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**Datasheet for the decision
of 3 May 2012**

Case Number: T 0191/11 - 3.4.03

Application Number: 98309877.3

Publication Number: 924660

IPC: G07F 5/24

Language of the proceedings: EN

Title of invention:
Coin mechanism

Applicant:
MEI, Inc.

Opponent:
-

Headword:
Con mechanism/MEI, INC.

Relevant legal provisions:
-

Relevant legal provisions (EPC 1973):
EPC Art. 56

Keyword:
"Inventive step (yes)"

Decisions cited:
-

Catchword:
-



Case Number: T 0191/11 - 3.4.03

D E C I S I O N
of the Technical Board of Appeal 3.4.03
of 3 May 2012

Appellant:
(Applicant)

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Representative:

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Decision under appeal:

Decision of the Examining Division of the
European Patent Office posted 19 October 2010
refusing European patent application
No. 98309877.3 pursuant to Article 97(2) EPC.

Composition of the Board:

Chairman: G. Eliasson
Members: E. Wolff
T. Bokor

Summary of Facts and Submissions

I. This is an appeal from the decision of the examining division to refuse European patent application 98309877 for the reason that the invention as claimed did not involve an inventive step taking into account the disclosure in the following document:

D1: DE 4 121 985 A

The following further documents were also discussed before the examining division:

D2: US 5 056 643 A

D4: US 5 400 891 A

II. The appellant has requested that the decision under appeal be set aside and a patent be granted on the basis of the sole request filed at the oral proceedings.

III. The only claims of the request are independent claims and read as follows:

"1. A coin mechanism comprising coin dispensing means (14), a cashbox (40) arranged in use above the coin dispensing means, wherein the cashbox is a multi-denominational store for receiving and storing coins of a plurality of denominations, wherein the cashbox is not dispensing coins as change, and wherein the coins in the cashbox are not stored in an ordered manner, at least one coin store (36, 38; 56, 58) for dispensing coins as change, which is arranged for storing coins of one denomination only,

*a coin reject path (12), and
a coin return tray (16),
characterized by means for allowing coins to be removed
from the cashbox (40) in place within the coin
mechanism,
wherein the cashbox (40) comprises a door (42) to
enable coins to be removed from the cashbox (40),
wherein coins are removable from the cashbox by way of
the coin reject path (12) and the coin return tray (16),
and
wherein the cashbox (40) is in a cassette (48) which is
removable from and replaceable in the coin mechanism.*

*2. A vending machine comprising a coin mechanism
according to claim 1."*

IV. In support of the request, the appellant argued essentially as follows.

The aim of the invention was to provide a coin mechanism which simplifies removal of cash which has accumulated in the coin mechanism and which is not intended to be dispensed to users. The solution adopted by the invention was, on the one hand, to provide the cashbox with a door which can be opened to discharge its accumulated contents via the coin reject path into the coin return tray. On the other hand, the cashbox was also part of a cassette which can be removed from the coin mechanism and replaced as a whole. This gave the service personnel collecting the contents of the cashbox the option of collecting the coins either in situ via the return tray or removing and replacing the cash box as part of the exchangeable cassette.

The argument put forward by the examining division in its decision, which was that the claimed arrangement was obvious over the arrangement in document D1, was to be rejected because it incorrectly equates a cashbox with a hopper. Hoppers, unlike cashboxes, only stored coins of a single denomination which can then be counted and dispensed to users. The term cashbox as such referred to a coin storage in which coins of two or more denominations are held, which are not subsequently dispensed to users. In order to make this distinction clear in the claim, the cashbox was now explicitly defined in the claim to have these features.

Neither document D1 over which the application was rejected on the grounds of obviousness, nor any of the other cited prior art documents showed or even hinted at the claimed arrangement in which the cashbox can either be emptied in situ from the coin return tray or by removing the whole cassette including the cashbox. The invention as claimed could not therefore be considered to lack an inventive step.

Reasons for the decision

1. The appeal is admissible.
2. Amendment (Art. 123(2) EPC)
 - 2.1 Claim 1 of the request is a combination of originally filed claims 1 to 5 and 7 to 12, with some minor changes of the wording as well as of the order in which the features are presented. The additional feature that "coins in the cashbox are not stored in an ordered

manner" is taken from page 9, lines 5&6 of the application as originally filed.

- 2.2 Claim 2 was introduced only during examination. Its subject matter is clearly derivable from the application as filed, e.g., the first paragraph of the application.
- 2.3 Minor amendments have also been made to the description to reflect the presence of two independent claims in the request (page 2a, lines 25&26), and to remove a superfluous statement at the end of the description.
- 2.4 The board is satisfied that none of the amendments made introduces subject matter going beyond the contents of the application as filed.
- 3. Novelty and Inventive step
 - 3.1 The novelty of the invention as claimed was not in dispute.
 - 3.2 To assess whether the claimed invention involves an inventive step it is necessary to compare the invention with the nearest prior art. In the present case, it is document D1 that constitutes the nearest prior art.
 - 3.3 Document D1 discloses, in the terminology of claim 1 of the application:
A coin mechanism comprising
coin dispensing means (6, 24),
a cashbox (26) arranged in use above the coin
dispensing means,

wherein the cashbox is a multi-denominational store for receiving and storing coins of a plurality of denominations,
wherein the cashbox is not dispensing coins as change,
and
wherein the coins in the cashbox are not stored in an ordered manner,
at least one coin store (hopper 19) for dispensing coins as change [into coin tray 24], which is arranged for storing coins of one denomination only,
a coin reject path (15), and
a coin return tray (6).

The invention as claimed in claim 1 differs from the prior art document D1 as follows:

- the cashbox arranged in use above the coin dispensing means is, unlike in D1, not just positioned above the level of the coin dispensing means but is functionally connected to the coin dispensing means,

- the coin mechanism further comprises the features of the characterising portion of the claim:

- (i) means for allowing coins to be removed from the cashbox (40) in place within the coin mechanism,

- (ii) the cashbox (40) comprises a door (42) to enable coins to be removed from the cashbox (40)

- (iii) coins are removable from the cashbox by way of the coin reject path (12) and the coin return tray (16), and

- (iv) the cashbox (40) is in a cassette (48) which is removable from and replaceable in the coin mechanism.

3.4 On the basis of these differences, the board accepts the appellant's argument that the problem addressed and solved by the invention is to provide an easier and

more flexible manner of removing cash from the coin mechanism.

3.5 The board cannot, however, accept the argument inherent in the case made by the examining division in rejecting claim 1 of the main request before it, which is that there is no difference in substance between the hopper 19 of document D1 and the cashbox as claimed in claim 1 (see also paragraph 3.2 of the decision of the examining division).

3.6 As argued by the appellant, an important difference between a cashbox and a hopper is that a hopper stores coins for the purpose of subsequently dispensing them, and for that reason holds only a single denomination of coins. In contrast, a cashbox is simply a repository for some or all of the coin denominations which may be used with the coin mechanism. Although coins will obviously need to be removed from the cashbox at intervals, this removal is of a different kind from the dispensing of coins which a hopper performs, which is dispensing coins to a precise monetary value to the user. This particular difference between a cashbox and a hopper is further emphasised by the explicit mention in claim 1 of the function and limitations of the cashbox.

3.7 Document D1 discloses two further embodiments in which all the cashboxes are hoppers. However despite fulfilling the function of a cashbox, each of the hoppers still holds only coins of a single denomination. The board accepts that at the priority date of the invention hoppers storing two or more denominations of coins were not known. A clear line can therefore be

drawn between the hopper cashboxes of document D1 and the cashbox of claim 1 which is explicitly stated to be a multi-denominational coin store. Also, since hoppers must be able to count out and dispense coins to a precise amount, there can be no suggestion that the coin dispensing mechanism of the hopper could be replaced by a plain door which, when opened, simply discharges all the coins contained in the hopper.

3.8 Also discussed during prosecution of the application before the examining division was document D2 which appears at first sight to disclose a cashbox which also dispenses coins. However, closer inspection shows that the coin receptacle labelled cashbox 8 is merely a intermediate coin store that "is provided for retaining coins in the event that the user interrupts the payment process with the coins that he has inserted into the slot 3" (column 3, lines 18-25). In other words the intermediate coin storage, cashbox 8, is not a cashbox in the sense of claim 1 in that it merely holds the coins paid in the course of a single payment in order to avoid having to count out and return coins to the same value as those already inserted should the user wish to abort the transaction.

3.9 Document D4 was stated by the appellant to be the prior art starting point for the two-part form of claim 1 of the request. Just like document D2, it therefore lacks features enumerated in the characterising portion of claim 1 of the request. While document D1 discloses a coin mechanism in which the cash box is located in a removable cassette, there is no suggestion in document D4 that the cashbox could be provided with any other means for removing the accumulated coins, and

definitely no suggestion that a door would provide an alternative way of removing the coins from the cash box in situ.

3.10 For the foregoing reasons, the board concludes that the solution provided by the claimed invention to the problem of removing cash from a coin mechanism would not have been obvious to the skilled person. In particular, the board takes the view that the invention amounts to more than replacing a cashbox with a hopper, or vice versa.

4. It follows that the invention as claimed in claim 1 involves an inventive step within the meaning of Article 56 EPC 1973.

Order

For these reasons it is decided that:

1. The decision under appeal is set aside.
2. The case is remitted to the first instance with the order to grant a patent in the following version:

Claims: 1 and 2 filed during the oral proceedings.

Description: pages 1, 2, 2a and 3 to 14 filed during the oral proceedings

Drawings: sheets 1/7 - 7/7 as filed with letter dated 9 February 1999

Registrar:

Chair:

S. Sánchez Chiquero

G. Eliasson