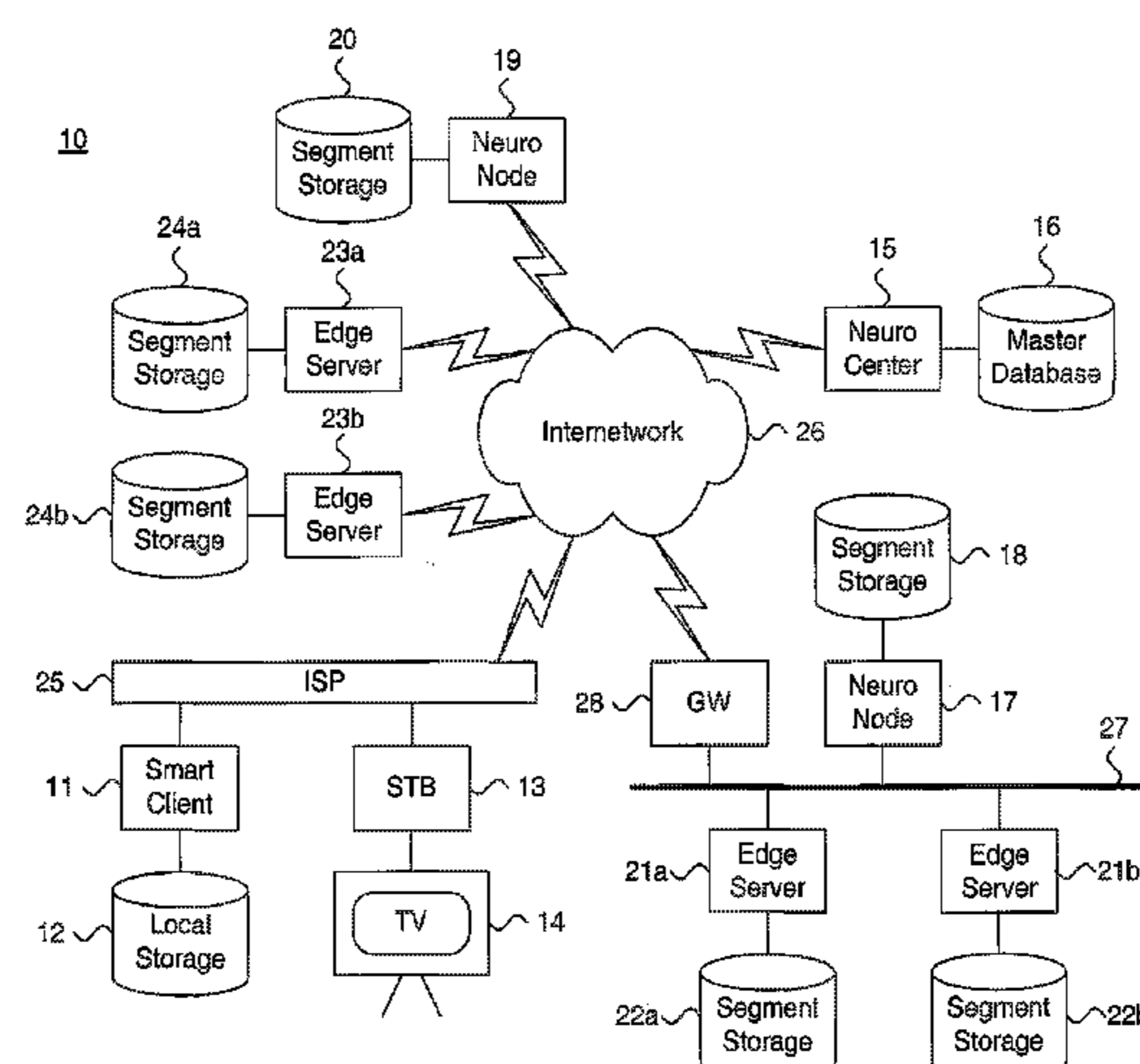
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A system and method for providing load balanced secure media content and data delivery in a distributed computing environment is disclosed. Media content is segmented and encrypted into a set of individual encrypted segments on a centralized control center. Each individual encrypted segment has the same fixed size. The complete set of individual encrypted segments is staged to a plurality of intermediate control nodes. Individual encrypted segments are mirrored from the staged complete set to a plurality of intermediate servers. Requests are received from clients for the media content at the centralized control center. Each individual encrypted segment in the set is received from one of an intermediate control node and an intermediate server optimally sited from the requesting client. The individual encrypted segments are reassembled into the media content for media playback.



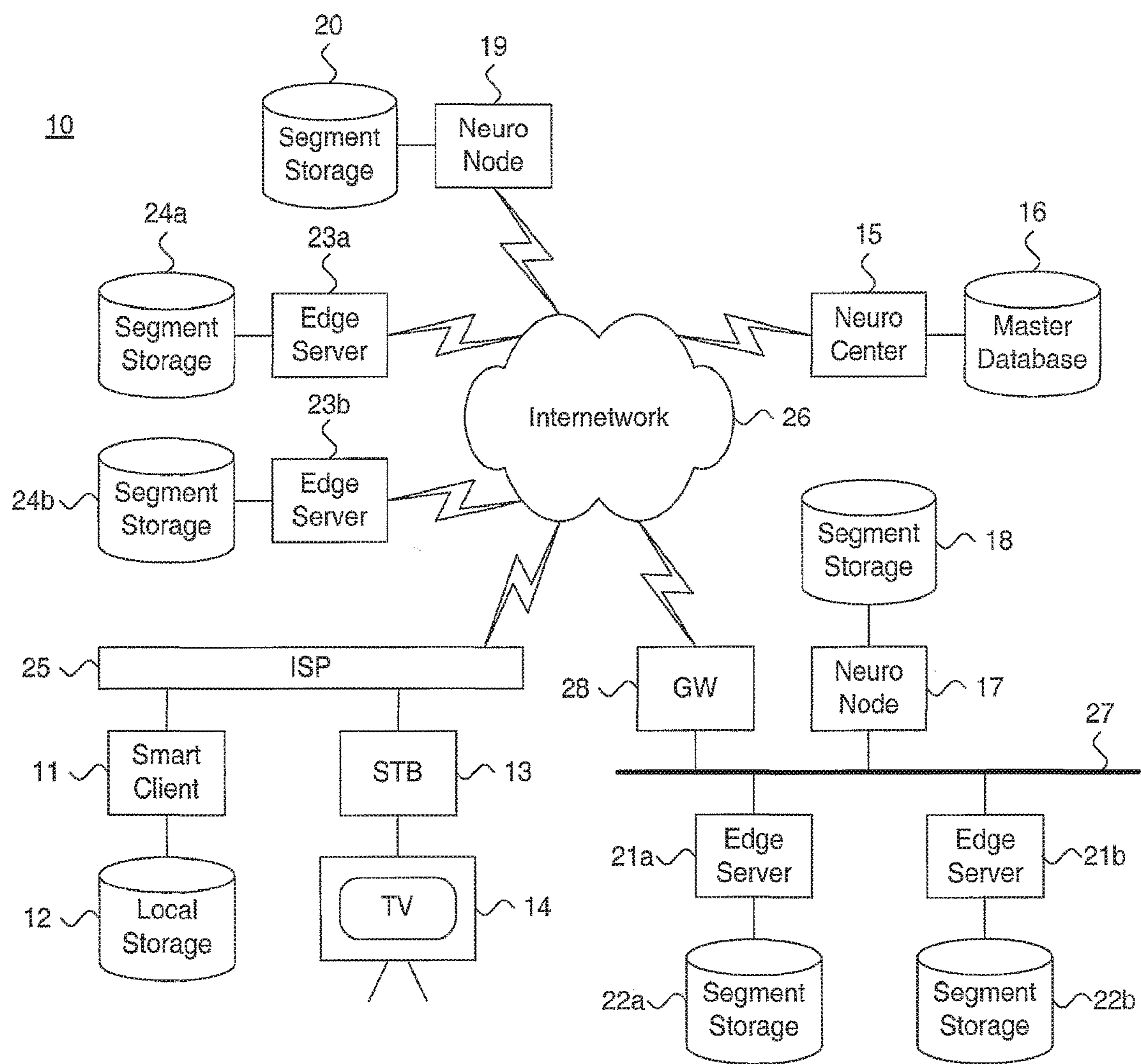


Figure 2.

40

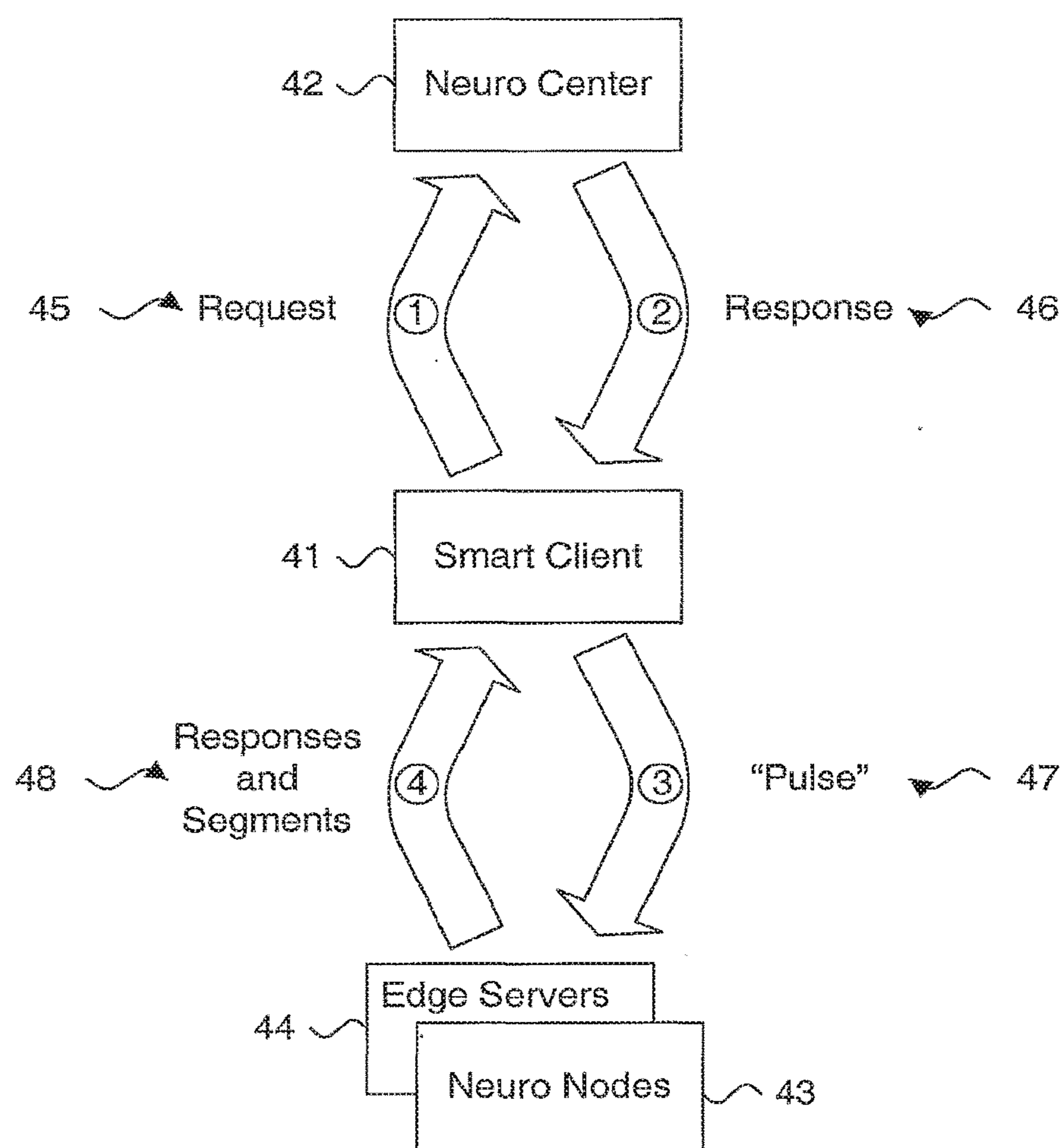


Figure 3.

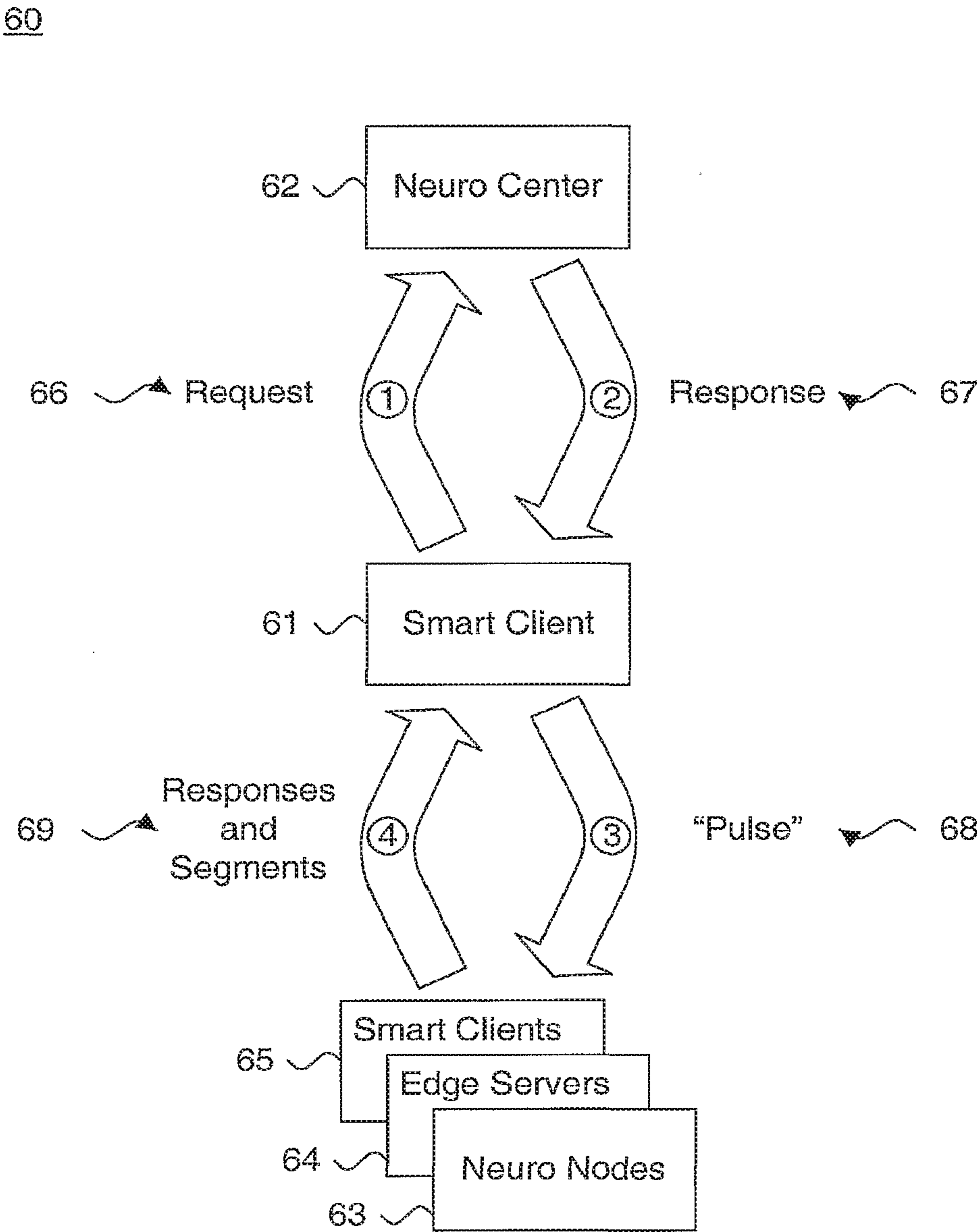


Figure 4.

80

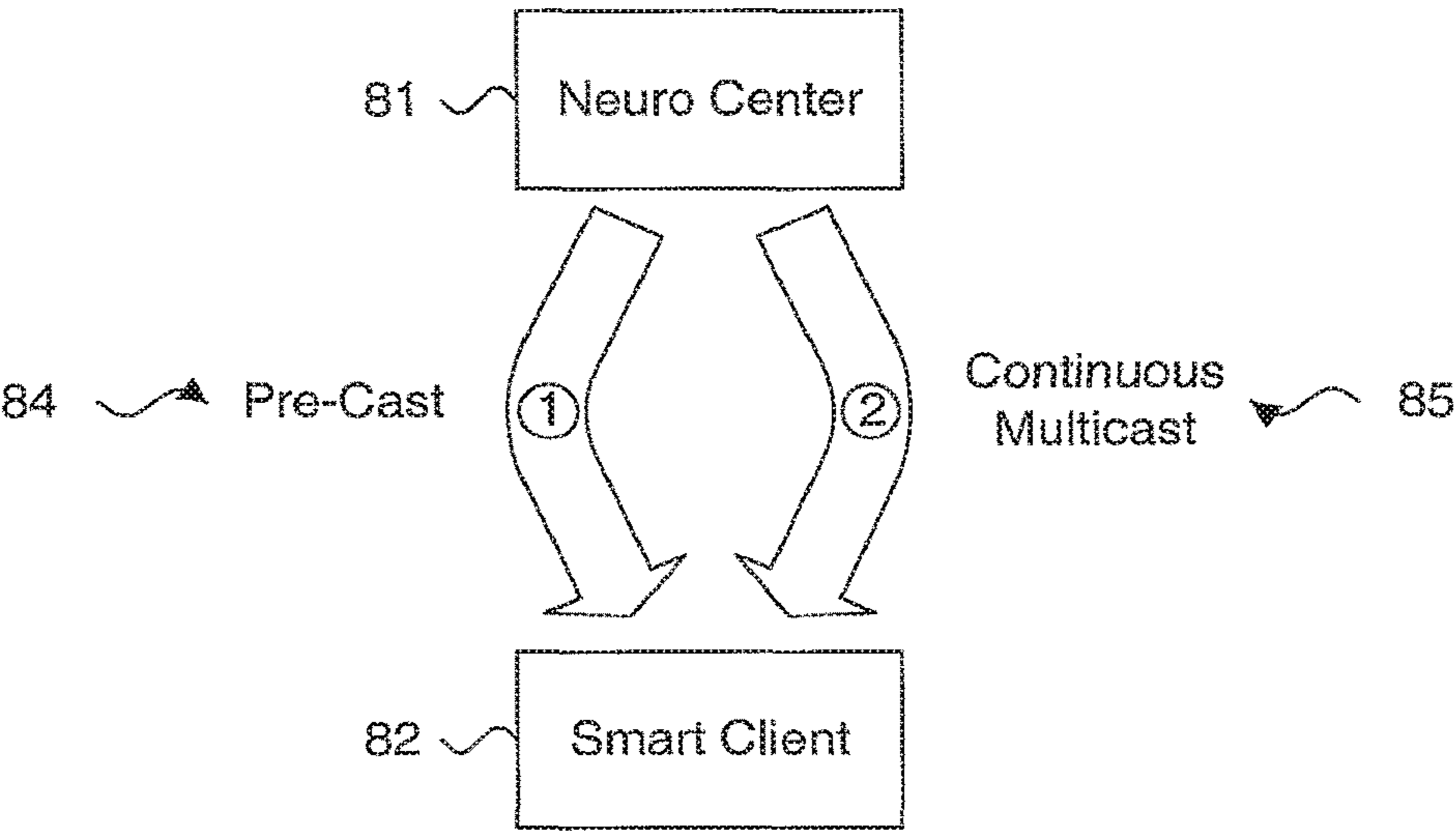


Figure 5.

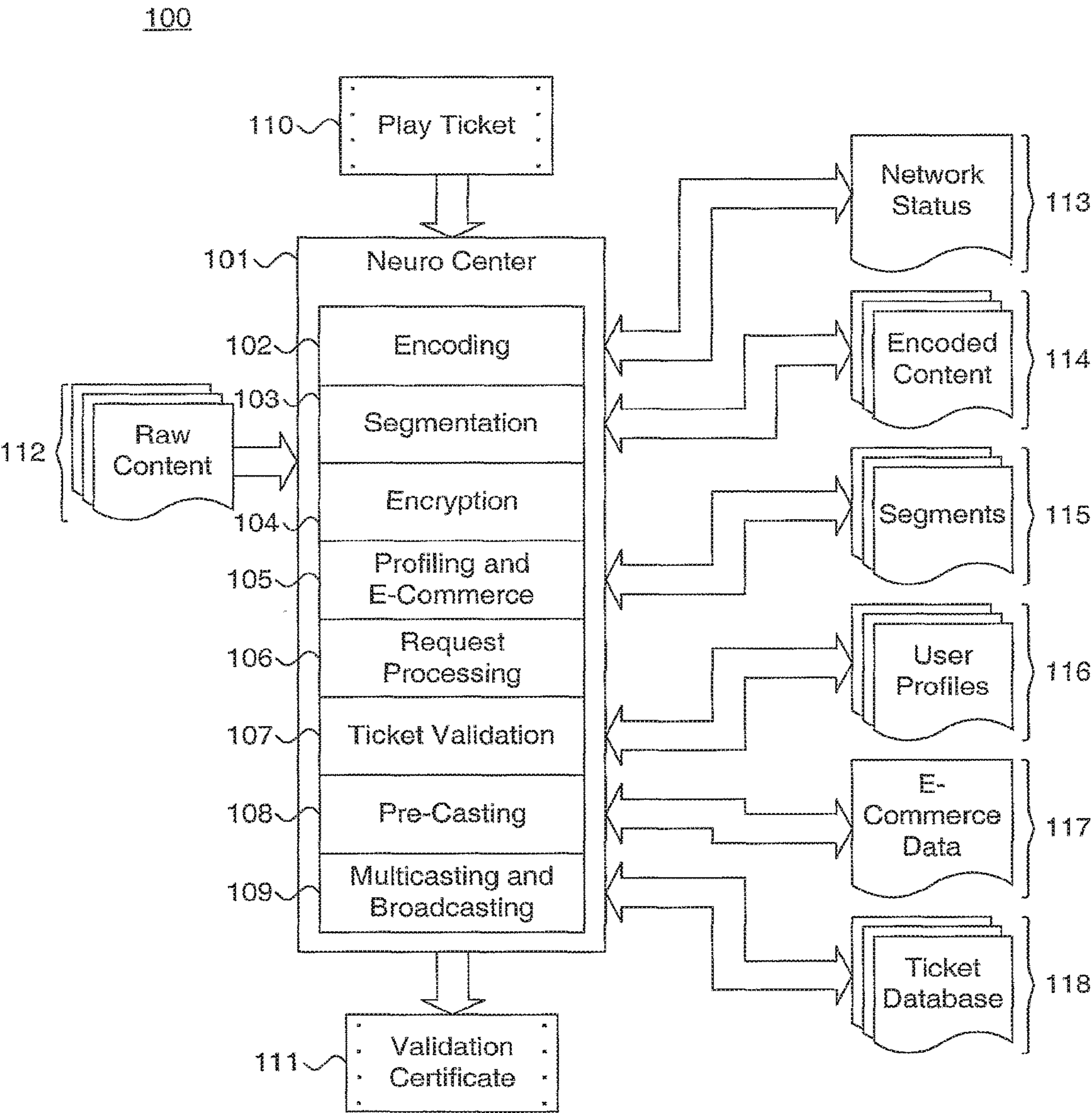


Figure 6.

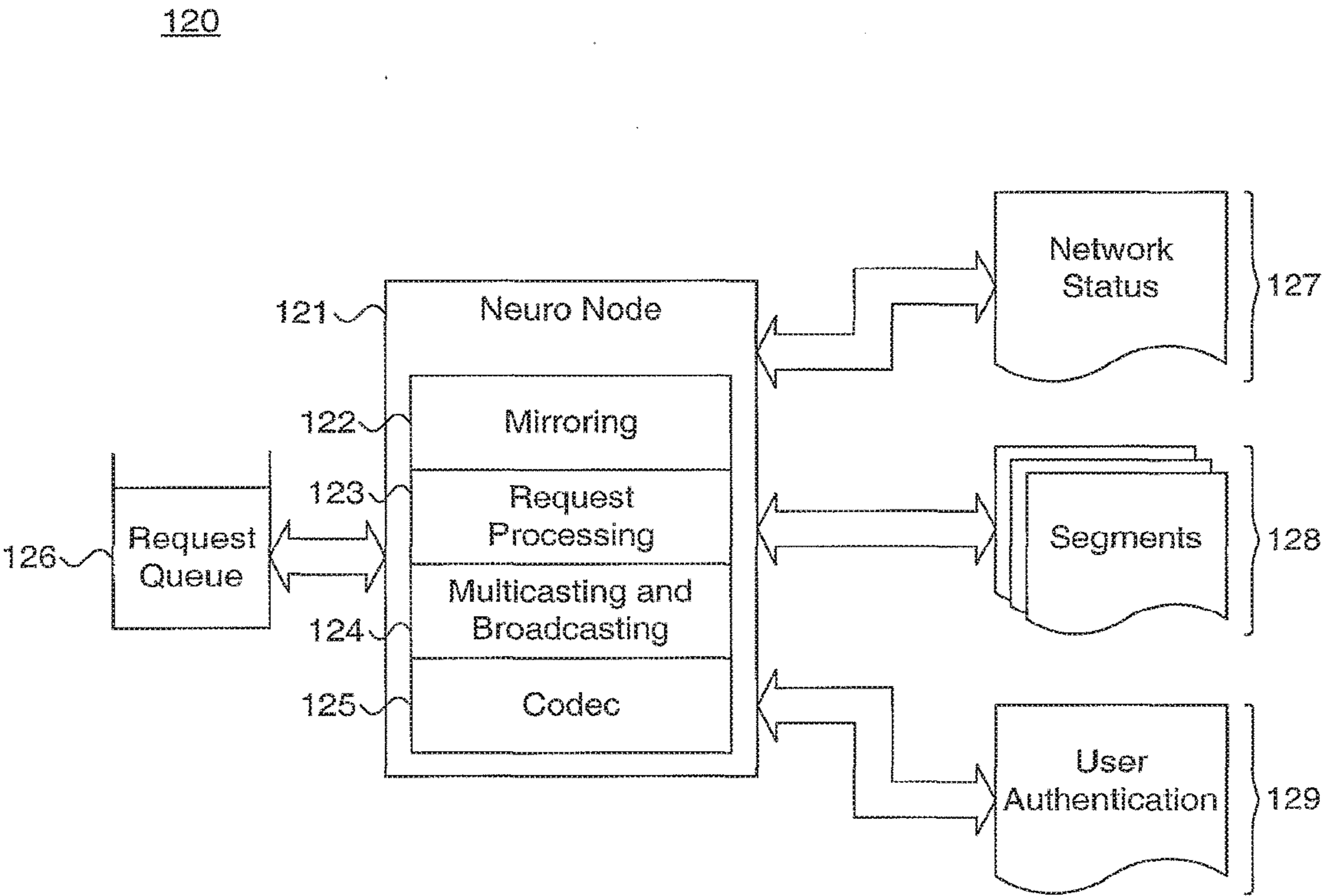


Figure 7.

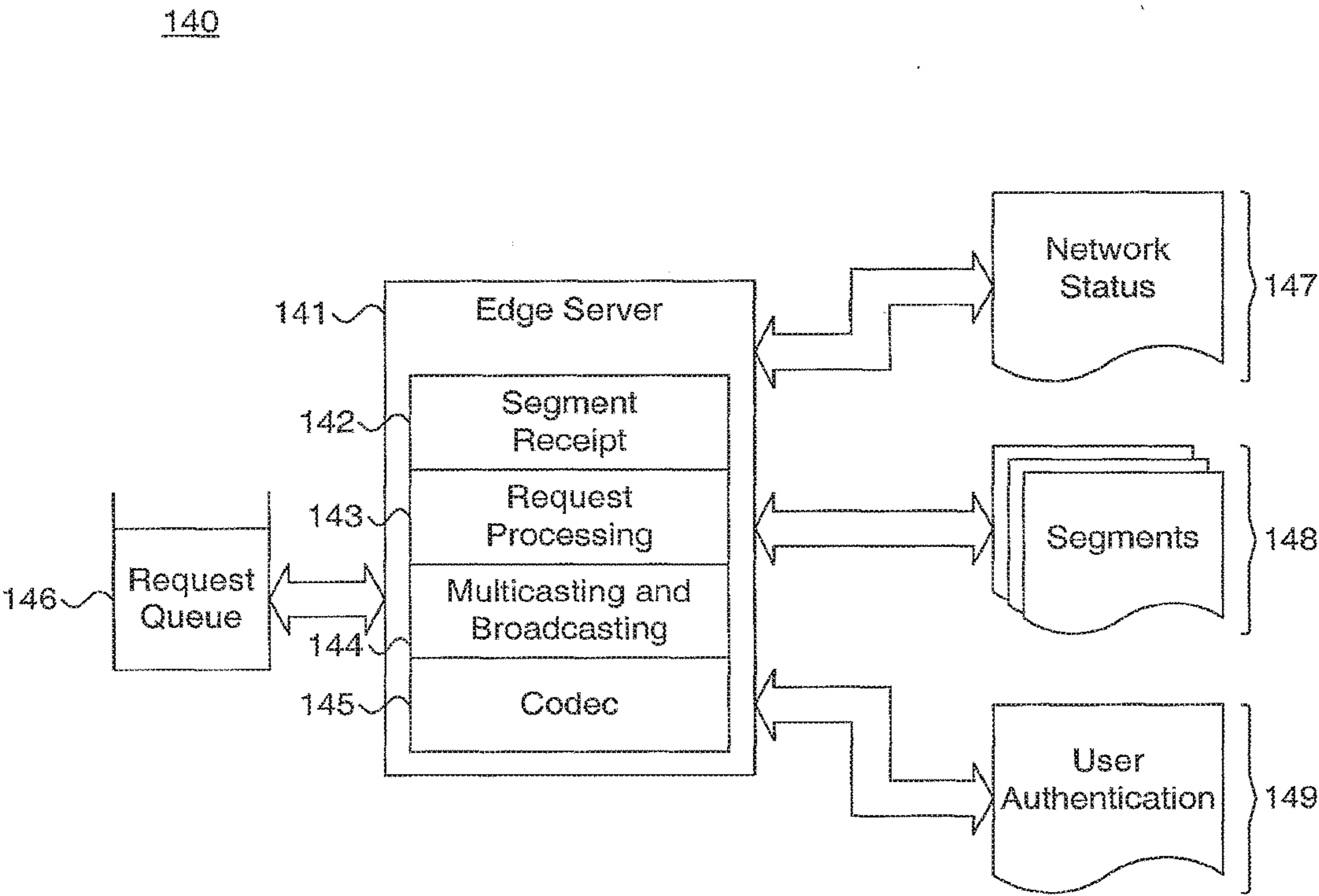


Figure 8.

160

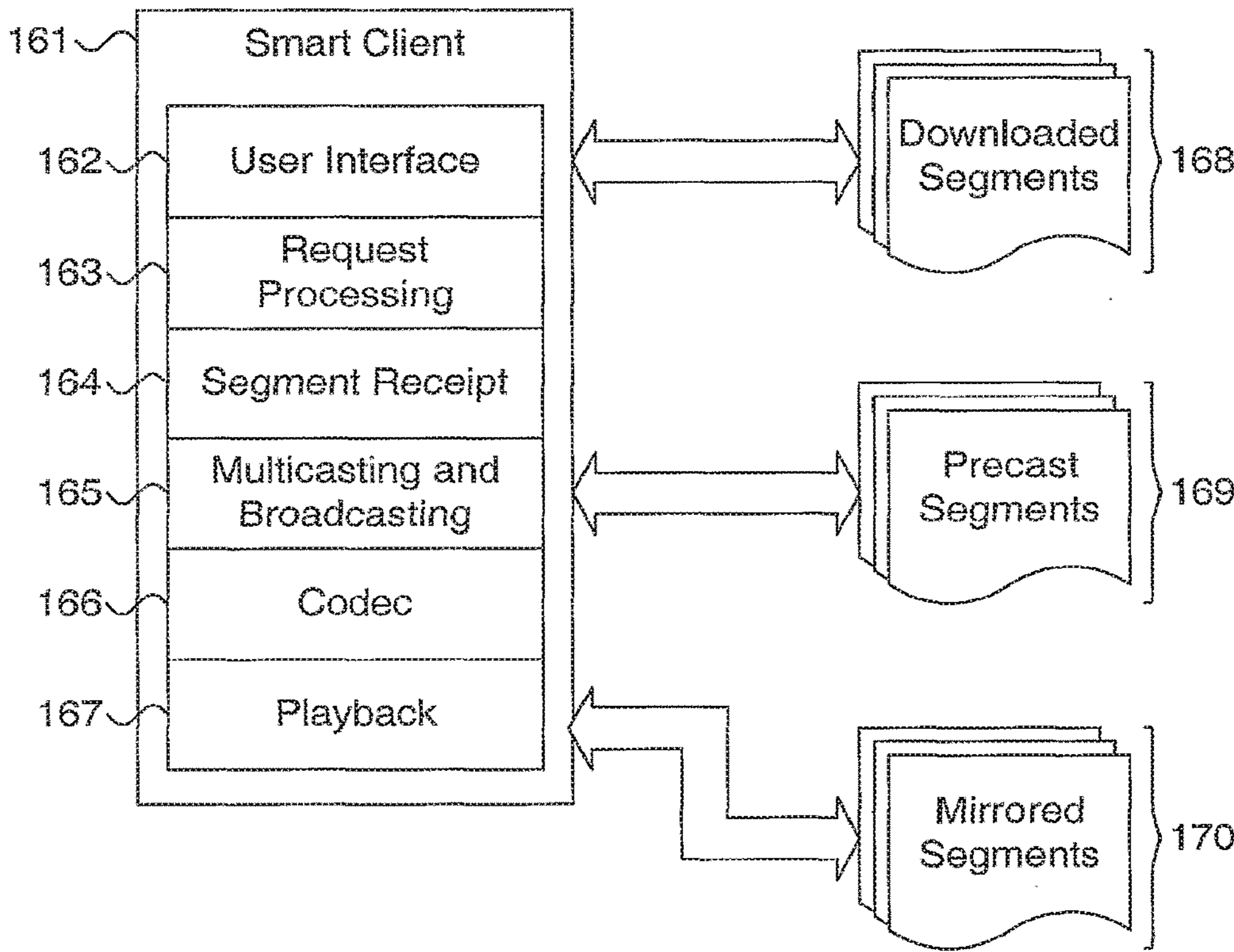


Figure 9.

180

Certificate Serial No. (181)		Customer No. (182)
Create Date/Time (183)	Expire Date/Time (184)	Movie Title No. (185)
No. of Plays (186)	Reserved (187)	
Movie Key (Part I) (188)		
Certificate Signature (189)		

Figure 10.

200

Certificate Serial No. (201)		Customer No. (202)
Create Date/Time (203)	Expire Date/Time (204)	Movie Title No. (205)
Reserved (206)		
Movie Key (Part 2) (207)		
Certificate Signature (208)		

Figure 11.

220

Source (221)	Destination (222)
Packet Length (223)	Checksum (224)
Type (225)	
Data Owner (226)	
Sequence No. (227)	
Header Extensions (228)	
Data (229)	

Figure 12.

240

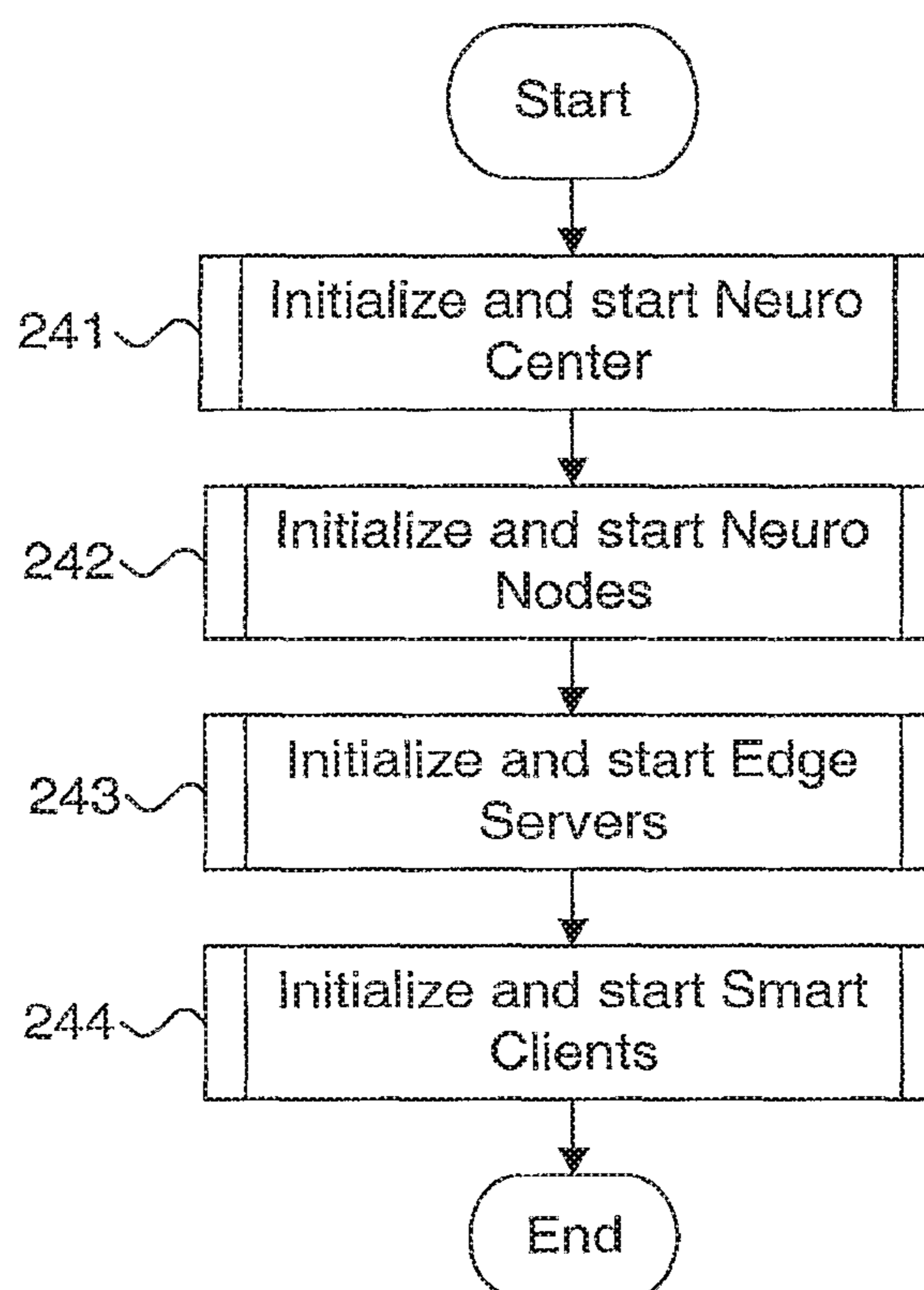


Figure 13.

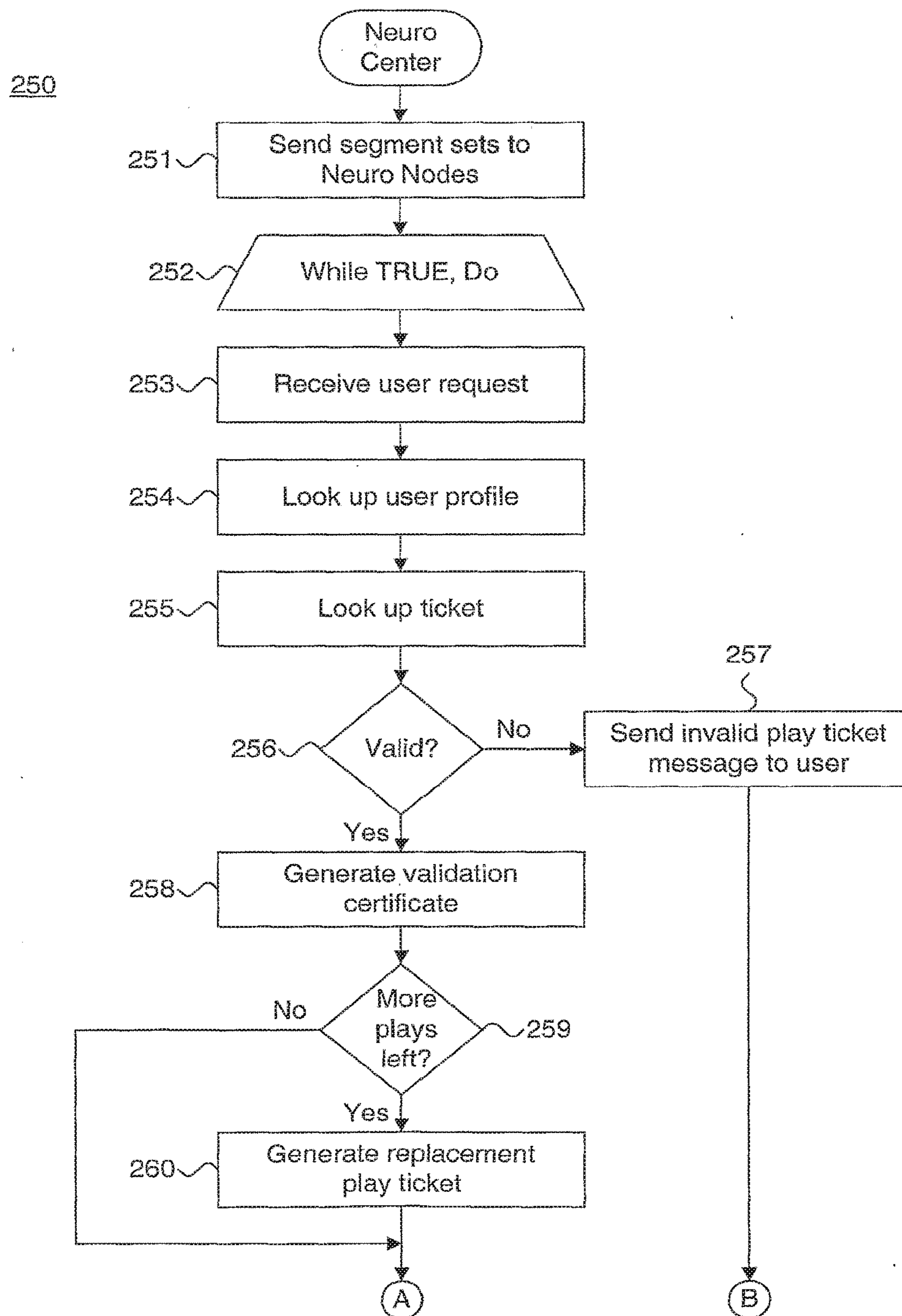


Figure 13 (cont'd).

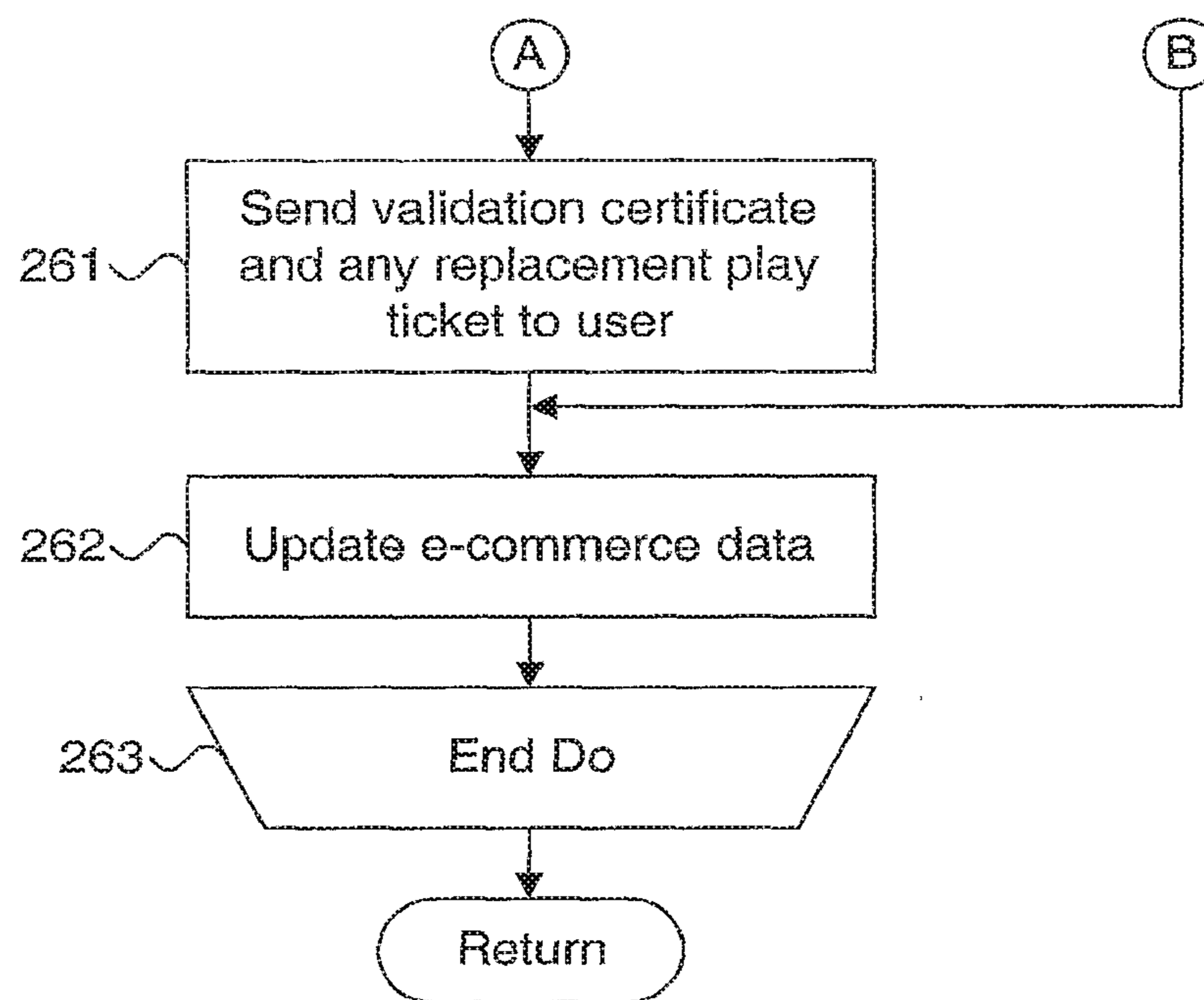


Figure 14.

270

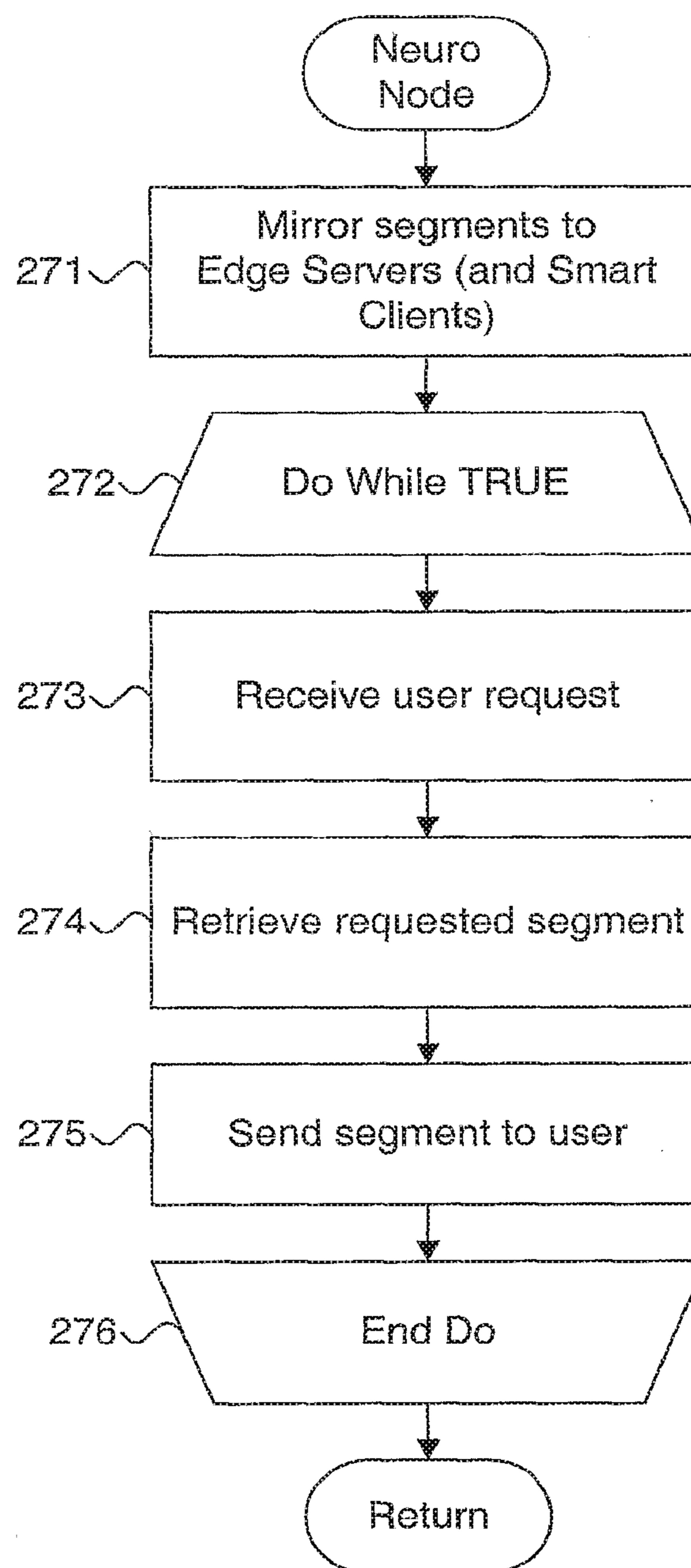


Figure 15.

280

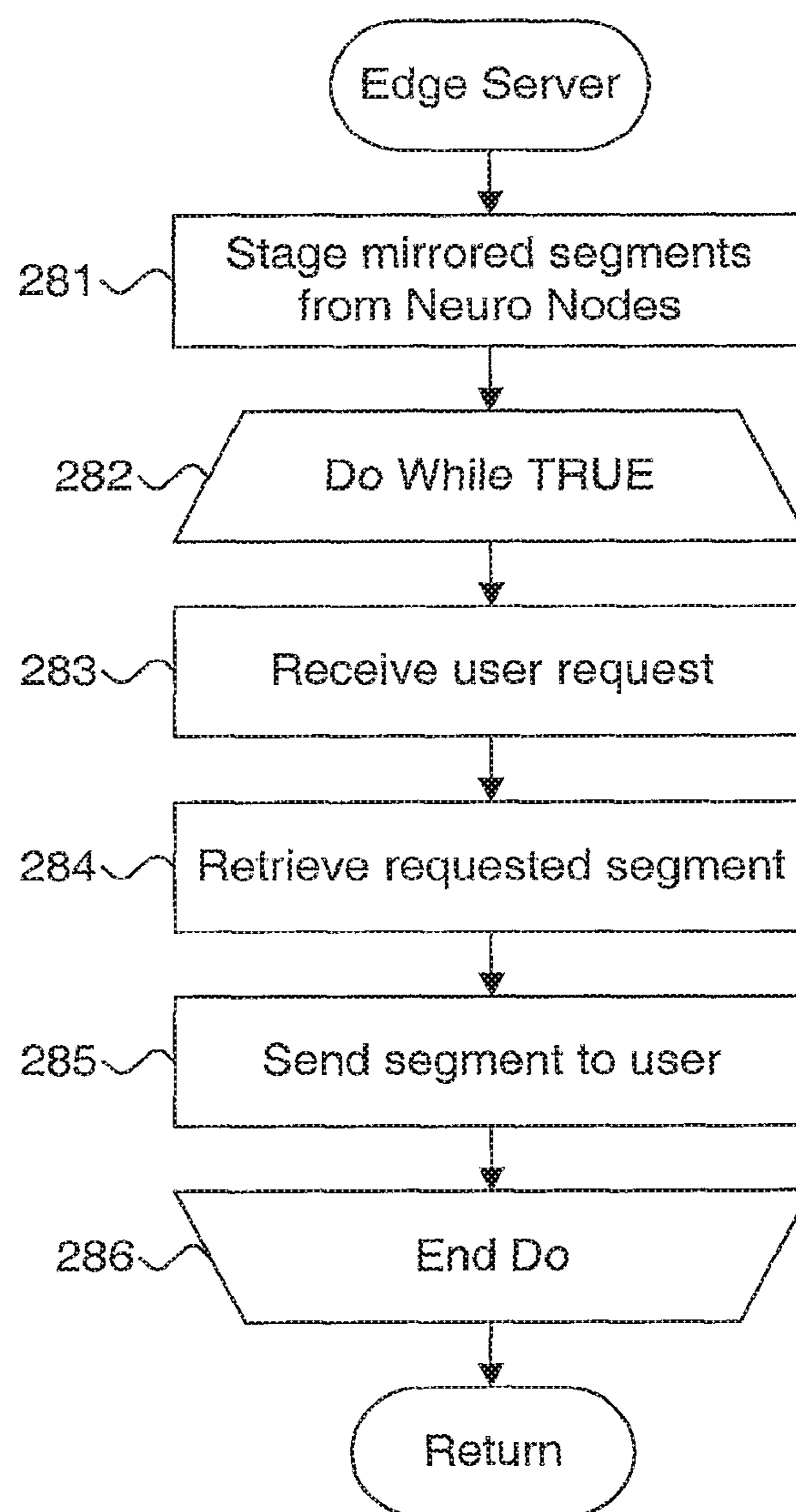


Figure 16.

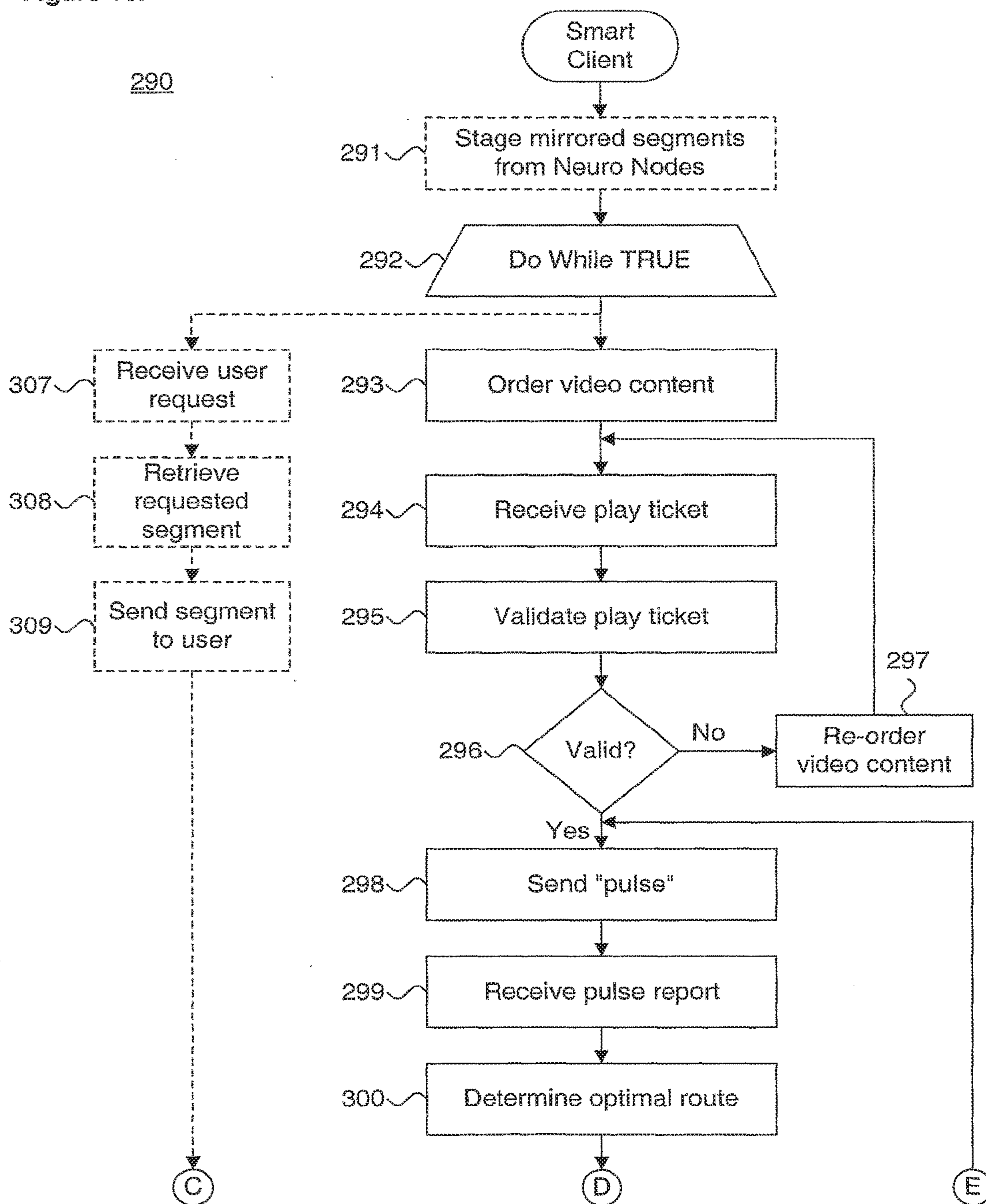
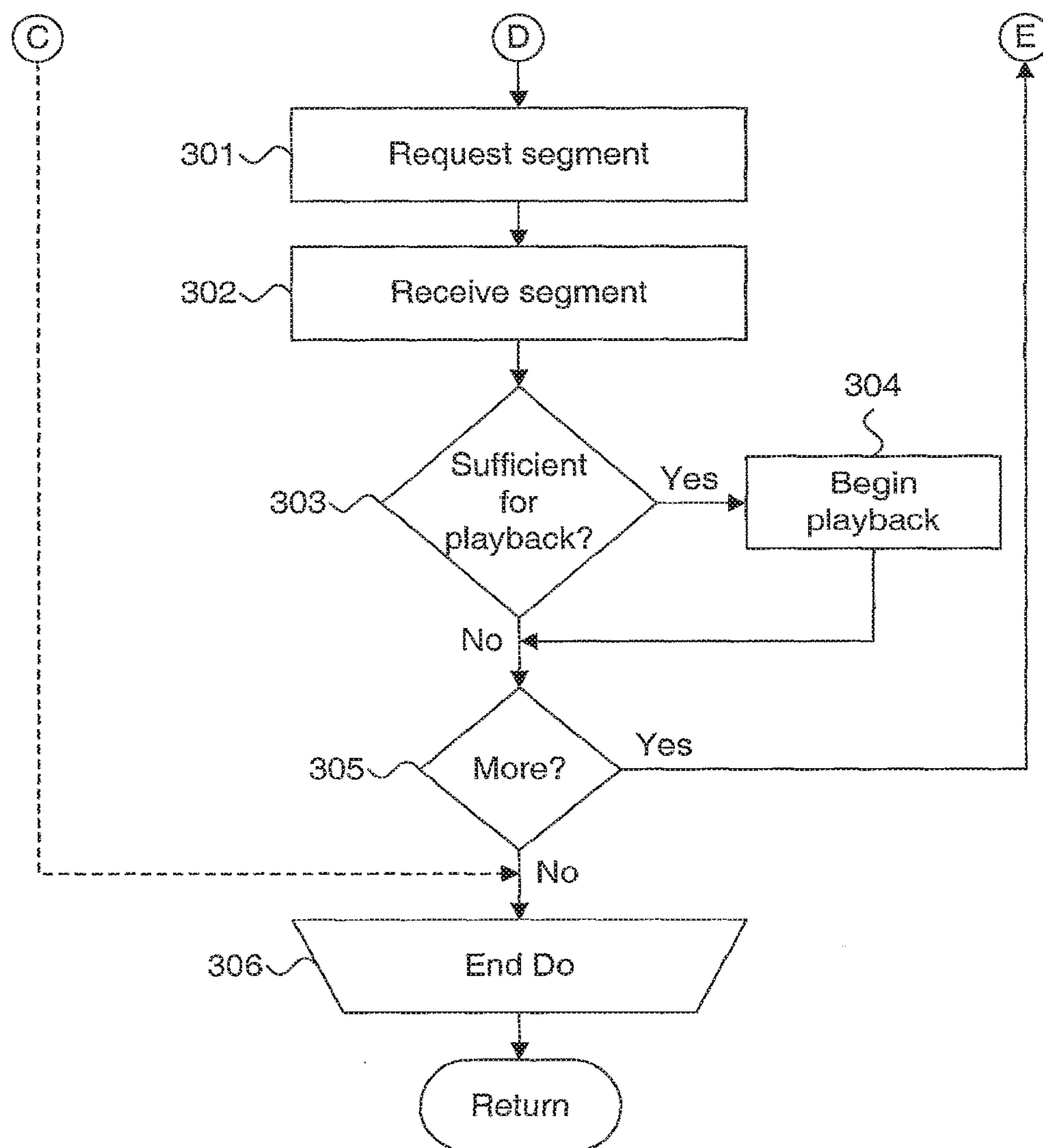


Figure 16 (cont'd).



**PROVIDING LOAD BALANCED SECURE
MEDIA CONTENT AND DATA DELIVERY IN
A DISTRIBUTED COMPUTING
ENVIRONMENT**

**CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED
APPLICATIONS**

[0001] This patent application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 15/671,577, filed Aug. 8, 2017, which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 15/075,037, filed Mar. 18, 2016, and issued on Sep. 12, 2017 as U.S. Pat. No. 9,762,550, which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 14/632,172, filed Feb. 26, 2015, and issued on Mar. 22, 2016 as U.S. Pat. No. 9,294,449, which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/938,823, filed on Jul. 10, 2013, and issued on Mar. 3, 2015 as U.S. Pat. No. 8,972,718, which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/663,397, filed on Jun. 5, 2008, and issued on Dec. 24, 2013 as U.S. Pat. No. 8,615,652, which is the National Stage of International Application No. PCT/US02/00332, filed on Jan. 2, 2002, which claims the benefit of U.S. provisional patent applications, Ser. No. 60/259,503, filed Jan. 2, 2001; and Ser. No. 60/262,529, filed Jan. 17, 2001; the priority dates of which are claimed pursuant to 35 U.S.C. § 119(e). The disclosures of all the above-referenced patent applications are incorporated by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The present invention relates in general to media content delivery and, in particular, to a system and method for providing load balanced secure media content delivery in a distributed computing environment.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Television is the most widely available form of mass audiovisual communications in use today. The basic format of television is relatively mature, consisting primarily of television network-operated transmission stations sending programming signals to passive receivers or “sets.” Media content, in the form of television shows and advertising, are transmitted over specific radio frequencies and program selection is limited to the programming broadcast at any given time.

[0004] Cable- and satellite-based television network services offer an alternative to conventional radio frequency-based television programming. Both formats offer superior reception quality and provide an extensive selection of media content by airing a wider range of television channels. Of late, these network services have begun to offer “pay-per-view” programming services. Using set-top boxes, subscribers can purchase time-restricted access to view content made available on controlled television channels. Popular content includes first run movies and sporting events. Although more flexible than conventional television, “pay-per-view” formats only provide access to the additional content aired by the cable or satellite networks at specific show times on standard television sets and are not broadcast via other means.

[0005] Recognizing this shortfall, media content providers operating over internetworks, and specifically, the Internet, have begun to offer downloadable media content as an alternative to television broadcast programming. Live media

content is aired as streaming media and static, pre-recorded media content is staged on content servers for retrieval and playback by clients on demand. Television, as well as radio, programming is also available. To view media content over an internetwork, users use a Web browser to navigate to the desired media content and then execute a media playback application within the Web browser to download and view the selected shows and other content.

[0006] Although more customizable than standard television programming, Internet-based “media-on-demand” (henceforth, simply “media-on-demand”) services suffer from numerous shortcomings. The most apparent shortcoming is a drastic difference in viewing experience. Personal computer displays offer a higher resolution than standard NTSC television sets. This difference negatively affects the appearance of media content. Moreover, Web browser-based media playback applications display media at low resolutions in small viewing windows with low fidelity sound, thereby further degrading the viewing experience.

[0007] As well, media-on-demand is network infrastructure-sensitive. Media content is generally downloaded as a series of streamed serialized packets. To improve throughput, the loss of individual packets can be tolerated to a certain degree at the expense of distortion during playback. However, media content delivery is contingent on the continued availability of the content server and is subject to bandwidth and network load constraints. As well, delivery is further limited by the processing capability of each client.

[0008] In addition, most media content is subject to copyright and other forms of digital rights protections. However, media content is often staged with little or no privilege or access safeguards. Content is freely available for downloading and viewing without significant copying or distribution protections. Once downloaded, redistribution consequently becomes uncontrollable and infringements virtually impossible to police.

[0009] Similarly, media-on-demand further lacks electronic commerce (e-commerce) and electronic business (e-business) support. For example, e-commerce concerns conducting on-line transactions over an internetwork and e-business concerns running a business based on a network-centric business model. However, users generally request media from a content server with minimal interaction. With few exceptions, no transaction processing, order management, or advertising and product targeting take place. Media content is simply downloaded and viewed with potential business opportunities lost.

[0010] In the prior art, direct download and media content streaming are the two predominant forms of media content retrieval. Direct download involves the retrieval of media content from a content server en masse. The user browses available data files containing media content and downloads a media content selection in the same way as any other file. This approach is slow and inefficient, as content is unicast from the content server to the requesting client in a one-to-one connection. Furthermore, less bandwidth-capable clients suffer further, as most content servers are architected to service the fastest connections first.

[0011] Media content streaming involves the delivery of media content in a series of individual packets at a data rate preferably exceeding the rate of consumption. Individual packets are received in serial order and stored in a temporary buffer until the requesting client has received packets suf-

ficient to enable playback. However, streaming is bandwidth-dependent and also unicast.

[0012] Therefore, there is a need for an approach to delivering full-function, full-motion media-on-demand in a distributed computing environment. Preferably, such an approach would provide secure reliable content delivery through a hierarchical media service infrastructure.

[0013] There is a further need for an approach to serving media content via a distributed network framework incorporating fault tolerance and dynamic load balancing. Preferably, such an approach would offer content provider support functions including user profiling and e-commerce and e-business management.

SUMMARY

[0014] The present invention provides a system and method for delivering encrypted segmented media content to individual clients through a dynamically load balanced network framework. Media content is encoded to a uniform format and is segmented and encrypted, preferably using one unique key per segment. A centralized control center, known as a Neuro Center, stages complete sets of the segmented encrypted media content to intermediate control nodes, known as Neuro Nodes, dispersed throughout the network. The Neuro Nodes then mirror select individual encrypted segments to intermediate servers, known as Edge Servers, and, in a further embodiment, to individual clients, known as Smart Clients. The Smart Clients may include client computers which are used as intermediaries in the system. The Edge Servers and Smart Clients maintain the mirrored individual encrypted segments for eventual delivery to requesting Smart Clients. Via a client, a user requests delivery of media content from the centralized control center, which validates the request and furnishes a validation certificate enabling delivery of the requested content. The client then requests each individual encrypted segment from either an intermediate control node, intermediate server, or, in a further embodiment, a peer client, on a segment-by-segment basis, based on network load and component availability. Playback of the delivered media content begins upon the receipt of sufficient individual encrypted segments.

[0015] An embodiment of the invention provides a system and method for providing load balanced secure media content delivery in a distributed computing environment. Media content is segmented and encrypted into a set of individual encrypted segments on a centralized control center. Each individual encrypted segment can be either fixed or variable in size. The complete set of individual encrypted segments is staged to a plurality of intermediate control nodes. Individual encrypted segments are mirrored from the staged complete set to a plurality of intermediate servers. Requests are received from clients for the media content at the centralized control center. Each individual encrypted segment in the set is received from one of an intermediate control node and an intermediate server optimally sited from the requesting client. The individual encrypted segments are reassembled into the media content for media playback. The segments may be received from different servers in non-sequential order. The requesting client should acquire the first segment from whichever of the intermediate control node or intermediate server that can deliver the first segment fastest, thus providing an immediate-playback start capability.

[0016] Still other embodiments of the present invention will become readily apparent to those skilled in the art from the following detailed description, wherein is described embodiments of the invention by way of illustrating the best mode contemplated for carrying out the invention. As will be realized, the invention is capable of other and different embodiments and its several details are capable of modifications in various obvious respects, all without departing from the spirit and the scope of the present invention. Accordingly, the drawings and detailed description are to be regarded as illustrative in nature and not as restrictive.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0017] FIG. 1 is a block diagram showing a system for providing load balanced secure media content delivery in a distributed computing environment.

[0018] FIG. 2 is a process flow diagram showing load balanced secure media content delivery via the system of FIG. 1.

[0019] FIG. 3 is a process flow diagram showing load balanced secure media content delivery with peer-to-peer intercommunication in accordance with a further embodiment.

[0020] FIG. 4 is a process flow diagram showing load balanced secure media content delivery with pre-casted media content staging in accordance with a further embodiment.

[0021] FIG. 5 is a block diagram showing the software modules of the Neuro Center of FIG. 1.

[0022] FIG. 6 is a block diagram showing the software modules of a Neuro Node of FIG. 1.

[0023] FIG. 7 is a block diagram showing the software modules of an Edge Server of FIG. 1.

[0024] FIG. 8 is a block diagram showing the software modules of a Smart Client of FIG. 1.

[0025] FIG. 9 is a data structure diagram showing a play ticket used by the system of FIG. 1.

[0026] FIG. 10 is a data structure diagram showing a validation certificate used by the system of FIG. 1.

[0027] FIG. 11 is a data structure diagram showing a packet header used by the system of FIG. 1.

[0028] FIG. 12 is a flow diagram showing a method for providing load balanced secure media content delivery in a distributed computing environment.

[0029] FIG. 13 is a flow diagram showing a routine for performing the operations of the Neuro Center for use in the method of FIG. 12.

[0030] FIG. 14 is a flow diagram showing a routine for performing the operations of a Neuro Node for use in the method of FIG. 12.

[0031] FIG. 15 is a flow diagram showing a routine for performing the operations of an Edge Server for use in the method of FIG. 12.

[0032] FIG. 16 is a flow diagram showing a routine for performing the operations of a Smart Client for use in the method of FIG. 12.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0033] FIG. 1 is a block diagram showing a system 10 for providing load balanced secure media content delivery in a distributed computing environment. Media content is delivered as individual encrypted segments to a Smart Client 11 or, alternatively, to a set-top box (STV) 13 for airing on a

television set (TV) 14. The Smart Client 11 provides media viewing playback capabilities to personal computers, wireless devices, public display kiosks, and the like. The Smart Client 11 includes a local storage 12 in which the segments are transitorily stored. Henceforth, for clarity of discussion, media content delivery will be described with reference to the Smart Client 11 only, although one skilled in the art would recognize that a similar form of delivery would apply to a set-top box 13 or similar media access device. The Smart Client 11 is further described below with reference to FIG. 8.

[0034] The Smart Client 11 initiates the media content delivery process by sending a request to a Neuro Center 15. The Neuro Center 15 centrally manages all requests for media content and is accessible via an internetwork 26, including the Internet, or similar broadband wide area network. The Smart Client 11 interfaces to the internetwork 26 through an Internet Service Provider 25 (ISP) or via direct connection (not shown). The Neuro Center 15 maintains a master database 16 in which individual users are profiled and e-commerce and e-business management data are maintained. Upon validating each client request, the Neuro Center 15 requests the Smart Client 11 to check the network and commence media content delivery. The Neuro Center 15 is further described below with reference to FIG. 5.

[0035] The actual media content is stored as individual encrypted segments on Neuro Nodes 17 and 19 and Edge Servers 21a-b and 23a-b. Neuro Node 17 and Edge Servers 21a-b are locally interfaced via an intranetwork 27 and are interfaced to the Neuro Center 15 via a gateway (GW) 28 interfacing to the internetwork 26. Neuro Node 19 and Edge Server 23a-b directly interface to the Neuro Center 15 via the internetwork 26. Other configurations and network topologies are feasible, as would be recognized by one skilled in the art.

[0036] The Neuro Nodes 17 and 19 maintain segment storages 18 and 20, respectively, in which complete sets of individual encrypted segments comprising a complete (or portion of a) media selection are stored. The Edge Servers 21a-b and 23a-b also maintain segment storages 22a-b and 24a-b, respectively, in which mirrored segments are maintained. The Neuro Nodes 17 and 19 selectively copy or “mirror” segments to the Edge Servers 21a-b and 23a-b to optimally balance the distribution of individual encrypted segments throughout the network. Neuro Nodes 17 and 19 are further described below with reference to FIG. 6 and Edge Servers 21a-b and 23a-b are further described below with reference to FIG. 7.

[0037] The individual computer systems, including Neuro Center 15, Neuro Nodes 17 and 19, Edge Servers 21a-b, and 23a-b, and Smart Client 11, are general purpose, programmed digital computing devices consisting of a central processing unit (CPU), random access memory (RAM), non-volatile secondary storage, such as a hard drive or CD ROM drive, network interfaces, and peripheral devices, including user interfacing means, such as a keyboard and display. Program code, including software programs and data, are loaded into the RAM for execution and processing by the CPU and results are generated for display, output, transmittal, or storage.

[0038] FIG. 2 is a process flow diagram showing load balanced secure media content delivery 40 via the system of FIG. 1. The key to achieving dynamic load balancing is through the continuous determination of network throughput

and load characteristics using client-generated “pulses” A pulse is generated prior to requesting each individual encrypted segment to identify an optimally sited Neuro Node or Edge Server from which to request the segment. Media content delivery begins with a Smart Client 41 sending a request 45 to a Neuro Center 42 (step {circle around (1)}). In response, the Neuro Center 42 validates the client request 45 and sends a response 46 requesting the Smart Client to “pulse” the network status prior to commencing delivery (step {circle around (2)}).

[0039] The requested media content is delivered in individual encrypted segments received from Neuro Nodes 43 and Edge Servers 44. Prior to receiving each segment, Smart Client 41 broadcasts a “pulse” 47 over the network to determine the load and operational status of the various Neuro Nodes 43 and Edge Servers 44 (step {circle around (3)}). The Smart Client 41 receives “pulse” responses and segments 48 back from the Neuro Nodes 43 and Edge Servers 44 (step {circle around (4)}). The Neuro Center 42 manages encryption and security in the background to media content delivery.

[0040] The “pulse” responses indicate the network load and relative status of each network component while each segment contains a portion of the actual requested media content. The Smart Client 41 reassembles the individual encrypted segments and begins media playback upon receiving a sufficient number of segments. The Smart Client 41 decrypts and decompresses each segment and provides a full-featured, full-motion playback. Note the segments need not be received in serial order and can be (and in practice, often are) requested from different Neuro Nodes 43 and Edge Servers 44, depending on network load and component status.

[0041] FIG. 3 is a process flow diagram showing load balanced secure media content delivery with peer-to-peer intercommunication 60 in accordance with a further embodiment. The Smart Client 61 takes advantage of media content already made available on peer Smart Client 65 through peer-to-peer segment sharing. This approach improves file delivery capabilities and provides a highly scalable network with a rich intermediate content server population.

[0042] As before, a Smart Client 61 sends a request 66 to a Neuro Center 62 to initiate media content delivery (step {circle around (1)}). The Neuro Center 62 validates the request and sends a response 67 requesting the Smart Client 61 to “pulse” the network (step {circle around (2)}). The Smart Client 61 broadcasts a “pulse” 68 over the network to the Neuro Nodes 63, Edge Server 64 and other Smart Clients 65 (step {circle around (3)}). These components send back responses and segments 69 (step {circle around (4)}) as above.

[0043] FIG. 4 is a process flow diagram showing load balanced secure media content delivery with pre-casted media content staging 80 in accordance with a further embodiment. Ordinarily, a Neuro Center 81 is only initially involved in media content delivery during the validation of individual user requests. However, to substantially minimize the delay attendant to media content delivery during peak demand times, the Neuro Center 81 can pre-cast 84 (step {circle around (1)}) media content to each Smart Client 82 during off-peak times. The initial segments of popular media content are thereby staged at individual Smart Clients 82 for immediate playback by a user without incurring a delay due to network load and demand. Once playback begins, the

remaining segments are sent to each Smart Client **82** in a continuous multicast **85** from the Neuro Center **81** (step {circle around (2)}).

[0044] FIG. 5 is a block diagram showing the software modules **100** of the Neuro Center **101** of FIG. 1. The Neuro Center **101** functions as a centralized control center and is primarily responsible for preparing raw media content **112** for distribution as individual encrypted segments **115** and for validating individual user requests. The Neuro Center **101** includes: encoding module **102**, segmentation module **103**, encryption module **104**, profiling and e-commerce module **105**, request processing module **106**, ticket validation module **107**, pre-casting module **108**, and multicasting and broadcasting module **109**.

[0045] The encoding module **102** receives raw media content **112** from a variety of diverse sources, including the Internet, satellite and cable feeds, wireless devices, and next-generation media sources. The raw media content **112** is converted into a standardized form of encoded content **114**. In turn, the segmentation module **103** segments the encoded content **114** into sets of individual segments **115** which are then encrypted by the encryption module **104**, preferably using a different unique key for each individual segment. The complete sets of individual encrypted segments **115** are then broadcast by the multicasting and broadcasting module **109** to the Neuro Nodes (shown in FIG. 1) for mirroring to Edge Servers and, in a further embodiment, Smart Clients.

[0046] Individual users request media content delivery by sending a play ticket **110**, as further described below with reference to FIG. 9. The play ticket **110** identifies the user and requested media content. The request processing module **106** processes each request and the ticket validation module **107** validates the play ticket **110**. The ticket validation module **107** accesses a ticket database **118** to validate the play ticket **110** and generate a validation certificate **111** which is sent back to the requesting client. The profiling and e-commerce module **105** accesses user profiles **116** and e-commerce data **117** to provide demographics tracking and order management. As well, advertising and product targeting can be delivered via the profiling and e-commerce module **105**.

[0047] The pre-casting module **108** is used in a further embodiment to stage the initial segments of popular media content to the individual Smart Clients during off-peak times. Finally, the multicasting and broadcasting module **109** sends sets of segments **115**, as well as individual encrypted segments **115**, to a select subset of network components (multicasting) or to all network components (broadcasting). The Neuro Center **101** monitors network status **113** in the background.

[0048] FIG. 6 is a block diagram showing the software modules **120** of a Neuro Node **121** of FIG. 1. Each Neuro Node **121** functions as an intermediate control node within the network. The Neuro Center (shown in FIG. 1) sends complete sets of individual encrypted segments, collectively constituting a complete work, to each Neuro Node **121** for staging and mirroring. Each Neuro Node **121** includes: mirroring module **122**, request processing module **123**, multicasting and broadcasting module **124**, and codec module **125**.

[0049] The mirroring module **122** selectively stages individual encrypted segments **128** to Edge Servers and, in a further embodiment, Smart Clients. The segments are dis-

tributed throughout the network to maximize load balancing and fault tolerance. The request processing module **123** receives incoming requests from individual Smart Client. The requests are staged in a request queue **126**. The multicasting and broadcasting module **124** sends a requested segment **128** if the Neuro Node **121** is optimally sited relative to the requesting Smart Client. Alternatively, a plurality of individual client requests for the same segment **128** can be stored in the request queue **126** and fulfilled en masse by the multicasting and broadcasting module **124**. The advantage of staging multiple client requests is network throughput efficiency. The request processing module **123** authenticates each user through a user authentication table **129**. The Neuro Node **121** monitors the network status **127** in the background. The codec **125** compresses individual encrypted segments **128** prior to delivery to a Smart Client.

[0050] FIG. 7 is a block diagram showing the software modules **140** of an Edge Server **141** of FIG. 1. Each Edge Server **141** functions as an intermediate server within the network. The Neuro Nodes (shown in FIG. 1) mirror select individual encrypted segments to each Edge Server **141** for staging. Each Edge Server **141** includes: request processing module **143**, segment receipt module **142**, multicasting and broadcasting module **144**, and codec module **145**. The segment receipt module **142** receives individual encrypted mirrored segments **148** selectively staged by the Neuro Nodes.

[0051] The request processing module **143** receives incoming requests from individual Smart Clients. The requests are staged in a request queue **146**. The Edge Server **141** sends a mirrored requested segment **148** if the Edge Server **141** is optimally sited relative to the requesting Smart Client. Alternatively, a plurality of individual client requests for the same mirrored segment **148** can be stored in the request queue **146** and fulfilled en masse by the multicasting and broadcasting module **144**. The advantage of staging multiple client requests is network throughput efficiency. The request processing module **143** authenticates each user through a user authentication table **149**. The Edge Server **141** monitors the network status **147** in the background.

[0052] FIG. 8 is a block diagram showing the software modules **160** of a Smart Client **161** of FIG. 1. Each Smart Client **161** initiates, facilitates and delivers media content to a requesting user. The Smart Client **161** includes: user interface module **162**, request processing module **163**, segment receipt module **164**, multicasting and broadcasting module **165**, codec module **166**, and playback module **167**.

[0053] The user interface module **162** provides controls to select media content for delivery. The request processing module **163** forms a request for media content that is sent to the Neuro Center (shown in FIG. 1) to initiate content delivery. The segment receipt module **164** receives individual downloaded segments **168** from the Neuro Nodes, Edge Servers, and, in a further embodiment, Smart Clients. A "pulse" is sent over the network via the multicasting and broadcasting module **165** to determine the current status of the network. The segment receipt module **164** also receives pre-cast segments **169** sent by the Neuro Center during off-peak times. Similarly, the segment receipt module **164** stages mirrored segments **170** received from Neuro Nodes when providing peer-to-peer intercommunications, in accordance with a further embodiment. The codec module **166** decompresses the individual downloaded segments **168** and pre-cast segments **169**. The codec module **166** performs

decryption of each individual segment including the decryption by a unique key through use of the play ticket **110** and validation certificate **111** (both shown in FIG. 5). Finally, the playback module **167** provides full-feature playback functionality, including play, pause, stop, rewind, fast forward, full screen, chapter stops, shuttle bar, and similar features.

[0054] Each module in the Neuro Center **101**, Neuro Node **121**, Edge Server **141**, and Smart Client **161** is a computer program, procedure or module written as source code in a conventional programming language, such as the C++ programming language, and is presented for execution by the CPU as object or byte code, as is known in the art. The various implementations of the source code and object and byte codes can be held on a computer-readable storage medium or embodied on a transmission medium in a carrier wave. The system operates in accordance with a sequence of process steps, as further described below with reference to FIG. 12.

[0055] FIG. 9 is a data structure diagram showing a play ticket **180** used by the system **10** of FIG. 1. Each play ticket **180** is used to transact the purchase or rental of delivered media content. Briefly, a play ticket **180** is issued on an individual customer basis and contains information about the movie ordered. Only a portion of the movie key for each movie is stored on a play ticket **180** to disable decryption and safeguard against theft and unauthorized access. The movie key also prevents reuse of the play ticket **180**.

[0056] When a customer orders media content from a Neuro Center (shown in FIG. 1), a play ticket **180** is generated and includes the following:

- [0057] (1) Certificate serial number (**181**) for the ticket;
- [0058] (2) Customer number (**182**);
- [0059] (3) Creation date and time (**183**);
- [0060] (4) Expiration date and time (**184**);
- [0061] (5) Movie title number (**185**);
- [0062] (6) Number of plays (**186**);
- [0063] (7) Reserved (**187**);
- [0064] (8) Movie key (Part 1) (**188**); and
- [0065] (9) Certificate signature (**189**).

[0066] The Certificate signature **189** is a digital signature prepared using symmetric public key encryption. The certificate signature **189** ensures the ticket cannot be altered without validation. As well, the movie key part **1188** includes only a portion of the entire movie key, which is split into two pieces between the play ticket **180** and a validation certificate **200** (shown below in FIG. 10).

[0067] In the described embodiment, each play ticket **180** has a 96-byte structure containing all information necessary to validate the play ticket. The certificate serial number **181** is used as a record lookup key into the ticket database **118** (shown in FIG. 5). The customer number **182** and movie title number **185** are also stored in the ticket database **118** and validated when the play ticket is used.

[0068] Before the play ticket **180** is presented for validation by the Neuro Center, the Smart Client checks the certificate signature **189** for validity. The certificate signature **189** includes a checksum of the certificate consisting of the first 64 bytes which are cryptographically signed using the Digital Signature Standard (DSS). If the play ticket **180** has been altered, the certificate signature **189** will not match and the signature validation will fail.

[0069] The number of plays field **186** can contain either a special numeric value indicating the ticket is good for unlimited plays, that is, the user has purchased the media

content, or a numeric value indicating the number of plays remaining in a rental of the media content. Unlimited play tickets **180** do not have an expiration date and time **184**.

[0070] Generally, all other play tickets **180** are good for only one play. If the number of plays in the play ticket **180** is greater than one, the play ticket **180** must be replaced. When validated, a replacement play ticket **180** is also returned with the number of plays field **186** reduced and a new certificate serial number **181** issued.

[0071] FIG. 10 is a data structure diagram showing a validation certificate **200** used by the system **10** of FIG. 1. Each validation certificate **200** includes essentially the same information as a play ticket **180** as follows:

- [0072] (1) Certificate serial number (**201**) for the validation certificate;
- [0073] (2) Customer number (**202**);
- [0074] (3) Creation date and time (**203**);
- [0075] (4) Expiration date and time (**204**);
- [0076] (5) Movie title number (**205**);
- [0077] (6) Reserved (**206**);
- [0078] (7) Movie key (Part 2) (**207**); and
- [0079] (8) Certificate signature (**208**).

[0080] Like the play ticket **180**, the Neuro Node validates each validation certificate **200** using the certificate signature **208**. If the certificate signature **208** does not match, the validation certificate **200** is invalid. The validation certificate **200** includes the other remaining portion of the movie key Part 2 **207**.

[0081] In the described embodiment, each movie key is split into two parts by using a second 128-bit random number generated using the same operations as used to generate the movie key Part 1. The second 128-bit random number is used as a split filter using an exclusive OR operation against the full movie key. The value used to split the key becomes the validation key.

[0082] Play tickets are computed according to the following operation:

$$K_2 = K_M \oplus K_1$$

[0083] where:

[0084] K_M is the Movie Key

[0085] K_1 is the Validation Key (Split Value)

[0086] K_2 is the Play Ticket Key

[0087] The validation key is stored in the ticket database **118**, along with the other information necessary to validate the play ticket **180**. The play ticket key becomes part of the play ticket **180**.

[0088] During the later validation phase, after the play ticket information has been validated against the ticket database **118**, a validation certificate **200** is generated and sent to the user. This certificate includes the validation key. The full movie key is recovered by using an exclusive OR of the two values to reverse the split process and recover the original key.

[0089] FIG. 11 is a data structure diagram showing a packet header **220** used by the system **10** of FIG. 1. A packet header **220** is prepended to each segment to enable a Smart Client (shown in FIG. 1) to reassemble the media content and enable playback. In the described embodiment, the individual data packets are sent in accordance with the Tranz-Cast Delivery Protocol (TCDP), a data exchange network based on the Reliable Multicast Framework (RMF).

[0090] The fixed header of each TCDP data packet contains the following fields:

- [0091] (1) Sources (221): port number from which the packet was sent;
- [0092] (2) Destination (222): port number to which the packet was directed;
- [0093] (3) Packet Length (223): contains a count of octets in the packet, including the header and data;
- [0094] (4) Checksum (224): corresponds to the Internet protocol checksum;
- [0095] (5) Type (225): identifies the type of packet;
- [0096] (6) Data Owner (226): contains a unique identifier for the originator of the data. Together with the sequence number, the contents of this field uniquely define a packet when multiple senders share a common multicast address;
- [0097] (7) Sequence Number (227): increments by one for each new packet sent and may be used by the receiver to detect packet loss and to restore packet sequence;
- [0098] (8) Header Extensions (228): indicates the presence of a header extension field; and
- [0099] (9) Data (229): Variable payload data is appended to the end of the header 220 and may be of any length, including zero, as specified by the type field. Other types and combinations of fields are possible, as would be recognized by one skilled in the art.

[0100] FIG. 12 is a flow diagram showing a method for providing load balanced secure media content delivery 240 in a distributed computing environment. Each of the individual components, the Neuro Center, Neuro Nodes, Edge Servers, and Smart Clients, operate independently following initialization and start-up (blocks 241-244, respectively). With the exception of the Neuro Center, the various components can initiate and terminate their respective processing asynchronously without significantly affecting the continued operation of the remaining components. Following initialization and start-up, the method completes.

[0101] FIG. 13 is a flow diagram showing a routine for performing the operations of the Neuro Center 250 for use in the method of FIG. 12. The purpose of this routine is to initially, and as necessary, stage complete segment sets to Neuro Nodes for mirroring and validate individual user requests.

[0102] Thus, complete sets of segments 115 (shown in FIG. 5) are sent to Neuro Nodes (block 251). Thereafter, user requests are processed in an iterative processing loop (block 252-263) as follows. During each iteration (block 252), a user request is received (block 253) from a Smart Client and the corresponding user profile 116 is looked up (block 254). The play ticket 180 (shown in FIG. 9) is looked up in the ticket database 118 (block 255) and, if valid (block 256), a validation certificate 200 (shown in FIG. 10) is generated (block 258). If more plays are left on the play ticket 180 (block 259), a replacement play ticket 180 is generated (block 260). The validation certificate 200 and a replacement play ticket 180 are sent to the user (block 261) and the e-commerce data 117 is updated (block 262).

[0103] If the play ticket 180 is not valid (block 256), an invalid play ticket message is sent to the user (block 257) and the e-commerce data is updated (block 262). Processing continues with each subsequent user request (block 263), after which the routine returns.

[0104] FIG. 14 is a flow diagram showing a routine for performing the operations of a Neuro Node 270 for use in the method of FIG. 12. The purpose of this routine is to mirror individual encrypted segments to the Neuro Nodes and to deliver requested segments to Smart Clients.

[0105] Thus, initially and as required thereafter, individual encrypted segments 128 (shown in FIG. 6) are mirrored to Neuro Nodes and, in a further embodiment, to Smart Clients, for providing load balancing and optimal retrieval of media content over the network (block 271). User requests are then processed in an iterative processing loop (blocks 272-276) as follows. During each iteration (block 272), a user request is received (block 273) from a Smart Client. The requested segment 128 is retrieved (block 274) from the segment storage and sent to the requesting user (block 275). Iterative processing continues (block 276) until the Neuro Node terminates, after which the routine returns.

[0106] FIG. 15 is a flow diagram showing a routine for performing the operations of an Edge Server 280 for use in the method of FIG. 12. The purpose of this routine is to receive individual encrypted mirrored segments and to deliver requested segments to Smart Clients.

[0107] Thus, initially and as required thereafter, individual encrypted segments are received from Neuro Nodes and staged (block 281) as mirrored segments 148 (shown in FIG. 7). User requests are then processed in an iterative processing loop (blocks 282-286) as follows. During each iteration (block 282), a user request is received (block 283) from a Smart Client. The requested segment 128 is retrieved (block 284) from the segment storage and sent to the requesting user (block 285). Iterative processing continues (block 286) until the Edge Server terminates, after which the routine returns.

[0108] FIG. 16 is a flow diagram showing a routine for performing the operations of a Smart Client 290 for use in the method of FIG. 12. The purpose of this routine is to request delivery of and playback media content selected by a user. In a further embodiment, the Smart Client provides peer-to-peer intercommunications by serving individual encrypted mirrored segments to other Smart Clients.

[0109] Thus, in a further embodiment, individual encrypted mirrored segments 170 (shown in FIG. 8) are staged (block 291) for retrieval by peer Smart Clients. Thereafter, media content requests are processed in an iterative processing loop (blocks 292-306) as follows. During each iteration (block 292), media content is ordered (block 293) through the user interface 162. A play ticket 180 (shown in FIG. 9) is received from the Neuro Center (block 294) and validated by the Smart Client (block 295) by authenticating the certificate signature 189. If the play ticket 180 is not valid (block 296), the media content is re-ordered (block 297) from the Neuro Center.

[0110] The status of the network is determined prior to requesting each individual segment (blocks 298-300) as follows. First, a "pulse" is sent from the Smart Client (block 298) to the Neuro Nodes, Edge Servers and, in a further embodiment, peer Smart Clients. A pulse report is received back from each of the components (block 299) and an optimal route is determined (block 300) for each of the individual encrypted segments.

[0111] Each individual encrypted segment is requested (block 301) and received (block 302), preferably from an optimally sited network component. If segments sufficient for playback have been received (block 303), playback

begins (block 304). Receipt of segments continues (block 305) until media content delivery is complete. Processing media content requests continues (block 306) until the Smart Client terminates.

[0112] In a further embodiment, the Smart Client sends individual encrypted mirrored segments 170 to peer Smart Clients upon request (blocks 307-109) as follows. A user request for an individual encrypted segment is received (block 307). The requested mirrored segment 170 is retrieved (block 308) and sent to the requesting user (block 309). The delivery of mirrored segments 170 from a peer Smart Client enables fuller network resource utilization and improved load balancing characteristics for the network.

[0113] While the invention has been particularly shown and described as referenced to the embodiments thereof, those skilled in the art will understand that the foregoing and other changes in form and detail may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for providing load balanced secure media content delivery in a distributed computing environment wherein the media content is segmented and encrypted into a set of individual encrypted segments, comprising:

storing at least one individual encrypted segment of the set of individually encrypted segments at a plurality of intermediate servers;

receiving requests, from one or more client computers, for retrieving the media content on at least one server of the plurality of intermediate servers;

queuing the requests from the one or more client computers on the at least one server; and

multicasting the individual encrypted segments, from the at least one server, based on the requests, wherein the individual encrypted segments are adapted to be reassembled into the media content for media playback.

2. The method according to claim 1, further comprising sending at least one individual encrypted segment of the set of individual encrypted segments for storage at the plurality of intermediate servers from at least one of the one or more client computers.

3. The method according to claim 1, wherein the media content comprises at least one of a video file, an audio file or a video game.

4. The method according to claim 1, wherein each client computer comprises at least one of a personal computer, a mobile phone or set top device.

5. The method according to claim 1, wherein multicasting the individual encrypted segments is performed in a non-sequential order.

6. The method according to claim 1, further comprising maintaining a master database of user profiles.

7. The method according to claim 1, wherein the individual encrypted segments are variable in size.

8. The method according to claim 1, further comprising pre-casting at least one of the individual encrypted segments to the one or more client computers before a request for retrieving media content is received from the one or more client computers.

9. The method according to claim 1, further comprising receiving a pulse signal from the one or more client computers, said pulse signal is used to determine the status and performance of the intermediate servers.

10. The method according to claim 1, wherein multicasting the individual encrypted segments to the one or more client computers is performed from an optimally sited intermediate server.

11. The method according to claim 1, further comprising directing a client computer to transmit at least one of the individual encrypted segments to the one or more client computers that is requesting the media content.

12. A network for providing load balanced secure media content delivery in a distributed computing environment wherein the media content is segmented and encrypted into a set of individual encrypted segments, the network comprising:

a plurality of intermediate servers adapted to store at least one individual encrypted segment of the set of individually encrypted segments;

a request processing module to receive requests, from one or more client computers, for retrieving the media content on at least one server of the plurality of intermediate servers; and

a multicasting module to queue requests from the one or more client computers on the at least one server, and to multicast the individual encrypted segments, from the at least one server based on the requests, where in the individual encrypted segments are adapted to be reassembled into the media content for media playback.

13. The network according to claim 12, wherein the media content comprises at least one of a video file, an audio file or a video game.

14. The network according to claim 12, wherein each client computer comprises at least one of a personal computer, a mobile phone or set top device.

15. The network according to claim 12, wherein the multicasting module multicasts the individual encrypted segments in a non-sequential order.

16. The network according to claim 12, further comprising a master database of user profiles.

17. The network according to claim 12, wherein the individual encrypted segments are variable in size.

18. The network according to claim 12, wherein the multicasting module pre-casts at least one of the individual encrypted segments to the one or more client computers before a request for retrieving media content is received from the one or more client computers.

19. The network according to claim 12, further comprising a module to receive a pulse signal from the one or more client computers, the pulse signal is used to determine a status and performance of the plurality of intermediate servers.

20. The network according to claim 12, wherein multicasting the individual encrypted segments to the one or more client computers is performed from an optimally sited intermediate server.

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