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[54] **RAPID PROTOTYPING SYSTEM WITH FILAMENT SUPPLY SPOOL MONITORING**

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[52] **U.S. Cl.** **425/145**; 242/563.2; 264/308;
425/162; 425/169; 425/375

[58] **Field of Search** 425/375, 162,
425/169, 145; 242/563, 563.2, 600; 264/308

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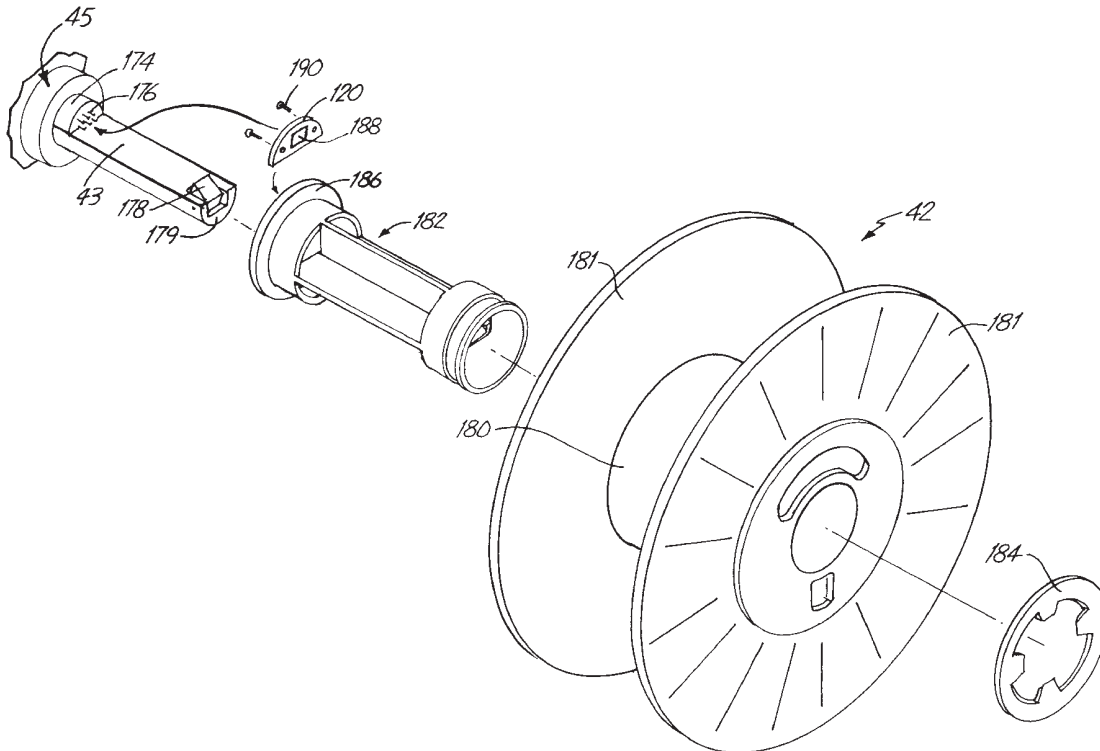
Primary Examiner—Robert Davis

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[57] **ABSTRACT**

A filament spool used in a rapid prototyping system carries a circuit which maintains data regarding the type and amount of filament on the spool. When the spool is mounted onto a spindle in the rapid prototyping system, the circuit is connected to the electronic control of the system. The data indicating the electronic control of the system. The data indicating the amount of filament on the spool is updated as filament is used by the system.

19 Claims, 9 Drawing Sheets



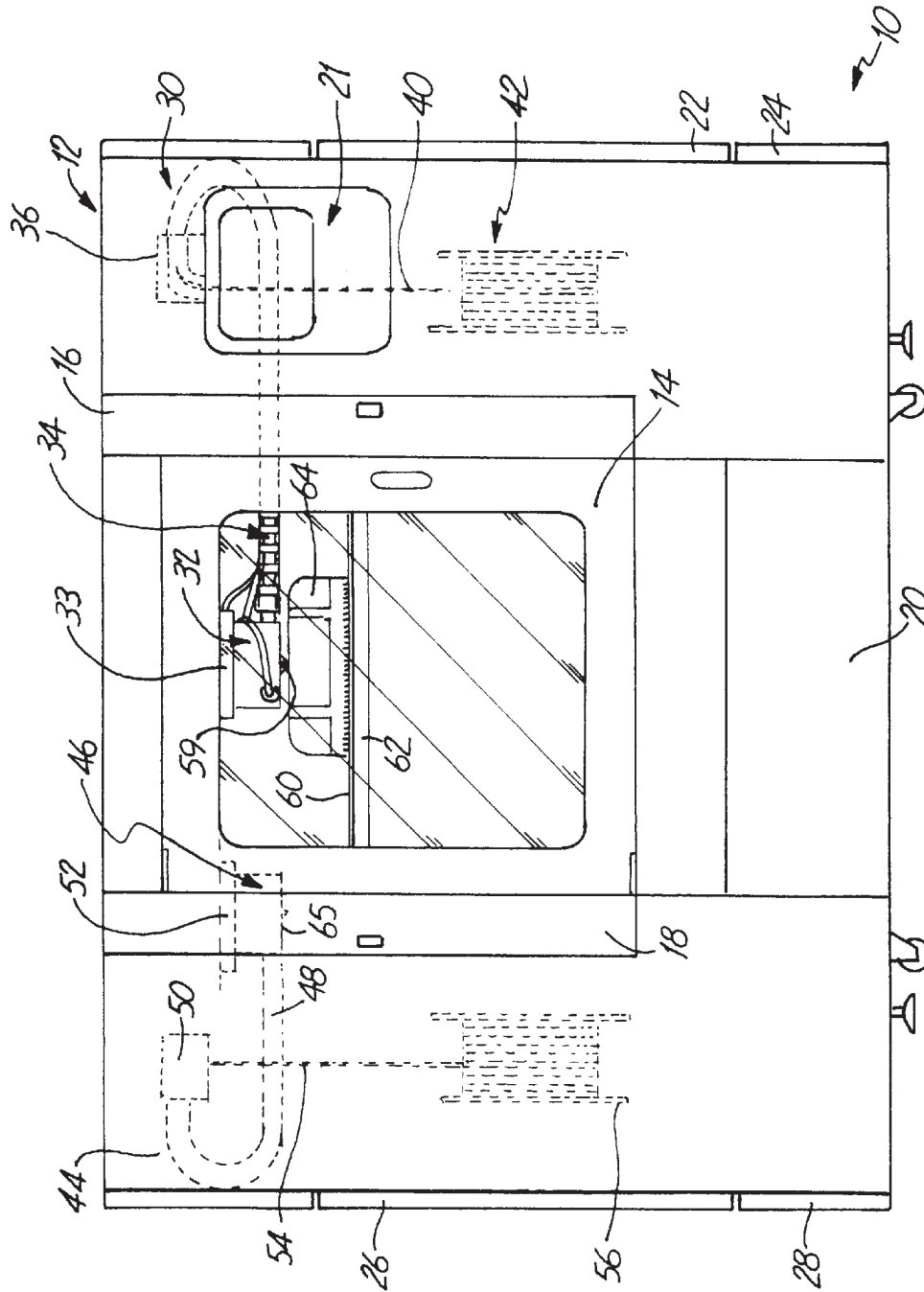


Fig. 1

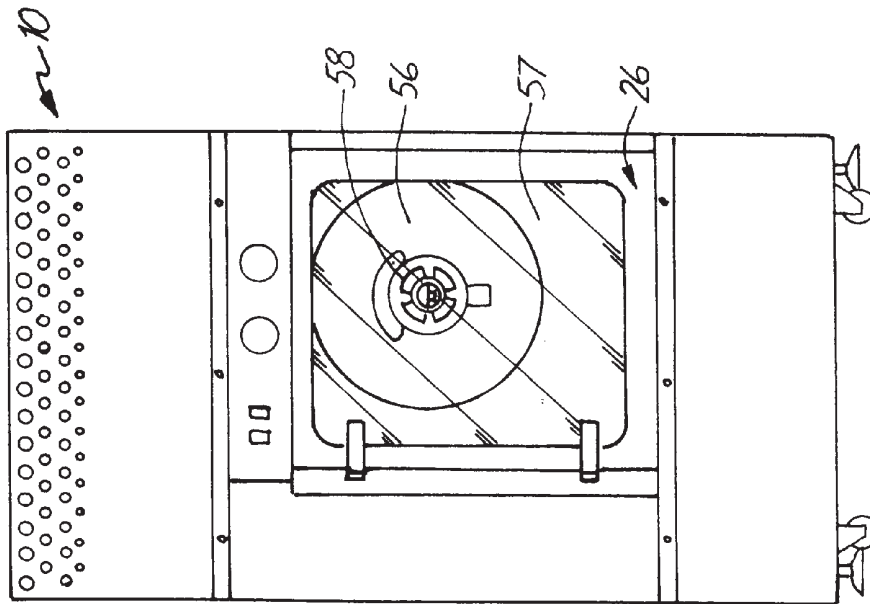


Fig. 3

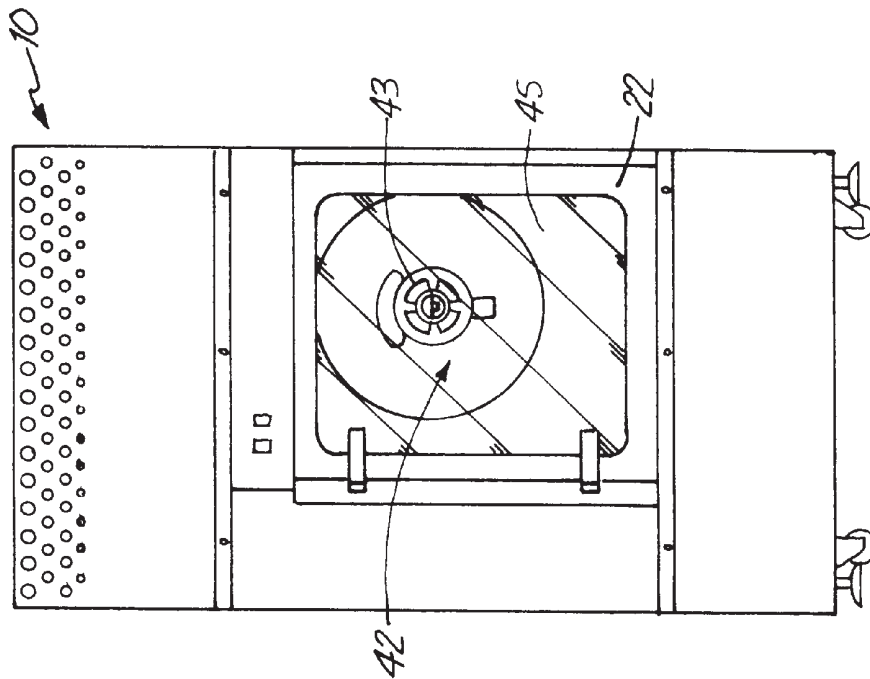
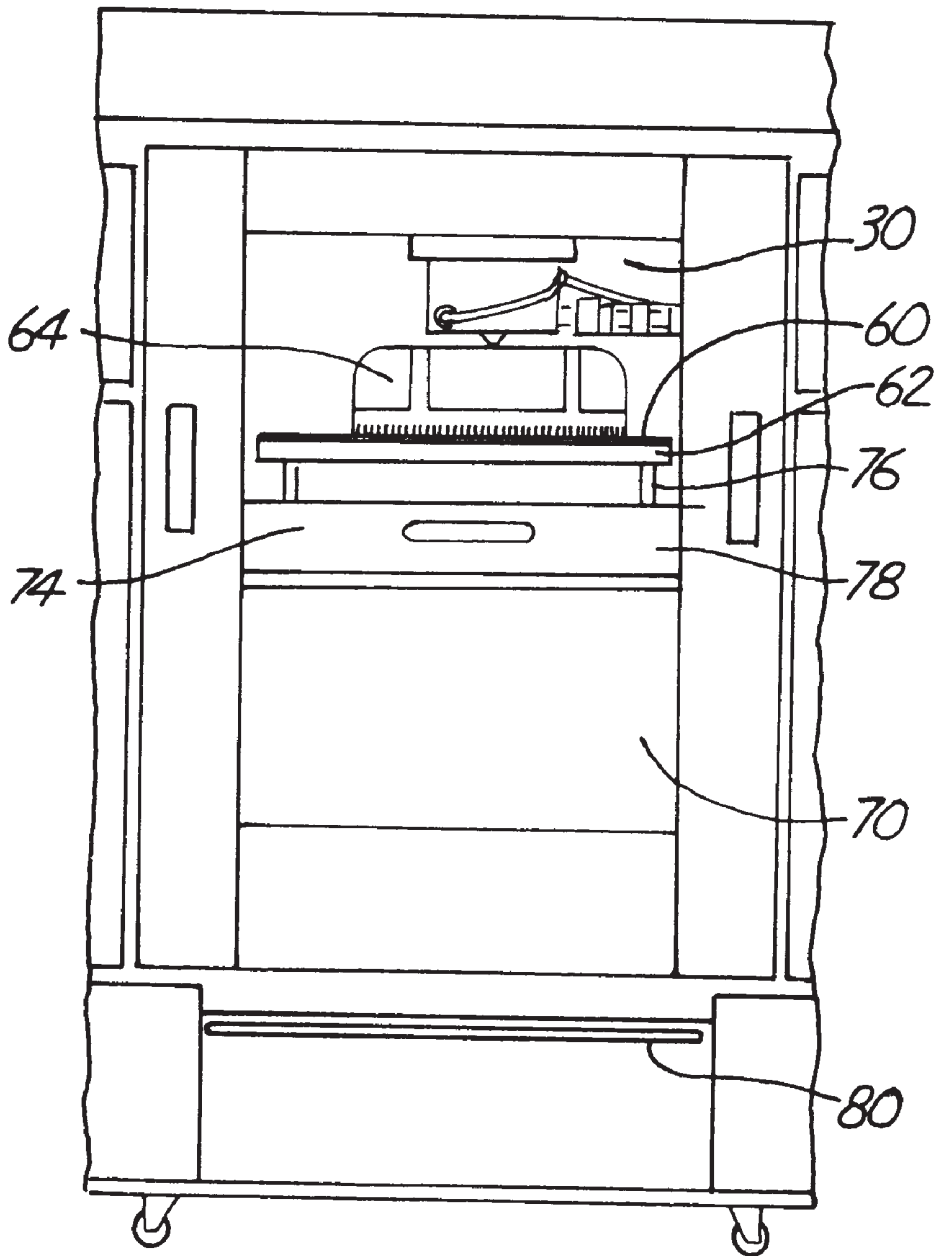
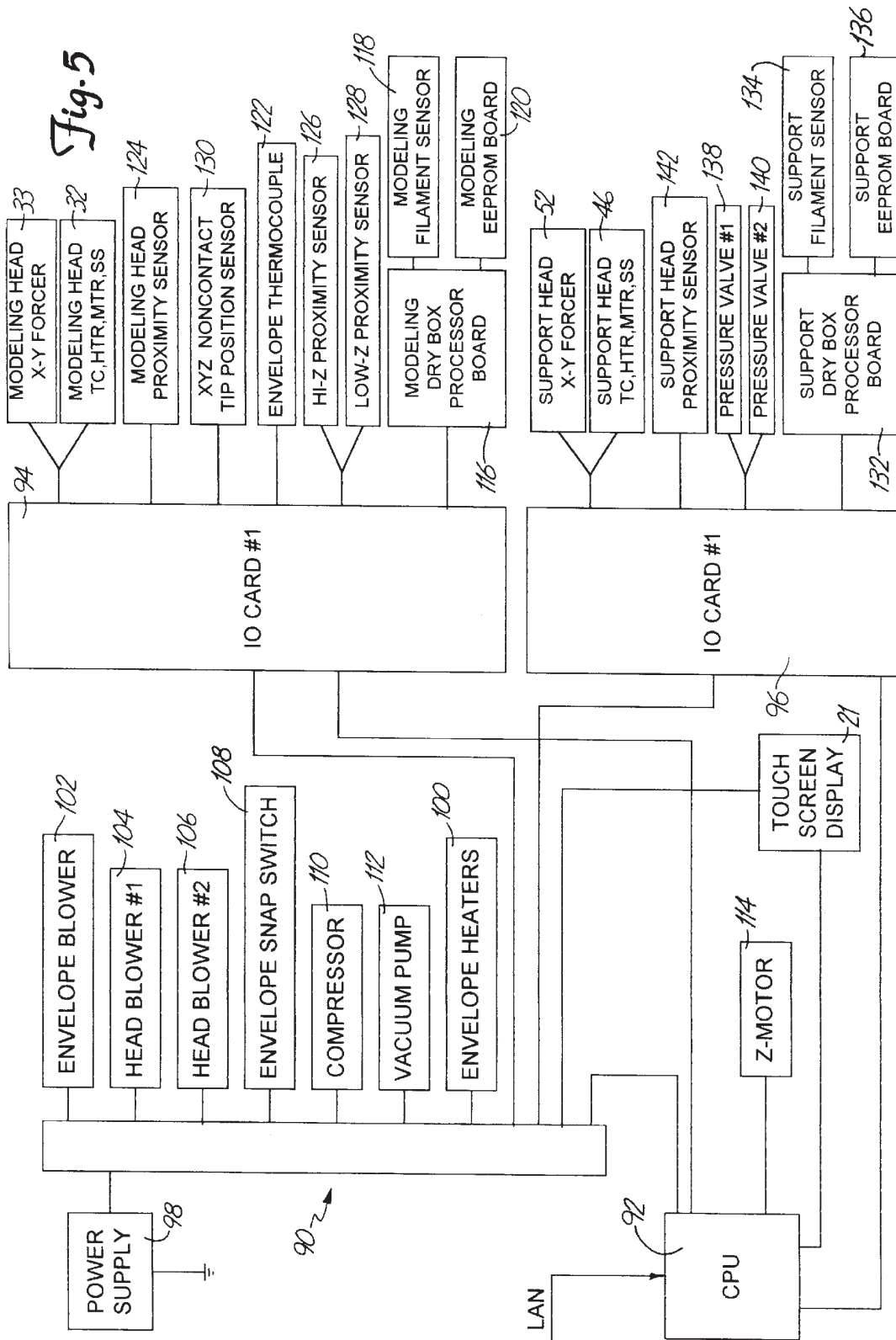
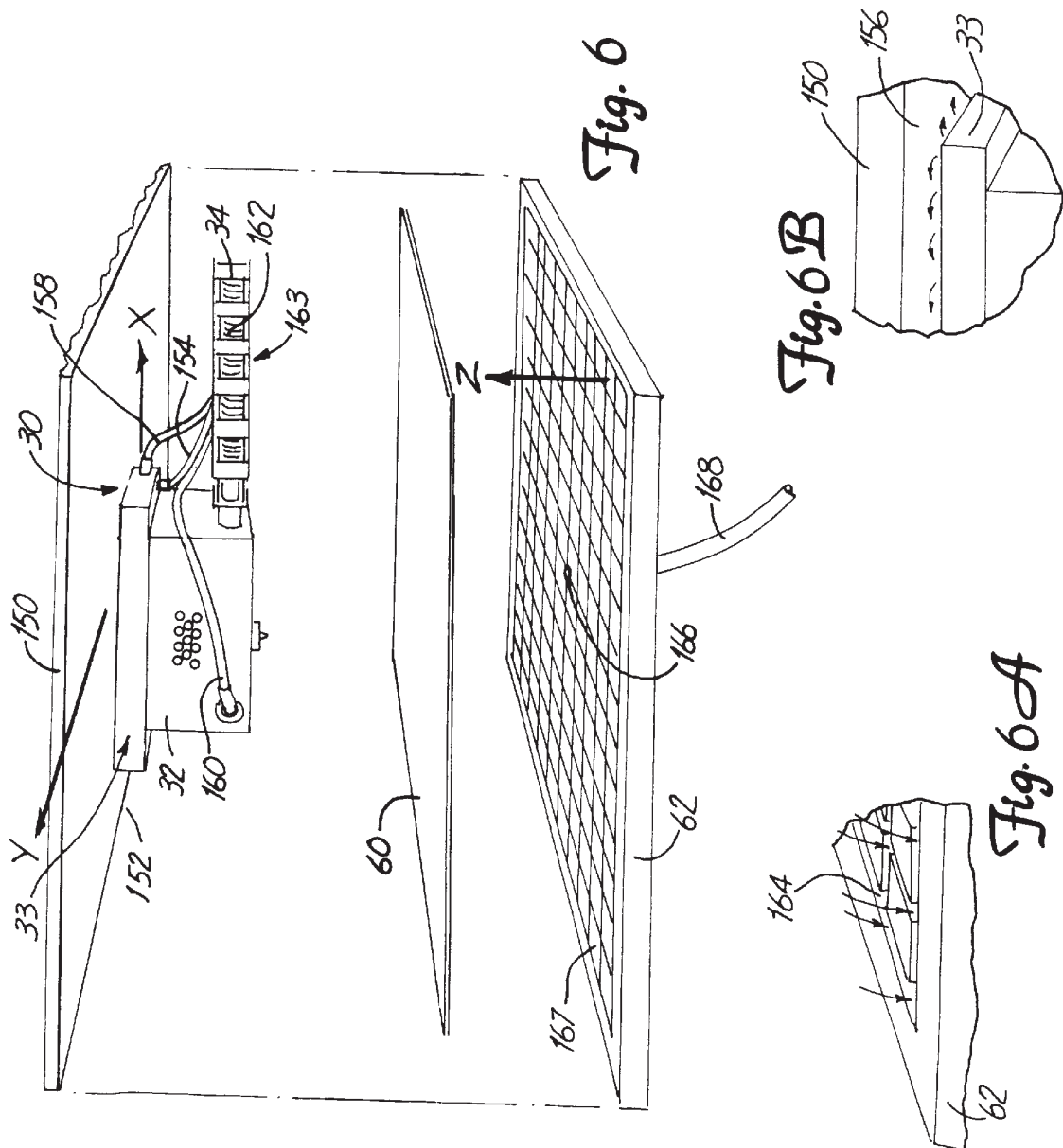


Fig. 2

Fig. 4







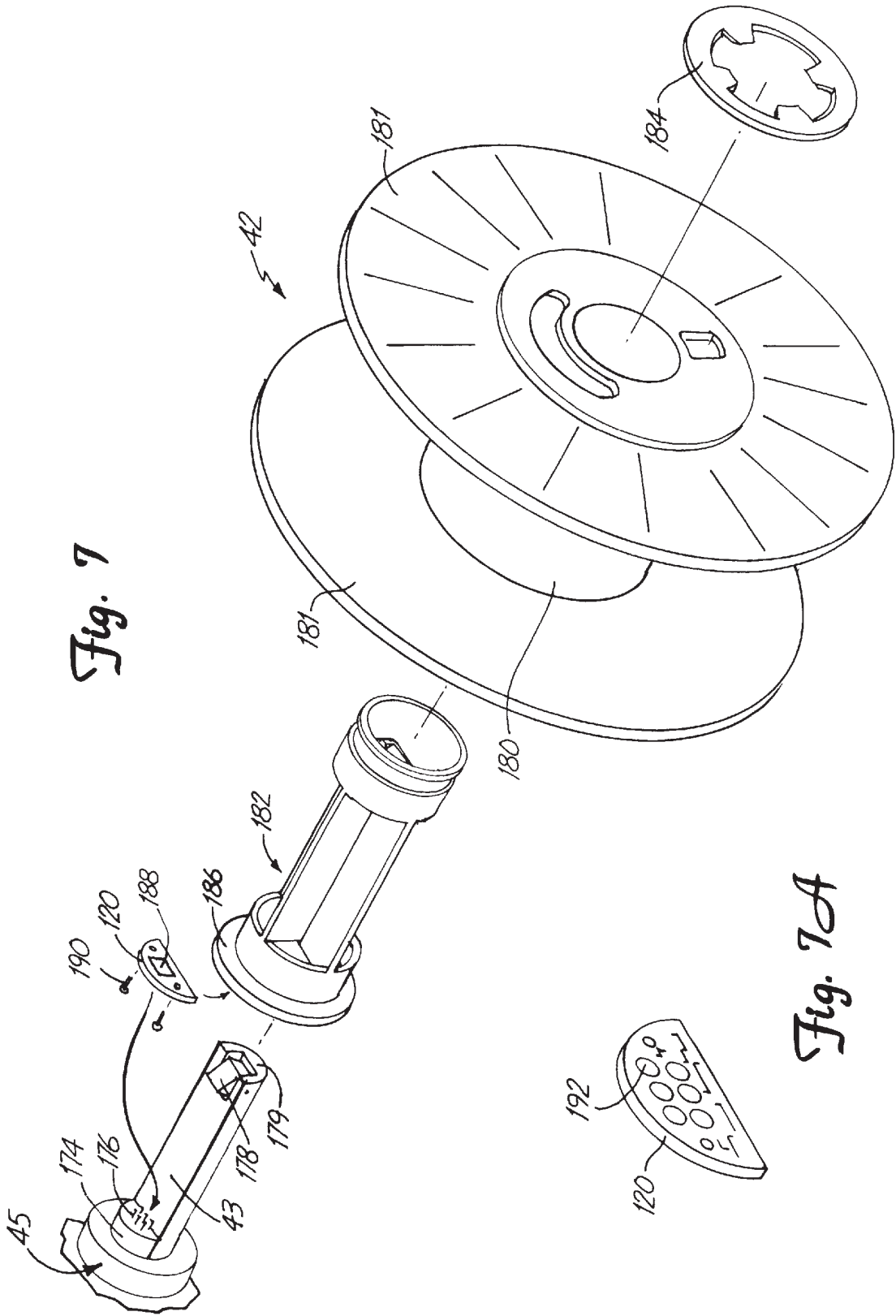
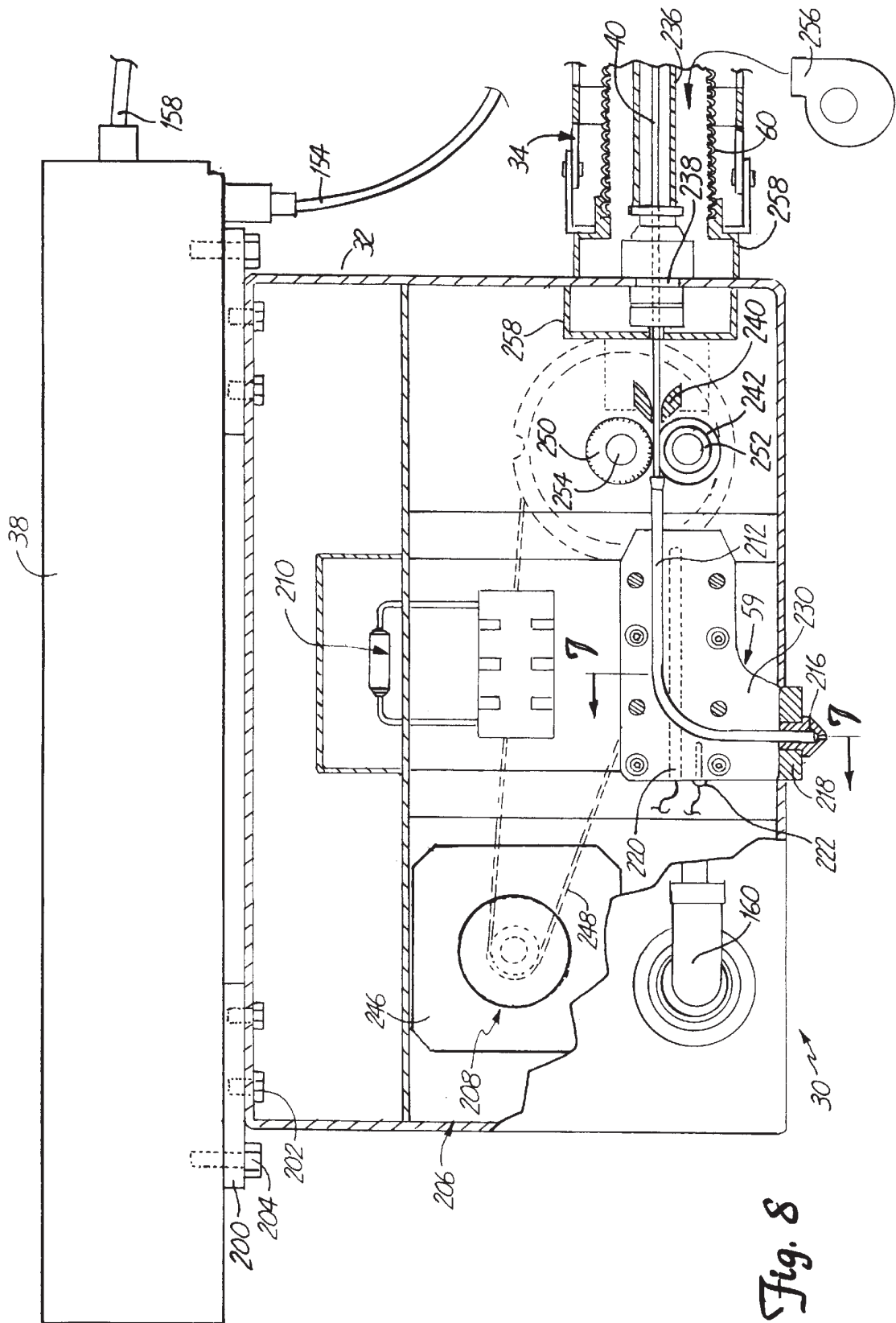
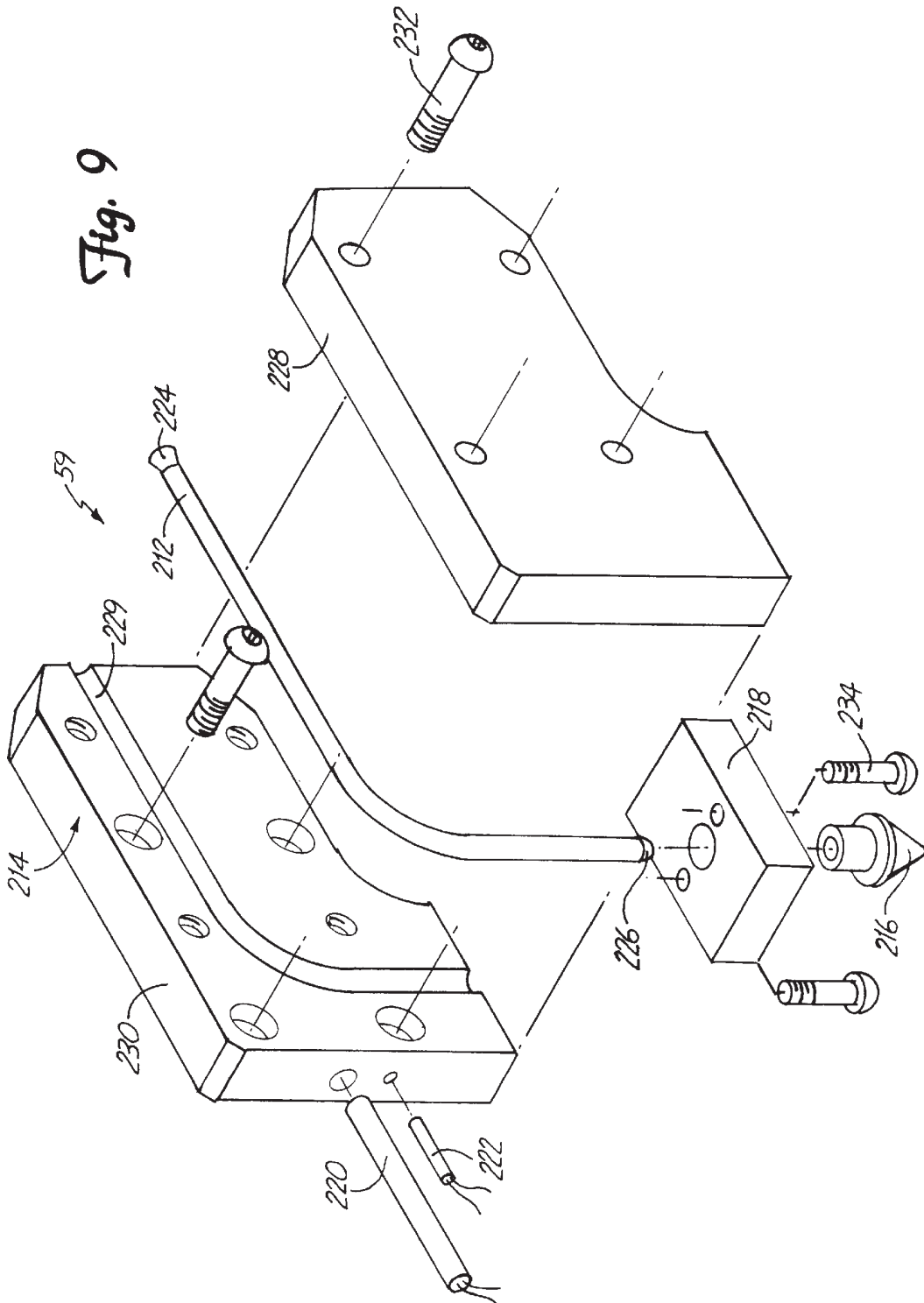


Fig. 7

Fig. 7A





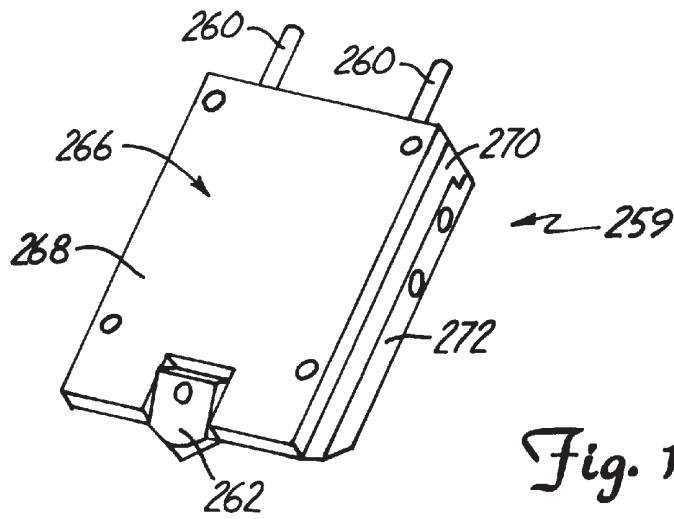


Fig. 10A

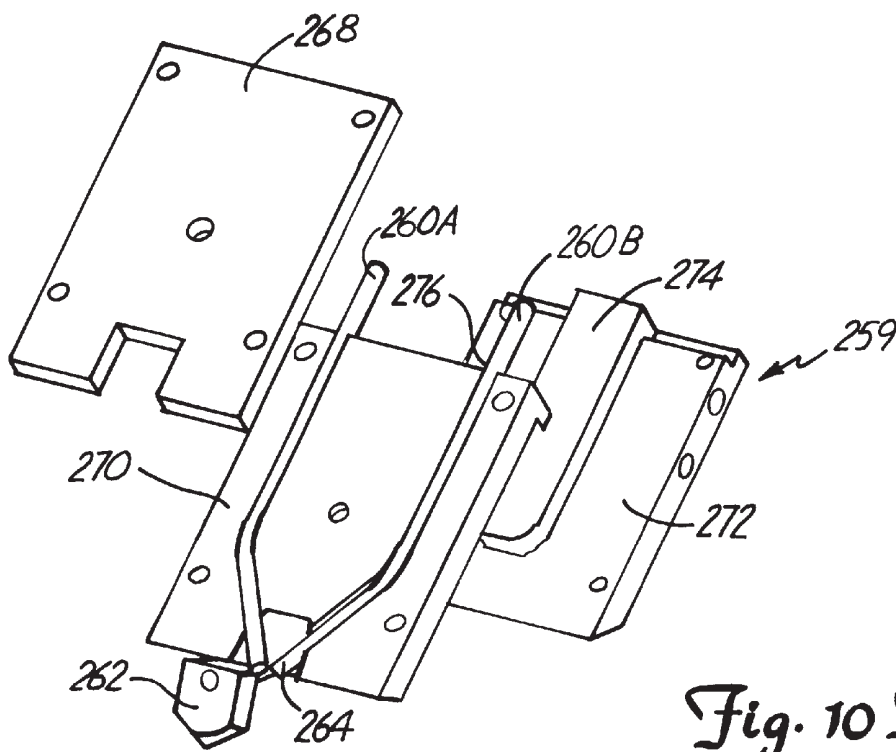


Fig. 10B

RAPID PROTOTYPING SYSTEM WITH FILAMENT SUPPLY SPOOL MONITORING

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to the field of three-dimensional prototype modeling. In particular, the present invention is a rapid prototyping system for forming three-dimensional objects of predetermined design by depositing multiple layers of a material in its fluid state from an extrusion head onto a base. The material is selected and its temperature is controlled so that it solidifies upon extrusion or dispensing onto the base, with the build-up of the multiple layers forming the desired object. In the present invention, three-dimensional objects are formed using filament supplied from a spool having an associated circuit for maintaining data regarding type and amount of filament on the spool.

A rapid prototyping system involves the making of three-dimensional objects based upon design data which is provided from a computer aided design (CAD) system. Examples of apparatus and methods for rapid prototyping of three-dimensional objects by depositing layers of solidifying material are described in Crump U.S. Pat. No. 5,121,329, Batchelder et al. U.S. Pat. No. 5,303,141, Crump U.S. Pat. No. 5,340,433, Batchelder U.S. Pat. No. 5,402,351, Batchelder U.S. Pat. No. 5,426,722, Crump et al. U.S. Pat. No. 5,503,785, and Abrams et al. U.S. Pat. No. 5,587,913, all of which are assigned to Stratasy, Inc. Rapid prototyping systems having a filament feed, or, alternatively, a solid rod feed, are described in the Crump '329 patent and the Crump '433 patent.

In a rapid prototyping system that uses a solid rod feed, rods or "wafers" of modeling material are typically stored in a cassette which dispenses the rods to the system, as described in co-pending application Ser. No. 08/556,583 which is now U.S. Pat. No. 5,764,521, assigned to Stratasy, Inc. In a rapid prototyping system that uses a filament feed, a length of filament wrapped around a filament spool supplies filament to the system.

In using either a filament feed or a solid rod feed, it is desirable for the control system of the rapid prototyping system to keep track of the amount of modeling material remaining in a cassette or on a spool. It is also desirable for the control system to know the type of modeling material that is on the cassette or spool, and the proper extrusion parameters for dispensing the material.

A rod dispensing cassette having an electronically readable and writeable memory device that provides data to the control system is described in co-pending application Ser. No. 08/556,583. The memory device is attached to the cassette so that electrical contact is made to the control system through a connector when the cassette is manually inserted. The memory device serves as an electronic tag which informs the control system of the type of material that is in the cassette, the proper extrusion parameters for dispensing the material, the current number of rods in the cassette, and the cassette serial number.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is a filament spool and a filament supplied rapid prototyping system that provides a circuit for monitoring data concerning the filament on the filament spool. Specifically, the present invention provides data regarding the type and amount of filament on the spool, and notifies the operator if the type of filament does not match the type of material identified by object specification data or

if the amount of filament on the spool is insufficient to create a desired object. The spool of the present invention further inhibits operation of the system before the filament is completely removed from the spool, so that the operator may grab a hold of and remove the filament from the filament drive and extrusion head, thereby facilitating removal of the used spool and filament and subsequent replacement with a new filament spool.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is an exterior front elevation view of the preferred embodiment of the invention, showing the system in a build state.

FIG. 2 is an exterior elevation view of the right side of the preferred embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 3 is an exterior elevation view of the left side of the preferred embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 4 is a front elevation view of the prototyping envelope, showing the system in a build state.

FIG. 5 is an electrical block diagram of the control system of the preferred embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 6 is a partially exploded perspective view of the prototyping envelope showing the modeling extrusion head in a build position.

FIG. 6A is a detailed view of a portion of FIG. 5 illustrating the vacuum platen grooves.

FIG. 6B is a detailed view of a portion of FIG. 5 illustrating the air bearing of the linear motor.

FIG. 7 is an exploded view of the filament spindle and filament spool shown in FIGS. 2 and 3.

FIG. 7A is a perspective view of the outward face of the EEPROM board.

FIG. 8 is a front elevation of the modeling extrusion head, with portions shown in sectional.

FIG. 9 is an exploded view of the liquifier.

FIGS. 10A and 10B show an alternative embodiment of the liquifier.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

In the preferred embodiment, the rapid prototyping system 10 is contained within a cabinet 12, as shown in FIG. 1. The cabinet 12 has doors and covers located on a front, left and right sides thereof. On the front of cabinet 12, there is an envelope door 14, a modeling waste tray door 16 to the right of envelope door 14, a touch screen display panel 21 to the right of modeling waste tray door 16, a support waste tray door 18 to the left of envelope door 14, and platform cover 20 below envelope door 14. A modeling drybox door 22 and an electronics bay cover 24 are located on the right hand side of cabinet 12. A support drybox door 26 is located above a compressor bay cover 28 on the left hand side of cabinet 12.

The upper right hand side of cabinet 12 houses a modeling extrusion apparatus 30, which comprises a modeling extrusion head 32 attached below a modeling x-y forcer 33 and connected to the end of a modeling arm 34 which rotates about a modeling pivot joint 36. Modeling extrusion apparatus 30 receives a filament of modeling material 40 from a modeling filament spool 42 located in a modeling drybox 45 (FIG. 2) below pivot joint 36 and accessible through modeling drybox door 22. Drybox 45 maintains low humidity conditions to optimize the condition of filament 40. Modeling extrusion apparatus 30 is used to dispense modeling material in layers onto a substrate 60. Modeling filament

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spool **42** mounted on a modeling spindle **43** in drybox **45** is more clearly shown in FIG. 2.

The left-hand side of cabinet **12** houses a support extrusion apparatus **44**, which is comprised of a support extrusion head **46** attached below a support x-y forcer **52** and connected to the end of a support arm **48** which rotates about a support pivot joint **50**. Support extrusion apparatus **44** receives a filament of support material **54** from a support filament spool **56** located in a support filament drybox **57** (FIG. 3) beneath support pivot joint **50** and accessible through support drybox door **26**. Drybox **57** maintains low humidity conditions to optimize the condition of filament **54**. Support extrusion apparatus **44** is used to dispense support material in layers. Support filament spool **56** mounted on a support spindle **58** in drybox **57** is more clearly shown in FIG. 3.

Modeling material extruded in layers by modeling extrusion apparatus **30** forms object **64**. The support material is used to support any over-hanging portions as the object is being built up. In building an object, over-hanging segments or portions which are not directly supported in the final geometry by the modeling material require a support structure. Support filament **54** is supplied to support extrusion head **46** which deposits material to provide the required support. The support material, like the modeling material, is deposited in multiple layers.

In building an object, only one extrusion apparatus at a time is in an active, extruding state. In FIG. 1, the system **10** is shown building a three-dimensional object **64**, with modeling extrusion apparatus **30** in an active build state, and support extrusion apparatus **44** in a home rest position. When modeling extrusion apparatus **30** is in an active state, modeling filament **40** travels through arm **34** to extrusion head **32**, where it is heated to a liquid state. Layers of modeling material in a molten state are deposited by head **32** through a liquifier **59** protruding through a bottom surface of head **32**, onto substrate **60**. Substrate **60** is supported upon a vacuum platen **62** and held in place by vacuum forces. When support extrusion apparatus **44** is in an active build state, support head **46** similarly receives support filament **54** via arm **48**, and heats it to a liquid state. Layers of support material in a molten state are deposited by head **46** through a liquifier **65** protruding through a bottom surface of head **32**, onto substrate **60**.

The filaments of modeling and support materials are each a solid material which can be heated relatively rapidly above its solidification temperature, and which will very quickly solidify upon a small drop in temperature after being dispensed from the extrusion head. A composition having a relatively high adhesion to itself upon which it is deposited when hot is selected for the modeling material. A composition having a relatively low adhesion to the model material upon which it is deposited is selected for the support material, so that the support material forms a weak, breakable bond with the modeling material and to itself. When the object is complete, the support material is broken away by the operator, leaving the object formed of modeling material intact.

The modeling material is preferably a thermoplastic material. Other materials that may be used for the modeling material filament include bees wax, casting wax, machinable and industrial waxes, paraffin, a variety of thermoplastic resins, metals and metal alloys. Suitable metals include silver, gold, platinum, nickel, alloys of those metals, aluminum, copper, gold, lead, magnesium, steel, titanium, pewter, manganese and bronze. Glass, and particularly

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Corning glass would also be satisfactory. Chemical setting materials, including two-part epoxies would also be suitable. A modeling material found to be particularly suitable is an acrylonitrile-butadiene-styrene (ABS) composition. A material found to be particularly suitable for the support material is an acrylonitrile-butadiene-styrene (ABS) composition with a polystyrene copolymer added as a filler (up to about 80%) to create a lower surface energy of the ABS composition, and to provide a lower cohesion and adhesion of the material. Both filaments of material are preferably of a very small diameter, on the order of 0.070 inch. The filament may, however, be as small as 0.001 inch in diameter.

FIG. 4 shows a build envelope **70** which is the central interior region of the system **10**, accessible through envelope door **14**. In FIG. 4, door **14**, platform cover **20**, and the adjoining face plates of cabinet **12** are removed. The envelope **70** is where a three-dimensional object is built. Envelope **70** contains a build platform **74** which comprises vacuum platen **62** supported by a set of legs **76**, which ride on a platform drawer **78**. Build platform **74** moves vertically in a z-direction within envelope **70**. Movement of build platform **74** is controlled by a z-drive chain **80**, driven by a z-motor **114** (shown schematically in FIG. 5). Build platform **74** remains stationary during formation of a single layer. As each additional layer is deposited on substrate **60**, build platform **74** is lowered slightly so as to allow a space for forming the subsequent layer. Platform drawer **78** pulls forward to allow the operator ready access to vacuum platen **62**.

An electrical system **90**, shown schematically in FIG. 5, controls the system **10**. A CPU **92**, together with first input/output (IO) card **94** and second input/output (IO) card **96**, control the overall operation of the electrical system **90**. CPU **92** receives instructions from the operator through communication from touch screen display **21**. Similarly, CPU **92** communicates with touch screen display **21** to display messages for the operator and to request input from the operator. CPU **92** in turn communicates with IO cards **94** and **96**. A power supply **98** supplies power to electrical system **90**.

Envelope heaters **100** and envelope blower **102** establish and maintain a temperature in the envelope **70** of approximately 80° C. An envelope thermal cutout (THCO) switch **108** carries current through the machine's main contractor actuation coil. If the temperature reaches approximately 120° C. the THCO switch opens and current through the main contractor to the system is interrupted. The head blowers **104** and **106** supply air at ambient temperature to cool the pathway of filaments **40** and **54** as they travel into modeling extrusion head **32** and support extrusion head **46**, respectively.

CPU **92** also controls a compressor **110**. Compressor **110** supplies compressed air alternately to x-y forcers **33** and **52** provides a vacuum to platen **62**. CPU **92** provides layering drive signals to selectively actuate the z-motor **114**, which drives platform **74** along the z-axis.

IO Card **94**, under the control of CPU **92**, sends and receives signals associated with modeling extrusion head **32** and the filament supply thereto. IO card **94** sends drive signals that control the movement and position of x-y forcer **33**. IO card **94** further sends and receives signals to and from modeling extrusion head **32**, which includes a thermocouple **222** (TC), a heater **246** (HTR), a motor **246** (MTR) and a safety switch **210** (SS) (shown in FIGS. 8-10). Safety switch **210** shuts down the system if the temperature in the modeling extrusion head **32** gets too high.

IO card **94** monitors data concerning modeling material filament spool **42** through communications with a modeling drybox processor board **116**. Modeling drybox processor board **116** is mounted inside of modeling filament drybox **45**. It receives data concerning the modeling filament from a modeling filament sensor **118** (located at the inlet to filament guide **236**, shown in FIG. **8**) and a modeling EEPROM board **120**, which is a circuit board carrying an electronically readable and writeable device (EEPROM **188**, shown in FIG. **7**) attached to modeling material filament spool **42**. EEPROM board **120** acts as an electronic tag with a variety of functions. It informs the control system **90** of the type of filament that is on the spool and of the lineal feet of filament on the spool. As filament **40** is wound off of the spool **42**, the CPU keeps track of how much material was commanded to be extruded, subtracts this amount from the total on the EEPROM **188** and writes the new value to the EEPROM **188**. Preferably, the data on EEPROM board **120** is encrypted so that it can be updated only by the CPU **92**. Filament sensor **118** senses and indicates the presence or absence of filament at the entrance to the filament feed tube. With filament remaining on the spool the operator can then grab ahold of the filament and extract it from the extrusion head **32**. Unloading of the used filament and spool and reloading of a new spool is thereby made easier.

CPU **92** receives the modeling filament data from IO card **94**. At the outset of a job, the CPU **92** will calculate whether a spool **42** or **56** contains enough filament to complete the job. Operator notification is then provided via touch screen display **21**, stating either that the filament is adequate to complete the job, or that the filament spool will need replacement and reloading during the process. Also at the outset of a job, the CPU verifies that the modeling filament material on the spool is the same material specified in object data. If these materials are not the same, an operator notification is provided via touch screen display **21**, providing the operator an opportunity to switch spools.

IO card **94** additionally monitors the temperature in the envelope **70** via signals received from envelope thermocouple **122**, and it sends signals to and from a modeling head proximity sensor **124**, a high-z proximity sensor **126**, a low-z proximity sensor **128** and an xyz noncontact tip position sensor **130**, all of which are described below.

IO card **96** serves similar functions as IO card **94**, for the support extrusion head **52** and the filament supply thereto. IO card **96** sends drive signals that control the movement and position of x-y forcer **52**. IO card **96** further sends and receives signals to and from support extrusion head **46**, which includes a thermocouple (TC), a heater (HTR), a motor (MTR) and a safety switch (SS). The safety switch SS shuts down the system if the temperature in the modeling extrusion head **46** gets too high.

IO card **96** monitors data concerning support material filament spool **56** through communications with a support drybox processor board **132**. It receives data concerning the support filament from a support filament sensor **134** and a support EEPROM board **136**, attached to support material filament spool **56**. EEPROM board **136** acts as an electronic tag, in the same manner as EEPROM board **120**. CPU **92** receives the support filament data from support processor board **132**, and uses it to provide operator information in the same manner as described above with respect to the modeling filament.

IO card **96** further controls a first pressure valve **138** and a second pressure valve **140**, which alternately open and shut to direct the flow of air from compressor **110**. When valve

138 is closed and valve **140** is open, air from compressor **110** is directed to modeling head x-y forcer **33**. When valve **138** is open and valve **140** is closed, air from compressor **110** is directed to support head x-y forcer **52**. IO card **96** in addition communicates with support head proximity sensor **142**, which is described below.

To create an object using rapid prototyping system **10**, an operator must first power up the system by pressing a power on switch (not shown), located on touch screen display **21**. The system **10** then enters a maintenance mode, in which the system executes a routine to calibrate the locations of modeling extrusion head **32**, support extrusion head **46**, and build platform **74**. The calibration is done in two phases. In the first phase, the system initializes movement boundaries for the extrusion heads and the platform. Modeling head proximity sensor **124** initializes boundaries of the modeling head **32**, and support head proximity sensor **142** initializes boundaries of the support head **44**. High-z proximity sensor **126** and low-z proximity sensor **128** together initialize the boundaries of platform **74**. In the second stage, the xyz noncontact tip position sensor **130** initializes the position of the tips of liquifiers **59** and **65**. The xyz noncontact tip position sensor **130** is a magnetic sensor imbedded in platform **74** which detects position of the liquifier tips with three displacement degrees of freedom. Tip position sensor **130** is of the type described in co-pending application Ser. No. 08/556,583, which is incorporated by reference.

After calibration is complete, the system exits the maintenance mode and enters a standby state. In the standby state, the design of a three-dimensional object **64** is input to CPU **92** via a LAN network connection (shown schematically in FIG. **5**) utilizing CAD software such as QUICKSLICE® from Stratasys, Inc., which sections the object design into multiple layers to provide multiple-layer data corresponding to the particular shape of each separate layer. After the layering data is received, the system **10** enters a warmup phase, during which the envelope **70** is heated. Upon reaching a temperature of 80° C., the system enters a build state during which it creates the three-dimensional object.

The modeling extrusion apparatus **30** is shown more particularly in FIG. **6**. Modeling extrusion apparatus **30** is movable in a horizontal plane in x and y directions. Modeling x-y forcer **33** is positioned beneath and parallel to a planer stator **150**, which contains a grid of stator elements (not shown). Together x-y forcer **33** and planer stator **150** form an electromagnetic linear stepper motor **152**. Commercially available linear stepper motor, are available from Northern Magnetics, Inc. of Santa Clarita, Calif. The x-y forcer **33** consists of two sets of single-axis forcercs mounted at 90° to each other and permanent magnets which hold forcer **33** against the stator (not shown). A compressed air supply **154**, supplied by compressor **110**, is provided to x-y forcer **33** when modeling apparatus **30** is active. The compressed air supply **154** flows upward through x-y forcer **33** and exits through a top surface thereof, as is illustrated in FIG. **6B**. The exiting air forms an air bearing **156** between x-y forcer **33** and planer stator **150**, which allows nearly frictionless motion of the forcer in a horizontal plane below planer stator **150**. Drive signals to x-y forcer **33** are received through an electrical supply **158** which powers a stepper motor driver located within x-y forcer **33** (not shown) to achieve motion. Ordinarily, linear stepper motors of this type exhibit abrupt jarring motions which create mechanical resonance. This resonance typically precludes use of such motors in high-precision systems such as rapid prototyping systems. As described below, an umbilical to the head creates the surprising result of providing a damping effect

sufficient to allow high-precision deposition at speeds far exceeding those possible in prior art rapid prototyping systems.

Modeling extrusion arm **34** is a flexible chain carrier that is flexible in a horizontal plane and substantially rigid in other directions. Arm **34** carries within it air supply **154** and forcer electrical supply **158**. Arm **34** also carries within it a modeling extrusion head electrical supply **160** and a flexible air tube **162** which contains an ambient air supply and modeling filament **40**, as depicted in FIG. **8**. Arm **34** together with air supply **154**, forcer electrical supply **158**, extrusion head electrical supply **160** and air tube **162** containing filament **40** form an umbilical **163** to extrusion head **32**. The umbilical **163** creates the surprising result of damping the mechanical resonance of extrusion head **32** with respect to stator **30**, which is produced by acceleration and deceleration of the head **32** by forcer **33**. In the preferred embodiment, the combined weight of head **32** and x-y forcer **33** is less than or equal to approximately 8 lbs.

The resonant frequency is about 55 Hz for small oscillations and about 45 Hz for large oscillations, and the damping time to achieve 98% of the final value (which is equal to approximately 4 times the damping time constant) in this embodiment is less than or equal to about 150 ms. Oscillation and damping of mechanical resonance may be expressed as: $A=A_0 \sin(\omega t + \phi)e^{-t/\tau}$, where A =amplitude, A_0 =initial undamped amplitude, $w=2\pi f$, f =resonant frequency of the system, ϕ =a phase constant, t =time, and τ =damping time constant. Critical damping occurs when $\tau=1/\omega$. In the preferred embodiment described, the system is approximately a factor often from being critically damped. Further damping can, therefore, be added if desired. The damping time constant is affected by the combined weight of extrusion head **32** and x-y forcer **33**. The lighter the weight, the shorter the damping time constant.

Damping of mechanical resonance is achieved primarily by frictional forces produced during movement of umbilical **163**. Alternatively, other forms of damping means can be used, such as an oscillation dissipater (or shock-absorber) carried in extrusion head **32**. Also, further damping can be produced by decreasing the resistivity of the bucking of starter **150** (such as by using copper rather than steel) to increase eddy current losses within stator **150**.

While FIG. **5** has been described as depicting modeling apparatus **30**, it should be understood that support head apparatus **44** has a similar structure and has an umbilical of the same type described with reference to modeling apparatus **30**. Specifically, support x-y forcer **52** shares the planer stator **150** such that x-y forcer **52** and stator **150** form a second linear motor. Support apparatus **44** starts from the opposite side of cabinet **12** from modeling apparatus **30**. For ease of reference, only one head is shown in detail.

Vacuum platen **62** and substrate **60** are shown in an exploded fashion in FIG. **6**. Vacuum platen **62** has a top surface **167** comprised of a grid of grooves **164**, shown in detail in FIG. **6A**. In the preferred embodiment, grooves **164** are 0.06 inches deep, 0.06 inches wide, and are 1 inch on center apart. An orifice **166** extends through the center of vacuum platen **62**. Orifice **166** receives a vacuum hose **168** which connects to vacuum pump **112**. When the system **10** is powered up, a vacuum is applied to vacuum platen **62** by vacuum hose **168** and vacuum pump **112**. The vacuum provided to platen **62** pulls air through grooves **164** to distribute the vacuum along the platen. This vacuum holds the substrate **60** against the top surface **167** of platen **62**. In the preferred embodiment, substrate **60** is a flexible sheet. A

polymeric material forms a suitable flexible sheet substrate. An acrylic sheet with a thickness of about 0.06 inches has been successfully used as a substrate. When a desired object is formed, the operator can remove substrate **60** from the platen **62** by lifting one corner of the sheet and breaking the seal of the applied vacuum.

Flexible substrate **60** can be flexed away from the object to peel the substrate from the object, if there is a weak breakable bond between substrate **60** and the object. This weak, breakable bond may be formed by depositing a first layer (or layers) of modeling material followed by a second layer (or layers) of support material on the substrate **60**. The modeling material and substrate are selected so that the modeling material is fully adhesive to the substrate. In forming an object, the modeling material is deposited in one or more layers on the substrate **60**. The support material is then deposited in one or more layers over the modeling material. The object is then built up on the support material, using a plurality of layers of modeling and/or support material. When the object is complete, vacuum is broken by lifting a corner of the substrate **60**, and the substrate **60** is removed from the platen **62** by the operator. By flexing the substrate **60**, the operator then peels the substrate **60** from the object. The first layer(s) of modeling material will remain adhered to the substrate, but the weak bond between the first layer(s) of modeling material and the second layer (s) of support material is a readily separable joint which breaks to allow removal of the substrate **60** without damage to the object.

Other flexible sheet materials may be used as substrate **60**. For example, plain or coated paper, metal foil and other polymeric materials are suitable. For high temperature support and modeling materials, a polymeric material (e.g., Kapton) or metal foil is particularly desirable.

Although a vacuum is a preferred way to achieve a releasable hold down force to hold substrate **60** against platen **62**, other means for providing a releasable hold down force can also be used. For example, substrate **60** can be held against platen **62** by an electrostatic chuck or by a weakly adhering adhesive applied to the bottom surface of the substrate **60** or the top surface of the platen **62** (or both).

FIG. **7** shows a detailed exploded view of the filament spool and spindle shown in FIGS. **2** and **3**. The mechanical configuration of the filament spool and spindle is identical for both the modeling filament and the support filament. For convenience of reference, FIG. **7** is directed specifically to modeling filament spool **42** and modeling spindle **43**. Spindle **43** extends horizontally from drybox **45** and has a semi-circular shape. A semi-circular connector **174** having a set of six depressible connector pins **176** is mounted on top of spindle **43** adjoining drybox **45**. A spring-loaded latch **178** is embedded in the top of spindle **43** at an outer edge **179**.

Filament spool **42** is comprised of a center barrel **180** on which filament may be wound, a pair of spool flanges **181** extending from either end of barrel **180**, a sleeve **182** that fits within barrel **180** for receiving spindle **43**, and modeling EEPROM board **120** mounted inside sleeve **182** and perpendicular to barrel **180**. Barrel **180** rotates about sleeve **182** so that filament **40** may be unwound from spool **42**. Sleeve **182** has a flange **184** at one end, a flange **186** at the opposite end, and an interior semi-circular cavity for receiving spindle **43**. In the preferred embodiment, flange **184** is removable and flange **186** is fixed. Removal of flange **184** allows withdrawal of sleeve **182** from barrel **180**. As mentioned above, EEPROM board **120** carries EEPROM **188**. In a preferred embodiment, EEPROM board **120** is mounted

adjacent fixed flange 186 by a pair of screws 190, so that EEPROM 188 faces inward towards sleeve 182 for protection. EEPROM board 120 on its outward facing side carries a set of six round electrical contacts 192, as shown in FIG. 7A. Connectors 192 are configured so as to provide a receiving surface for connector pins 176 when spool 42 is mounted on spindle 43.

Latch 178 must be manually depressed to allow insertion or removal of spindle 43 from sleeve 182. When sleeve 182 is mounted on spindle 43, latch 179 rests in an upward position so as to lock spool 42 into place such that contacts 192 fully depress connector pins 176. When filament spool 42 is manually inserted onto spool holder 43, electrical contact between EEPROM board 120 and drybox processor board 116 is made through the connector 190.

Detail of the extrusion apparatus is shown in FIG. 8. While FIG. 8 shows modeling extrusion apparatus 30, it should be understood that support extrusion apparatus 44 contains the same parts and operates in the same manner as modeling extrusion apparatus 30, at a 180° rotation. Extrusion head 32 is mounted below x-y forcer 38 by a pair of mounting plates 200. Two pairs of bolts 202 attach head 32 to plates 200. Two bolts 204 connect plates 200 to x-y forcer 38 to hold head 32.

Extrusion head 32 is formed of an inclosure 206 which holds liquifier 59, a filament drive 208 and safety switch 210. Liquifier 59 comprises a thermal conducting thin-wall tube 212, a heating block 214, an extrusion tip 216, a tip retainer 218, heater 220 and thermocouple 222. FIG. 9 shows liquifier 59 in an exploded view. As shown in FIG. 9, thin-wall tube 212 has an inlet end 224, an outlet end 226 and is bent at a 90° angle. In the preferred embodiment, tip 216 is soldered into the outlet end of tube 212. Alternatively, tip 216 may be brazed or welded to tube 212. Using a 0.070 inch filament, tube 212 preferably has an inner diameter of about 0.074 inches. The wall thickness of tube 212 is preferably between 0.005–0.015 inches. It is desirable to keep tube 212 as thin as possible to achieve maximum heat transfer across tube 212 to filament 40. Other metals may also be used, such as brass, copper, tungsten, titanium, molybdenum, beryllium copper or other steels. Other thermal conducting materials such as polyimide (Kapton), a plastic with a high melting temperature, may also be used to form the thin-wall tube.

Tube 212 fits into a channel 229 of heating block 214, between a front section 228 and a rear section 230 of the heating block. Heating block 214 is made of a heat conductive material such as aluminum or beryllium copper. A set of four bolts 232 extend through outer section 228 and rear section 230 of heating block 214 to hold tube 212. When mounted in heating block 214, a first section of tube 212 adjacent the inlet end 224 is exterior to heating block 214, and a second mid-section of tube 212 is clamped within heating block 214, and a third section of tube 212 including tip 216 extends through the bottom of block 214. The first section of tube 212 forms a cap zone for the liquifier 59, the second section of tube 212 forms a heating zone, and the third section forms a nozzle zone. The nozzle zone is contained within and silver soldered to extrusion tip 216, which is supported against heating block 214 by tip retainer 218, a square plate having a center orifice. Tip retainer 218 is press fit around the extrusion tip 216, and mounted beneath heating block 214 by a pair of screws 234.

The length of the cap zone of tube 212 is in the range of 0.15 inches and 2 inches. The cap zone must undergo a temperature gradient from about 70 degrees C envelope

temperature to about 280 degrees C liquifier temperature. A shorter cap zone allows for greater control by the system over the rate that molten filament is extruded (i.e., flow rate), but makes it more difficult to maintain a cool temperature for the filament through the cap zone. The length of the heating zone is anywhere from 0.04 inches to 7 inches. The longer the heating zone, the higher the maximum extruded flow rate, but the slower that the flow rate can be accelerated and decelerated. A liquifier having a cap zone of between 0.02–0.04 inches long and a heating zone of about 2.5 inches long has been successfully used in a preferred embodiment of the system.

Cylindrical heater 220 and thermocouple 222 extend horizontally into rear section 230 of heating block 214. Heater 220 is positioned in heat exchange relation to the heating zone of tube 212, to heat the tube to a temperature just above the melting temperature of the filament. Using an ABS composition for the filament 40, the tube is heated to about 270 degrees C. Thermocouple 222 is positioned adjacent tube 212 to monitor the temperature in the tube. Safety switch 210 will cause the system 10 to shut down if temperature exceeds a predetermined level.

A guide tube 236 guides filament 40 from pivot 36 to extrusion head 32, made of a suitable low friction material such as Teflon for support in motion. As described above, filament 40 within guide tube 36 are located within flexible tube 60 contained inside of arm 34. Filament 40 enters extrusion head 32 through an inlet aperture 238. Inside of extrusion head 32, filament 40 is fed through a tapered guide 240 having a restricted guide passage 242. Filament drive 208, comprised of a stepper motor 246, a pulley 248 and a pair of feed rollers 250 and 252. Roller 250 has a drive shaft 254 which is driven by stepper motor 246. Roller 252 is a rubber-coated idler. Filament 40 is fed from the guide passage 242 of tapered guide 240 into a nip between rollers 250 and 252. The rotation of roller 250 advances filament 40 towards liquifier 59. The inlet end 224 of thin-wall tube 212 is positioned to receive filament 40 as it passes through rollers 250 and 252. The flow rate of the molten filament out of liquifier 59 is controlled by the speed at which filament drive 208 advances the filament 40 into liquifier 59.

A blower 256 blows air at ambient temperature into flexible tube 60 to cool guide tube 236 and filament 40. Cooling of strand 40 is important so as to maintain the filament at a sufficiently low temperature that it does not become limp and buckled within the passages leading into the liquifier 59. Air from blower 256 travels through tube 60 and enters extrusion head 32 via an air conduit 258. Air conduit 258 provides a path for the air which is in a forward and parallel position from filament 40 within extrusion head 32.

FIGS. 10A and 10B show an alternative embodiment of the liquifier. FIG. 10A shows liquifier 259 in an assembled view, while 10B shows liquifier 259 in an exploded view. In this embodiment, two thin-wall tubes 260A and 260B of the type described above flow into one, nozzle 262. A liquifier of this type can be substituted into the dispensing head shown in FIG. 8 to provide one extrusion head that dispenses, at alternate times, two different deposition materials. The two deposition materials may be a modeling and a supply material, or they may be modeling materials of two different colors or having other diverse properties. Nozzle 262 is brazed or welded to the outlet ends 264 of tubes 260A and 260B. Nozzle 262 is positioned in a vertical orientation, while tubes 260A and 260B may be angled towards the horizontal. Separate feed mechanisms (not shown) are provided for tubes 260A and 260B so that filament material is fed into only one of the tubes at any given time.

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Thin-wall tubes **260A** and **260B** are held into position by a heating block **266**. Heating block **266** is comprised of an outer plate **268**, an interior plate **270** and a rear plate **272**. Rear plate **272** is mounted within the extrusion head, and holds a heater **274** which extends between tubes **260**. Two channels **276** which hold tubes **260A** and **260B** are routed through interior block **270**. A set of five bolts (not shown) extend through outer plate **268**, interior plate **270** and rear plate **272** to detachably hold together liquifier **259**. It is an advantageous that the liquifier be removable from the heating block, for replacement and cleaning.

Although the present invention has been described with reference to preferred embodiments, workers skilled in the art will recognize that changes may be made in form and detail without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

We claim:

1. A rapid prototyping system for making a three-dimensional physical object by depositing solidifiable material in multiple layers, comprising:
 - a movable extrusion head having an inlet for receiving a filament of a material which solidifies at a predetermined temperature, and an outlet for delivering the material in a molten state;
 - a spool carrying a coil of filament, the spool having an associated circuit for maintaining data regarding type and amount of filament on the spool;
 - a filament drive for withdrawing filament from the spool and supplying the filament to the liquifier; and
 - updating means for updating the data regarding the amount of filament on the spool as a function of filament withdrawn from the spool by the filament drive.
2. The rapid prototyping system of claim 1 and further comprising:
 - control means for controlling operation of the extrusion head and the filament drive.
3. The rapid prototyping system of claim 2 wherein the control means includes:
 - means for inhibiting operation of the filament drive and the extrusion head when the amount of filament on the spool reaches a predetermined minimum value.
4. The rapid prototyping system of claim 2 wherein the control means includes:
 - means for providing an operator notification if the type of filament on the spool does not match a type of material identified by object specification data.
5. The rapid prototyping system of claim 2 wherein the control means includes:
 - means for providing an operator notification before the start of a job if the amount of filament on the spool is insufficient to create a desired object.
6. The rapid prototyping system of claim 2 wherein the control means includes:
 - means for providing an operator notification if the filament spool will need replacement during the process of creating a desired object.

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7. The rapid prototyping system of claim 1 wherein:

the updating means is encrypted so that the data regarding the amount of filament on the spool can be updated only by a sensing means.

8. A material carrier for use in a rapid prototyping system of the type having an extrusion head having an inlet for receiving a filament of a material which solidifies at a predetermined temperature, and an outlet for delivering the material in a molten state, the material carrier comprising:

a spool on which the filament is wound;

a circuit carried by the spool for maintaining data regarding the type and amount of filament on the spool; and contacts for providing electrical connection between the circuit and the rapid prototyping system.

9. The material carrier of claim 8 wherein:

the circuit maintains a count representative of the amount of material on the spool.

10. The material carrier of claim 9 wherein:

the circuit updates the count as filament is withdrawn from the spool.

11. The material carrier of claims 8, 9 or 10 wherein:

the circuit is positioned within a sleeve that extends through the center of the spool.

12. The material carrier of claim 11 wherein:

the sleeve has a flange at either end thereof.

13. The material carrier of claim 12 wherein:

one flange is removable to allow withdrawal of the sleeve from the spool.

14. The material carrier of claim 13 wherein:

the flange opposite the removable flange is fixed.

15. A filament spool for use in a rapid prototyping system of the type having an extrusion head having an inlet for receiving a filament of a material which solidifies at a predetermined temperature, and an outlet for delivering the material in a molten state, the filament spool comprising:

a center barrel on which filament may be wound;

a sleeve within the barrel for receiving a spindle; and

a circuit board mounted inside the sleeve, the circuit board carrying an electronically readable and writeable device for maintaining data regarding the type and amount of filament on the spool and a set of electrical contacts for receiving a set of mating connector pins connected to the system.

16. The filament spool of claim 15 wherein:

the sleeve has a flange at either end thereof.

17. The filament spool of claim 16 wherein:

one flange is removable to allow withdrawal of the sleeve from the barrel.

18. The filament spool of claim 17 wherein:

the flange opposite the removable flange is fixed.

19. The rapid prototyping system of claim 18 wherein:

the circuit board is mounted adjacent the fixed flange and perpendicular to the barrel.

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