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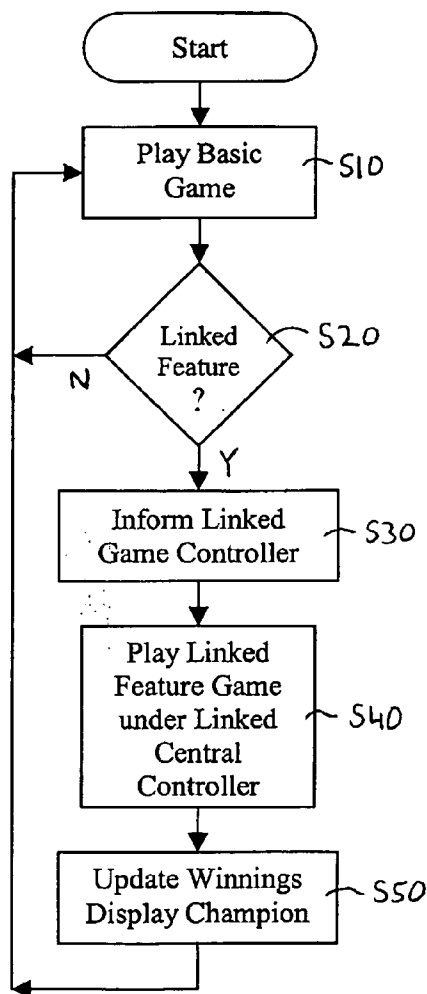
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TORRANCE, CA 90504 (US)**(57) **ABSTRACT**

Gaming apparatus 1 may include a number of player terminals 2, e.g. Electronic Gaming Machines (EGMs), which may be networked with a central controller 3 for implementing a linked feature game. When a feature game triggers from a basic game, the player triggering the feature may compete for a prize against a previous feature game winner. Other players may also be involved. A winner of a feature game becomes a champion, and plays in the next feature game that is triggered. Responsibility for running the feature game may rest with the player terminals 2 and/or with a central controller 3 as is appropriate to the implementation. A single player competitive feature game is also described.

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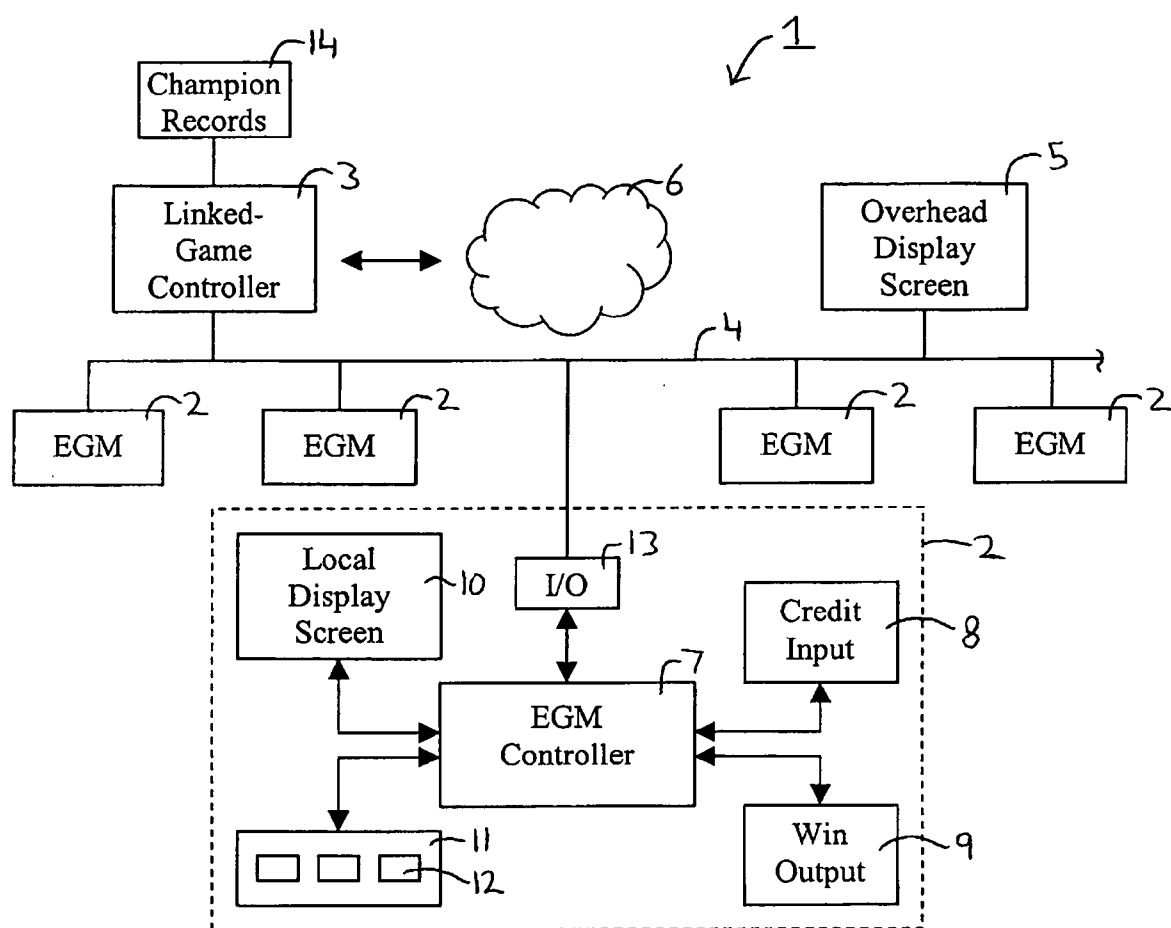


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

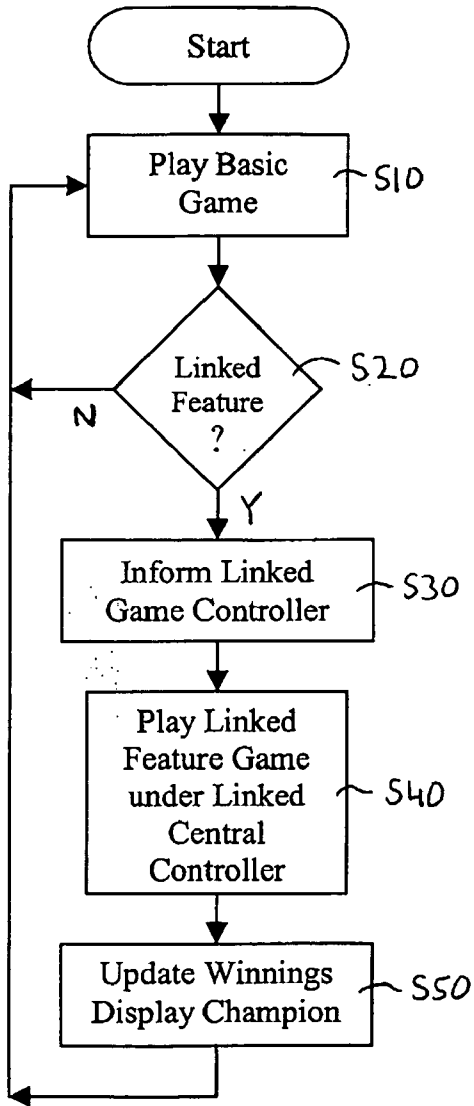


Fig. 3

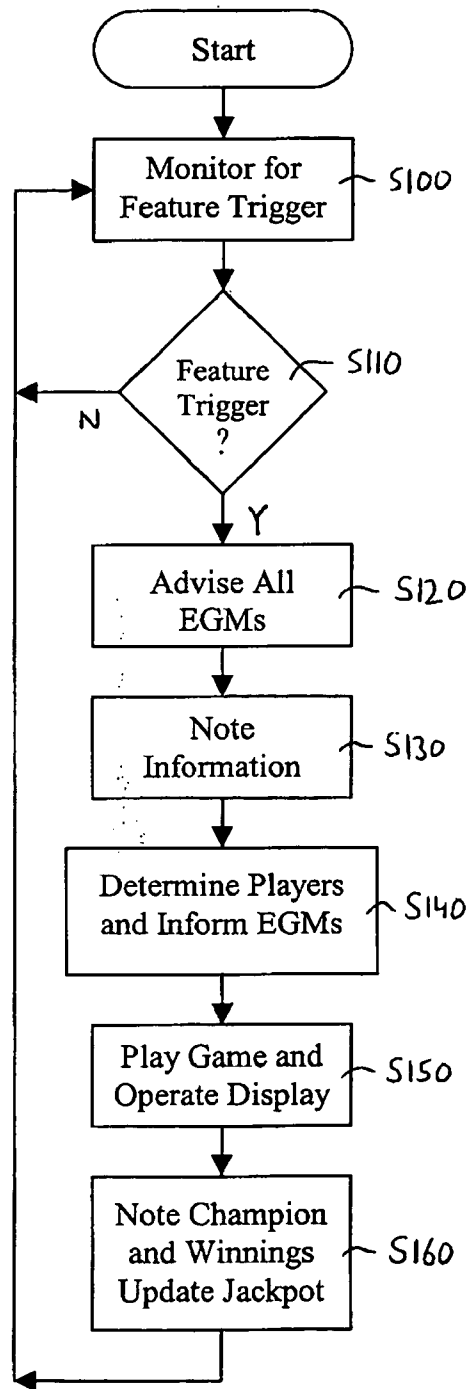


Fig. 4

GAMING APPARATUS AND SYSTEMS

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] The present application claims priority from Australian Patent Application No. 2005901694 filed on 6 Apr. 2005 and entitled "Gaming Apparatus and Systems", the contents of which are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to gaming apparatus and systems. It relates for example to electronic gaming machines (EGMs) and to networked gaming systems, such as Intranet and/or Internet-based gaming systems.

BACKGROUND

[0003] Gaming machines have been a popular form of entertainment for many years. This popularity has been enhanced by the advent of electronic gaming machines, and by computer-based gaming systems, such as are provided over the Internet.

[0004] Many different types of game are playable. They include for example standard slot-machine type games with spinning reels, and casino-type games. They may include games such as poker, keno, bingo, blackjack, roulette, pachinko, Sic Bo and the like.

[0005] A user will typically place a bet, press a button or pull a lever to begin a game, and will win or lose based upon the gaming machine's play algorithm and random number generator.

[0006] An aim of the present invention is to provide gaming apparatus having novel features for enhancing gameplay.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] Viewed from one aspect, the present invention provides gaming apparatus including:

[0008] game means for playing a basic game;

[0009] trigger means for triggering a feature game of the basic game; and

[0010] feature means for playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

[0011] A feature game may be seen as an extraneous or bonus game to a main game that a user of the apparatus is playing.

[0012] The feature game may be triggered from time to time, and typically, although not necessarily, provides a game that pays out at a higher rate than a main game. A feature game may be triggered randomly, periodically, or when set conditions occur in a main game. It may for example be triggered by a particular game event, e.g. the appearance of a particular set of symbols or a certain type of win or the like. It may also be triggered based on gameplay, e.g. the amount of gameplay, such as the number of games played or the amount bet or won or the like. A feature game may also be triggered from within another feature game, e.g.

a first feature game may be triggered from a basic game, and during play of the first feature game, a second feature game may be triggered, both such feature games may be said to be feature games of the basic game.

[0013] The present invention allows for a "champion" to be established in a feature game, and for that champion to continue playing in the feature game until they are defeated or reach a goal, or some other appropriate event occurs. If a player wins a feature game, then they are automatically included in the next feature game.

[0014] Thus, the present invention adds a new game play experience to gaming apparatus, which can provide added excitement and involvement in a game, and can involve a player participating in a contest over a number of separate feature game rounds.

[0015] By including a "champion" aspect to a feature game, the feature game may allow a player to accumulate extra winnings across a number of triggered games. Thus, a champion may continue to accumulate wins until no longer a champion.

[0016] The champion feature game may be played in relation to all of the feature games of a main game, or only in relation to a particular feature game, so that a player may play standard feature games as well as a champion feature game, dependent on the trigger activated. The champion feature game may also be supplemental to standard feature games, so that a feature trigger may trigger both a standard feature game and a champion feature game, which a player may play concurrently.

[0017] The gaming apparatus may be a stand-alone machine, in which case, during a feature game, a player of the machine may play against themselves and/or against a virtual opponent generated by the gaming machine. In this case, if the player wins a feature game against the machine, the player will play the next game as champion, whilst if the player loses a feature game, they will no longer be champion, and will play the next triggered feature game as a contender against the machine's virtual champion. If a player triggers a feature game whilst the current champion, the player may play the triggered feature both as the champion and as a contender. The player thus effectively participates in the feature game as two players. The machine may include one or more other virtual players in the feature game, which are run by the machine.

[0018] In one particularly preferred embodiment, the gaming apparatus includes two or more gaming machines/terminals that are linked together to provide a linked feature game between the machines, so that two or more real players can compete against one another in a feature game. The machines may be linked via a central controller to which the machines are connected.

[0019] In this embodiment, if one player's machine triggers a feature game or if the central control triggers a feature game for that player's machine, then both that player and a player who is designated as a champion at that time will play against one another in the feature game.

[0020] If no designated champion currently exists, a player triggering the feature game may contest against a virtual opponent, and would become the designated champion if they won the contest.

[0021] If it is the current champion who triggers the feature game, then they may play as both the champion and as a contender. Alternatively, they may play in a game by themselves or against a virtual opponent. The apparatus may also prevent a champion player from triggering a feature game, and may for example provide an alternative event to the trigger game, which could be e.g. a bonus prize.

[0022] The trigger player and champion may be the sole players in a feature game, so as to go “head-to-head” against each other. In another embodiment, one or more additional players may also take part in the feature game. These additional players may be chosen in any suitable manner. For example, they may be chosen randomly and/or they may be chosen based on qualification criteria, e.g. based on their gameplay history. In one preferred embodiment, additional players may include players that have previously qualified for the feature game contest, but failed to become champion, or were champion, but were subsequently defeated.

[0023] In order to be eligible for entry into a champion feature game, a player may need to fulfil certain criteria. If a player does not fulfil these criteria, then the player may merely play standard feature games that do not include a champion player aspect. For example, a player may need to play a side bet in order to be eligible for the championship feature game. Eligibility may also be decided based on gameplay, e.g. dependent upon a player betting a certain amount or winning or losing a certain amount (in the latter case, entry into the feature game could be a consolation prize).

[0024] When a player is a champion, then they may not need to play a side bet or the like, in order to ensure that they qualify. Alternatively, the champion may still need to play the side bet, and will forfeit their champion position if they do not play the side bet, e.g. they may be deemed to have retired.

[0025] In another possible embodiment, the playing of the side bet or the like by a champion may result in the champion receiving the chance of extra bonus prizes or the like in the main game. These prizes may be paid out randomly or based on a win event in the main game.

[0026] If a player is a champion, then they may receive extra bonuses and the like in the main game for as long as they are champion, irrespective of any side bet or the like. Thus, a player that becomes a champion may be assigned extra advantages in the main game, whilst they are champions in the feature game.

[0027] The main game may take any suitable form, and for example may be a slot machine or casino type game. Where machines are linked together in a linked feature game, the basic games of the machines, from which the feature games may trigger, may be the same on all machines or may differ between machines.

[0028] The feature game may also take any suitable form. In a preferred form it is a game that emphasises a contest between players, especially a head-to-head, one-on-one type of game.

[0029] The feature game may be a luck/chance-based game, e.g. won in accordance with a random number generator. It may include some element of player choice, which

may influence the outcome, e.g. a selection, e.g. the choice of opening one of a number of doors or the like.

[0030] Luck-based games may for example include a standard slot machine or casino-based game or the like, where the winner is the player achieving the highest score or a particular type of win event. A game could take the form of a card game, e.g. a card draw between the participants from the same or different decks of cards. The feature games could also be a virtual sporting or virtual talent contest, with the apparatus generating players in the contest and determining the outcome appropriately. For example, the game could be a boxing match, racquet sport, race or other such contest. Player interaction, e.g. a landed punch, a winning shot, a miss or the like may be determined based on a random number generator, and after a set number of hits, a player may win.

[0031] Players of a feature game may play together in the same single game, or may play in separate games the results of which are then compared in order to determine the winner.

[0032] The feature game may vary between triggers, with the consistent element being that in each game there is a champion from a previous game.

[0033] The feature game may include biasing relating to the outcome. Thus, a champion in a feature game may be given an advantage over another player or players. Similarly, a player triggering a feature may be given an advantage over other players besides a champion. This advantage may take any suitable form, e.g. a player may be given better win odds by the win algorithm of the apparatus, and/or may be allowed to play first where this is appropriate.

[0034] It is also possible to give a champion a disadvantage, e.g. to make it more difficult to win as they continue as champion.

[0035] Biasing may also be based on other criteria. For example, a player may increase their odds of winning if they have a particular gameplay history, e.g. a higher number of games played and/or a higher number of wins or losses or the like, or may increase their odds with a large side-bet. Players may be asked to place bets during the feature game contest, and these bets may alter the odds of winning.

[0036] Prizes may be awarded as appropriate. A losing player, e.g. the trigger player, may receive a reward as a consolation prize for reaching the feature game. A winning player may be awarded a prize each time that they win or defend their title, or may receive an accumulated prize at the end of their run as champion. Each time that they win, the prize won may increase in value.

[0037] In one preferred embodiment, the player or players compete for a jackpot prize, and a player may win the jackpot if they successfully defend their title a set number of times. The jackpot may be a progressive jackpot that increases over time and/or with gameplay. Thus, a jackpot may continue to increase whilst a number of champions are defeated before they reach the required number of wins. More than one jackpot may be provided.

[0038] A champion's reign may end if a challenger defeats them, if they resign, or if they reach a goal, e.g. a jackpot.

[0039] Should a champion lose to a contender, the champion may retain their winnings to date, may take a reduction

in winnings, or may lose everything. If a champion resigns their title, they may take their winnings to date. Thus, in one embodiment, a champion may need to decide at some point, e.g. immediately after a contest, whether they wish to continue and win more prizes or risk some or all of their winnings on further prizes.

[0040] When there is no current champion, e.g. when a champion resigns or completes a goal, or when no feature game has yet been played, a player who triggers a feature game may be automatically designated as the champion. Alternatively, the player may compete against a virtual champion generated by the gaming apparatus.

[0041] Prizes may take any suitable form, e.g. a money win and/or extra games or features in the main game, e.g. extra wild cards or the like.

[0042] In one embodiment, there may be more than one champion at any one time. In one multi-player embodiment, a number of players may begin a feature game, and a number of these players may win. When any of the winners or anyone else triggers a new feature game, then all of the winners from the previous game may be included in the resulting feature game, and those that win may proceed forward to the next game until the end of the game sequence, e.g. until only one or a set number of ultimate winners remain. The remaining players will be given a winning prize, and prizes may also be awarded throughout the various rounds of play.

[0043] Multiple champions and/or other competitors could also play in successive feature games in other ways. For example, a number of the most recently defeated feature game qualifiers may remain as competitors in one or more subsequently triggered feature games. For example, if a player enters a feature game, e.g. a race, and loses to a champion or defeats the champion, both players may compete again in the next feature game against the player that triggers the next feature game. This would allow a champion player or players to obtain wins and pursue other prizes, e.g. jackpots, whilst the other player or players would still be able to play in the next feature game round. This may continue with e.g. a fourth player and the like. Players, e.g. lowest placed players, may also be removed from the feature game after a set number of players exists.

[0044] A player may be involved simultaneously in more than one feature game, and may be given the option of selecting which feature game or games they wish to be eligible to enter.

[0045] The main game from which the feature game is triggered may be continued with whilst the feature game is being played, or may be suspended whilst the feature game is being played.

[0046] A champion may be informed of an impending feature game in any suitable manner. They may receive a message that a feature game has been triggered elsewhere, and may then be transferred to the triggered feature game at a suitable time in the champion's main game, e.g. once a particular main game round has ended. Alternatively, the transfer may be immediate, with the main game being paused at whatever point coincides with the triggering of the feature game. The champion may also play the feature game simultaneously with their main game, e.g. in a split screen, side window or the like. The champion may be given the

option of resigning before being transferred to a feature game, in case they wish to concentrate on the main game.

[0047] The present invention may be applied to any suitable type of gaming apparatus or system. It can apply to stand-alone gaming apparatus, e.g. electronic gaming machines, such as video gaming machines. It may also apply to gaming machines that are linked together, e.g. via a network such as an intranet, and/or to gaming systems provided through computing or other electronic devices, e.g. personal computers, PDAs, mobile telephones, digital televisions and the like, e.g. provided over the Internet or other communications networks.

[0048] In a stand-alone machine, all win/lose and feature trigger decisions can be conducted internally.

[0049] In some networked or linked games, the normal win/lose decisions and the like may be determined internally by each individual machine in the network, whilst decisions regarding a linked feature game may be determined by an external controller that runs the linked game. One of the machines may be configured to also act as an external controller.

[0050] In other networked or linked games, all controls may be vested in a central control, and the player terminals may be merely for input and display purposes. For example, in Internet-based gaming systems conducted on a personal computer or other data-processing system, e.g. a PDA, mobile telephone, digital television or the like, the apparatus may include a central control for conducting the games and for managing the accounting and the like, and a number of remote terminals/clients that provide user input and display mechanisms.

[0051] The present invention extends to central controls/servers and to remote terminals/clients that are configured to carry out feature games according to the present invention.

[0052] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides a gaming system including:

[0053] game means for playing a basic game;

[0054] trigger means for triggering a feature game of the basic game; and

[0055] feature means for playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

[0056] Preferably, the system includes a plurality of electronic gaming machines and a central controller for conducting the feature game. Alternatively, the system includes a central control for running a gaming algorithm, and a plurality of remote clients in communication with the central control over a communications network, the remote clients including means for inputting bets and displaying the results of bets.

[0057] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides a method of operating a gaming machine, the method including the steps of:

[0058] playing a basic game;

[0059] monitoring for the triggering of a feature game of the basic game; and

[0060] playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

[0061] Viewed from a further aspect, the present invention provides gaming software including:

[0062] a main game component for playing a basic game;

[0063] a trigger component for triggering a feature game of the basic game; and

[0064] a feature game component for playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

[0065] The present invention extends to computer software products including a data storage medium on which gaming software according to the present invention is stored.

[0066] Viewed from a still further aspect, the present invention provides electronic gaming apparatus including:

[0067] game means for playing a basic game;

[0068] trigger means for triggering a feature game of the basic game; and

[0069] feature means for playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

[0070] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides a gaming system, including:

[0071] a plurality of electronic gaming machines that operate one or more basic games from which a linked feature game can be played; and

[0072] a central controller that is in communication with the electronic gaming machines, and that is configured to operate the linked feature game between the electronic gaming machines when a feature game is triggered for one of the electronic gaming machines;

[0073] and wherein the central controller records a winner of a linked feature game as a champion, records win details associated with the champion, and includes the champion in the next linked feature game that is triggered.

[0074] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides a gaming system, including:

[0075] a central server for operating one or more basic games and one or more linked feature games that can be played from the basic game;

[0076] and a plurality of remote terminals that communicate with the central server for receiving player inputs and for displaying game results;

[0077] wherein the central server records a winner of a linked feature game as a champion, records win details associated with the champion, and includes the champion in the next linked feature game that is triggered.

[0078] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides an electronic gaming machine, including:

[0079] means for running a basic game and a feature game that can be played from the basic game;

[0080] means for recording a player of a feature game as a champion if the player wins a feature game; and

[0081] means for recording win details associated with the champion, and for including the champion in the next feature game triggered.

[0082] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides an electronic game in which the game includes a feature game in which a player that triggers the game plays against a designated champion.

[0083] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides gaming apparatus including a feature game, wherein the identity of a player that wins a feature game is recorded, and wherein when a feature game is subsequently triggered, the identified player takes part.

[0084] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides gaming apparatus including a feature game, wherein a player that wins a feature game plays in the next feature game.

[0085] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides a gaming apparatus feature game, in which at least two players compete against one another, and in which a winner of a feature game plays in the next feature game.

[0086] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides gaming apparatus including a feature game associated with a main game, wherein one or more competitors from a first feature game are automatically included to play in the next feature game.

[0087] Viewed from another aspect, the present invention provides gaming apparatus, including:

[0088] game means for playing a basic game;

[0089] trigger means for playing a feature game of the basic game;

[0090] player selection means for determining participants in a triggered feature game, the selection means identifying a winner of a previous feature game, and including the identified winner in the triggered game; and

[0091] feature playing means for playing the triggered feature game with the selected players.

[0092] It should be noted that any of the aspects mentioned above may include any of the features mentioned above in relation to the first aspect of the present invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0093] Embodiments of the present invention will now be described, by way of example only, with reference to the accompanying drawings. It is to be understood that the particularity of the drawings does not supersede the generality of the preceding description of the invention.

[0094] In the drawings:

[0095] **FIG. 1** is a block diagram of gaming apparatus according to an embodiment of the present invention;

[0096] **FIG. 2** is a screen shot of a feature game according to an embodiment of the present invention; and

[0097] **FIGS. 3 and 4** are flow diagrams respectively of an EGM gaming control process and a linked feature control process, in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0098] Referring to **FIG. 1**, gaming apparatus **1** includes a plurality of player terminals **2**, which in this case take the form of electronic gaming machines (EGMs). The EGMs **2** are connected to a central control **3** by a communications bus **4** to allow the EGMs **2** to take part in a linked feature game.

[0099] The apparatus may include an overhead screen **5** to display selected details of the linked feature game, e.g. a current jackpot, as appropriate.

[0100] The controller **3** may also be connected to a suitable communications network **6**, e.g. a LAN, a WAN or the Internet, so as to allow communication with remote player terminals and/or with other central controllers. This would allow the EGMs **2** to take part in linked feature games with other EGM banks in a venue and/or with EGMs in other venues.

[0101] The EGMs **2** include various standard components, such as a controller **7** for controlling the operation of the EGM **2** and for operating the games run on it. They may include a credit input device **8** for receiving monies, e.g. in the form of coin, token or card inputs, a win output device **9** for paying out winnings, e.g. again in the form of coin, token or card outputs, a screen **10** for displaying various game screens, and a user input **11**, which may include e.g. buttons **12** for allowing user interaction. The buttons **12** could in one embodiment be provided as part of a touch-screen of the screen **10**. The EGMs **2** also include an input/output interface **13** for connecting with the communications bus **4**.

[0102] In use, a player will insert coins, tokens or the like into an EGM credit input device **8** to obtain a suitable number of credits, and will press the buttons **12** to initiate play and otherwise interact with the basic game. How matters proceed in any specific circumstance will depend on the game being played.

[0103] Generally, the EGM **2** will display a basic gaming screen, and the player will select e.g. the amount to bet and the type of bet. Once a bet has been placed, the EGM controller **7** will determine the outcome of a playing round in accordance with a stored gaming algorithm and random number generator, and will e.g. provide an animation of the outcome for the particular game being played. The EGM **2** then pays out any winnings in accordance with the bets laid.

[0104] The basic game may take any suitable form, and may be any of the known forms of game, e.g. a slot machine type game or a casino type game. It could be for example a game of poker, keno, bingo, blackjack, roulette, pachinko, Sic Bo or the like.

[0105] The basic game includes one or more feature games associated with it. A feature game may be a bonus game that is extraneous to the basic main game. It may for example allow a player to win a bonus prize, possibly at a higher rate than is usual in the main game. The prize may take any suitable form and may be e.g. a monetary prize, a number of free games, a wild card or some other valuable symbol in the main game, or the like.

[0106] A feature game may be triggered in a number of ways. For example, it may be triggered randomly, or in accordance with a specific event occurring in the basic game, e.g. the appearance of a symbol or combination of symbols on a win line or the like. The feature game could

also be triggered in other ways, e.g. based on a time trigger or on gameplay. It could for example be triggered based on the amount of gameplay, e.g. the accumulated amount bet or number of plays, and/or the number of wins and/or losses. A feature game may also be triggered from within another feature game.

[0107] The gaming apparatus provides a linked-feature in which a player can compete in a feature game against another player for a prize, and in which a winner of the feature game is designated as a champion and will play in the next triggered game of the linked feature.

[0108] Thus, someone playing on one of the EGMs **2** may opt to participate in a linked feature game with the other EGMs. If that person triggers the linked feature game, they then become a contender and go "head-to-head" with a current champion of the linked-feature. If the contender beats the champion, then they themselves become the champion, and if the linked feature is triggered by another player, then the new champion is notified of the trigger and goes into the head-to-head against the new contender. Whilst a player is champion, they will win suitable prizes, and may accumulate a running reward that increments on each successful defence. They may also attempt to achieve a set goal, such as to win a jackpot, e.g. after a set number of successive wins.

[0109] A champion's reign may end when they lose a feature game to a contender, when they reach a final jackpot amount or other feature limit, or when they decide to retire.

[0110] A player may join a linked-feature game in any suitable manner. For example, they may place a side-bet to enter the linked-feature. For example, they may place a 30-credit bet, 25 credits being on a main game outcome and 5 credits entering them into the linked-feature should it be triggered for them.

[0111] In one embodiment, the controller **7** of each EGM **2** will run a basic main game and will pay out suitable winnings as normal. However, when a player triggers a linked feature game, e.g. when the controller **7** generates a particular combination of symbols or the like in the basic game, the controller **7** sends a message to the central controller **3** to advise of the trigger. The central controller **3** then runs the linked-feature.

[0112] Triggers for the feature game could be random or based on gameplay on the machines, and may be initiated by the central controller **3** rather than or as well as the EGMs **2**.

[0113] When a feature game is triggered, the central controller **3** will first determine the players of the game. These will be at least the current champion, as recorded in the central controller's memory **14**, and the player that triggered the current feature game.

[0114] The central controller **3** then informs the machines **2** which are to play in the feature game and communicates with them to run the game and determine a winner.

[0115] When the feature game is concluded, the central controller **3** will record the winning player/machine as the champion in a designated memory location in its memory **14**. It will also allocate prizes as appropriate, and e.g. update the current winnings of the champion and the jackpot amount in further designated memory locations in the memory **14**.

[0116] The central controller 3 may also display the feature game on the overhead screen 5, so that players other than the champion and competitor may see the contest take place, and to show the current champion and their current accumulated winnings, as well as an overall jackpot that may be aimed for. This information could also be provided on each of the individual EGMs 2, e.g. in a side bar or window.

[0117] Whilst the central control 3 is playing the feature game, the EGMs 2 that are not involved in the linked-feature may continue with their own basic games. The EGMs 2 that are involved in the feature game may also allow their players to continue with the basic game simultaneously with the feature game, or may delay the basic game until the feature game is over. The EGMs 2 may also allow a player to play a standard feature game and the champion feature game concurrently, e.g. a feature trigger may trigger a standard feature game at the same time as a champion feature, with both games being played at the same time.

[0118] The linked feature games generated by the central control 3 may take many different forms. They may for example be variations on the basic game, but with the inclusion of inter-player competition. They may also take on other forms that emphasise the contest or head-to-head aspect of the feature game and that one player is playing against another.

[0119] The feature game may for example take the form of a virtual sports contest, e.g. a boxing match, a racquet game such as a tennis match, or a race or the like. It could also for example take the form of a virtual talent contest, e.g. a virtual music contest.

[0120] The result of the contest may be determined by chance/luck, e.g. through the use of a random number generator and a suitable gaming algorithm in the central controller 3. For example, the central controller 3 may determine randomly who is to win, and may then generate a contest sequence which eventually shows the determined result. The central controller 3 may also generate a number of separate elements of contest action or rounds based on a random number generator, e.g. a number of hits or misses, and may determine the result of the contest based on the cumulative results of the actions during the feature game, e.g. based on the player with the most hits.

[0121] The determination of the result may also include an element of choice, e.g. through the use of the buttons 12 on the players' EGMs 2. This may be for example through the selection of one of a number of options, such as a choice between a score that is behind one of a number of doors.

[0122] When a player is a champion, they may still need to continue to play a side-bet in order to remain in the feature game, and may be deemed to have resigned if they do not. Alternatively, they may not need to play the side-bet to continue as champion, or, if they do, then this may enable them to qualify for the feature game twice, i.e. in order to play themselves as champion. It is also possible to prevent them from triggering the feature game, and instead to have them win other prizes for their side-bet, e.g. win a bonus prize or the like that is provided randomly during the course of the main game.

[0123] In another possibility, a champion is provided with extra advantages in the main game, whether or not a side-bet is placed, e.g. the potential to win a random prize.

[0124] FIG. 2 is a screen shot for one embodiment of how a head-to-head feature game may be implemented. The screen shot shows a music talent contest, in which a character 20 represents a current champion, and a character 22 represents a contender, who would represent the player that has triggered this particular feature game.

[0125] The central controller 3 generates an animation and sound for the champion and the contender, and generates an "applause" intensity value randomly for each player, which will register on an "applause meter" 24 after each player's character has played their instrument. The results are provided at score indicators 26, and, in the case shown, the winner is the challenger, as they have obtained the highest applause value.

[0126] A banner 28 indicates that the loser will win 50 credits, whilst a credit meter 30 shows that the current champion has won four times in a row and has reached a win of 1000 credits. It also shows that if the champion were to win another three games, then they would win a jackpot 32.

[0127] If the challenger 22 loses, then they win 50 credits for reaching the feature game. The champion 20 then remains the champion, and the credit meter 30 increments to the next stage, e.g. from 1000 credits to 2000 credits.

[0128] If the challenger 22 wins, as is the outcome shown in the screen shot, then they are made champion, and their character is placed in the champion's position. The credit meter 30 is reset, and the challenger (now champion) receives 100 credits, the lowest amount on the credit meter 30. The new champion will play in the next feature game that is triggered, and will win the next credit increment on the credit meter 30 at each successive win.

[0129] The defeated champion will have received all of the credits shown on the credit meter 30 (at the end of each game that they won), and will receive the 50 credits as the loser. The defeated champion will become an ordinary player in the linked feature, and, e.g. may only play in the feature game again if they themselves trigger the feature game.

[0130] The jackpot 32 may be set at a constant value, or may be a progressive jackpot, so that it will increase, e.g. with each game played or the like, until the jackpot is actually won. Therefore, the jackpot 32 may increase over a number of games and a number of champions, until one of the champions actually wins enough successive games to win the jackpot. The jackpot may then be reset to a base amount.

[0131] Minor jackpots could also be provided on the credit meter 30, e.g. at level 3, which a champion may win without losing their title.

[0132] Various other payout regimes would also be possible. For example, the champion may only be paid their full winnings if they resign without defeat, or if they reach the jackpot, and may forfeit some or all if they are defeated before then. This would require the champion to consider at each stage whether they wished to risk their accumulated winnings for a chance at the jackpot.

[0133] Besides losing, a champion may lose their champion status by voluntarily retiring, e.g. by pressing an appropriate button on their EGM or not playing any side-bets, or by reaching the jackpot 32.

[0134] Where there is no winning contender to take the place of a retiring champion, a new champion may be chosen in any suitable way. For example, the central controller may generate a virtual champion that will play until a real challenger wins. Alternatively, one of the eligible players may be chosen as the champion, e.g. randomly and/or based on their play history or the like. These methods may also be applied to provide an initial champion, when the linked-feature is first initialised.

[0135] The possible triggering of the feature by the reigning champion may be dealt with in a number of ways. The champion may for example be prevented from triggering the feature during their reign. Alternatively, the feature may trigger with them as champions, and they may play against another player chosen in any suitable manner, e.g. randomly or based on game play, or they may play a virtual player, e.g. generated by the machine. The champion may also be able to play as both champion and contender, in which case they would clearly prefer to win as the champion, but may still win as the contender, in which case their progress on the credit meter 30 would be reset to the start.

[0136] The challenger and champion may have an equal chance of winning. It would also however be possible to provide a bias in their respective chances. For example, the champion may be given a better chance of winning than the challenger or vice versa. The biasing could change depending on how the number of games that a player has been champion. For example, it could become easier or harder for the champion to win as the champion progresses up the credit meter 30. Biasing may also depend for example on the amount of the side-bet that a player bets in order to enter the linked-feature or may depend on a bet placed during a game.

[0137] As well as two player feature games, it would also be possible to play with three or more players. In this case, as well as the champion and the trigger player, other players may also be involved. The other players may be chosen in any suitable manner, e.g. randomly or based on their play history. Suitable biasing may be applied to these extra players, e.g. they might have a lower chance of success than the champion and trigger player.

[0138] More than one champion or competitors may progress from one feature game to another. For example, two players may compete against one another to give a winner and loser, e.g. in a car race, but both players may go through to the next feature game, in which they would play another player who has triggered the feature game. All three would then compete, with perhaps one then dropping out (so that only two or some other maximum number of players can proceed) or all three may proceed to await a fourth player triggering the feature game. Suitable winnings may be allocated based on player position and the like.

[0139] In a further embodiment, a single player may play the feature game. This may apply where the EGM 2 is a stand-alone machine. The EGM 2 may have all of the features of the EGM 2 shown in FIG. 1, but need not connect with a central controller 3. Instead, the controller 7 may run the feature game. In this case, the player may compete against the machine, i.e. a virtual player, either as the champion or competitor. Thus, each time the player triggers the feature, they will play against the virtual player as the contender or will play as the champion against a virtual competitor. Alternatively, or also, the player may

qualify for the feature more than once. Thus, they may play themselves as both a champion and a contender.

[0140] FIGS. 3 and 4 show flowcharts of control processes for an EGM controller 7 and for a central controller 3 for one implementation of a linked feature game. Thus, in one embodiment, a linked-feature game may be put into effect by the controllers 7 and 3 running software that incorporates routines executing in the manner shown.

[0141] At step S10, the EGM 2 conducts processes in accordance with a basic game. Thus, the EGM 2 will display a start screen, and will await the input of coins, tokens, cards or the like. When the user has deposited a sufficient balance in the machine, the EGM 2 prompts for e.g. the amount to be bet in the current round of play in the main game and the type of bet to be made. Prompting may occur e.g. through the flashing of relevant buttons and the like. Thus, a user would select the bet types and amounts that they would like to place.

[0142] The EGM 2 then waits for the "start" button to be pressed by the user, and, in response to the button's activation, generates the outcome of the round and provides an animation in accordance with the results.

[0143] Once the round is finished, the EGM 2 determines any winnings for the user. Before resetting to show the start screen again, the EGM 2 determines at step S20 whether the outcome of the round has triggered a linked-feature, e.g. checks whether a set combination of symbols has occurred on the screen. If not, then the machine proceeds as with a normal game in step S10. If yes, then the process passes to step S30, in which the EGM 2 sends a trigger message to the linked-feature controller 3. When the controller 3 receives the trigger message, it conducts a linked-feature game, and the EGM 2 acts in step S40 as an input and display for the central controller 3. Once the feature game is ended, game control passes back to the EGM 2 in step S50, and the EGM 2 updates winnings and the like, and resumes the basic game play of step S10. If an EGM is advised during step S50 that it has won the feature game, the EGM may generate a display message that remains visible during normal play, which indicates that the player on the current machine is the current champion.

[0144] Referring to FIG. 4, the linked-feature controller 3 (a central control) monitors the bus 4 in step S100. If no linked feature trigger signal is detected at step S200, then the central controller 3 continues to monitor the bus 4, and the EGMs 2 continue to play independently. If a linked-feature trigger message is received, then in step S120 the central controller 3 advises all of the EGMs 2 that are associated with the linked feature that a trigger has activated. The central controller 3 may then obtain any necessary information from the EGMs 2 in order to initialise the feature game in step S130. This information may be combined with information that is already stored in the central controller 3. This information may be information obtained through regular updates from the EGMs 3 and/or information stored in the central controller 3, e.g. in memory 14, from a previous feature game, e.g. the name of the current feature champion and their championship details, e.g. length as champion and details on winnings.

[0145] Once the central controller 3 has all of the necessary information, it determines, in step S140, which of the

EGMs 2 are to play in the triggered feature game, and informs them accordingly. On receipt of the instructions to play, the notified EGMs inform the player accordingly via the screens 10, and go into feature game mode, as in step S40 of FIG. 3.

[0146] The central controller 3 then, in step S150, begins a game and communicates with the selected EGMs 2 to obtain user input and to provide the EGMs 2 with display instructions. It may also operate the overhead display 5.

[0147] Once the feature game is ended, the central controller 3 will update its records as to the current champion, the champion's winnings and the jackpot, at step S160, and will inform the EGMs 2 appropriately, who will return to standard play mode and resume their basic games.

[0148] The above routines may of course vary from the basic forms shown, and may include various validity checks, bonus games and the like, and the step order may change. Other communications, e.g. to provide linked jackpots and the like may also occur. Further, the central control may initiate a feature game, e.g. randomly or through monitoring gameplay or the like of the EGMs 2. Step S130 may not be required if a feature game is only played between a champion and the player for whom the feature game triggered.

[0149] A machine may be involved in more than one linked-feature, and may participate in more than one of these linked-features at a time. The user may therefore be playing a first linked-feature with one group of EGMs and a second linked-feature with another group of EGMs at the same time.

[0150] The central controller 3 may communicate with various other EGMs 2 and various other controllers 3 through a suitable communications network 6, e.g. the Internet or an intranet, so as to include EGMs in a linked feature that are remote from one another. EGMs or other player terminals could then be linked to adjacent EGMs, to EGMs in the same bank of machines, to EGMs in the same venue, e.g. casino, and/or to EGMs across a wider territory, e.g. nationally.

[0151] Responsibility for running the basic games and the linked-feature games may change depending upon the situation. For example, where the linked feature is implemented in an Internet gaming system, all decisions may be taken at a central server, and the player terminals may merely act to obtain user input and to display results.

[0152] In a single machine feature game, the EGM controller 7 may conduct all proceedings itself.

[0153] Instead of the gaming apparatus being an EGM, it may take any other suitable form, and could for example comprise a game provided on a computing or other electronic device, such as on a personal computer, PDA, mobile phone, digital television or the like. The game may also be provided over an intranet, the Internet, or some other communications system, such as a mobile telephone system.

[0154] Various other bonus and/or mystery events could also be included.

[0155] It is to be understood that various alterations, additions and/or modifications may be made to the parts previously described without departing from the ambit of the present invention, and that, in the light of the above teachings, the present invention may be implemented in software,

firmware and/or hardware in a variety of manners as would be understood by the skilled person.

What is claimed is:

1. Gaming apparatus including:

game means for playing a basic game;

trigger means for triggering a feature game of the basic game; and

feature means for playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

2. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the apparatus is a single gaming machine, and wherein a feature game is played by a player of the machine and a virtual player.

3. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the apparatus is a single gaming machine, and wherein a feature game is played by a player of the machine as both a champion and a contender.

4. The apparatus of claim 1, including two or more player terminals that play in a linked feature game.

5. The apparatus of claim 4, including a central controller for conducting a linked feature game between the player terminals.

6. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the apparatus consists of or includes one or more electronic gaming machines.

7. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the apparatus includes a central control for conducting the basic game and feature the game, and a plurality of remote devices in communication with the central control for receiving bets and displaying results.

8. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the feature game is a two-player game and is played by a recorded champion and a player that triggers a feature game.

9. The apparatus of claim 8, wherein the triggered feature game is played by one or more further players.

10. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein more than one player from a first feature game is retained to play in a subsequently triggered feature game.

11. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the feature game includes a luck-based element.

12. The apparatus of claim 11, wherein the odds of each player winning the feature game are equal.

13. The apparatus of claim 11, wherein the odds of a champion winning the feature game are different from the odds of another player winning.

14. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the feature game includes an element of player choice.

15. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the feature game is represented as a virtual sports or virtual talent contest.

16. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein when no champion exists, a player who triggers the feature game is recorded as a champion.

17. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein when no champion exists, a player who triggers the feature game plays a virtual opponent as a champion.

18. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein a feature game is triggered based on the outcome of a basic game.

19. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein a feature game is triggered randomly.

20. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the feature game includes a jackpot prize.

21. The apparatus of claim 20, wherein a player wins a jackpot if they win a set number of consecutive feature games.

22. The apparatus of claim 20, wherein the jackpot is a progressive jackpot.

23. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein a player plays a side bet in the basic game to be eligible to play in a feature game.

24. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the basic game is a slot machine or casino type game.

25. A gaming system including:

game means for playing a basic game;

trigger means for triggering a feature game of the basic game; and

feature means for playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

25. The system of claim 24, including a plurality of electronic gaming machines and a central controller for conducting the feature game.

26. The system of claim 24, wherein the system includes a central control for running a gaming algorithm, and a plurality of remote clients in communication with the central control over a communications network, the remote clients including means for inputting bets and displaying the results of bets.

27. A method of operating a gaming machine, the method including the steps of:

playing a basic game;

monitoring for the triggering of a feature game of the basic game; and

playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

28. Gaming software including:

a main game component for playing a basic game;

a trigger component for triggering a feature game of the basic game; and

a feature game component for playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

29. A computer software product, including a storage medium on which is stored gaming software according to claim 28.

30. Electronic gaming apparatus including:

game means for playing a basic game;

trigger means for triggering a feature game of the basic game; and

feature means for playing a feature game when a feature game is triggered, wherein a winner of a previous feature game is included to play in a subsequent feature game.

31. A gaming system, including:

a plurality of electronic gaming machines that operate one or more basic games from which a linked feature game can be played; and

a central controller that is in communication with the electronic gaming machines, and that is configured to operate the linked feature game between the electronic gaming machines when a feature game is triggered for one of the electronic gaming machines;

and wherein the central controller records a winner of a linked feature game as a champion, records win details associated with the champion, and includes the champion in the next linked feature game that is triggered.

32. A gaming system, including:

a central server for operating one or more basic games and one or more linked feature games that can be played from the basic game;

and a plurality of remote terminals that communicate with the central server for receiving player inputs and for displaying game results;

wherein the central server records a winner of a linked feature game as a champion, records win details associated with the champion, and includes the champion in the next linked feature game that is triggered.

33. An electronic gaming machine, including:

means for running a basic game and a feature game that can be played from the basic game;

means for recording a player of a feature game as a champion if the player wins a feature game; and

means for recording win details associated with the champion, and for including the champion in the next feature game triggered.

34. An electronic game in which the game includes a feature game in which a player that triggers the game plays against a designated champion.

35. Gaming apparatus including a feature game, wherein the identity of a player that wins a feature game is recorded, and wherein when a feature game is subsequently triggered, the identified player takes part.

36. Gaming apparatus including a feature game, wherein a player that wins a feature game plays in the next feature game.

37. A gaming apparatus feature game, in which at least two players compete against one another, and in which a winner of a feature game plays in the next feature game.

38. Gaming apparatus including a feature game associated with a main game, wherein one or more competitors from a first feature game are automatically included to play in the next feature game.

39. Gaming apparatus, including:

game means for playing a basic game;

trigger means for triggering a feature game of the basic game;

player selection means for determining participants in a triggered feature game, the selection means identifying a winner of a previous feature game, and including the identified winner in the triggered game; and

feature playing means for playing the triggered feature game with the selected players.