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(54) **GAMING DEVICE FOR A FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION AND A METHOD OF OPERATING SAME**

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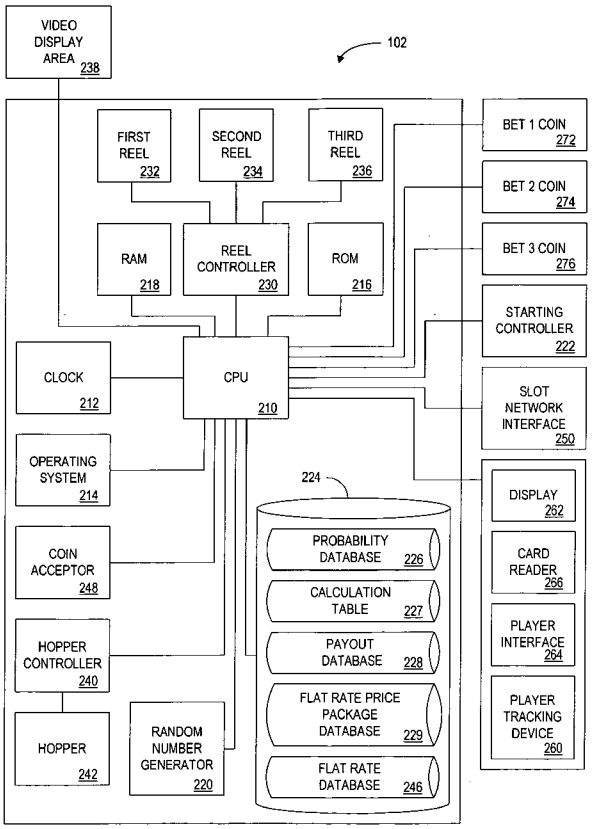
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

The present invention is directed generally to a method and apparatus for operating a gaming device having a flat rate play session costing a flat rate price. The flat rate play session spans multiple plays on the gaming device over a pre-established duration. The gaming device identifies price parameters and determines the flat rate price of playing the gaming device based on those price parameters. In one embodiment, identifying price parameters includes receiving player selected price parameters. In another embodiment, price parameters further incorporate operator selected price parameters. Should the player decide to pay the flat rate price, the player simply deposits the necessary funds into the gaming device or makes a credit account available for the gaming device to debit. Once the player initiates play, the gaming device tracks the duration remaining in the flat rate play session and stops the play when the given period has elapsed. During the play, payouts are made either directly to the player in the form of coins or indirectly in the form of credits to the player's credit account.



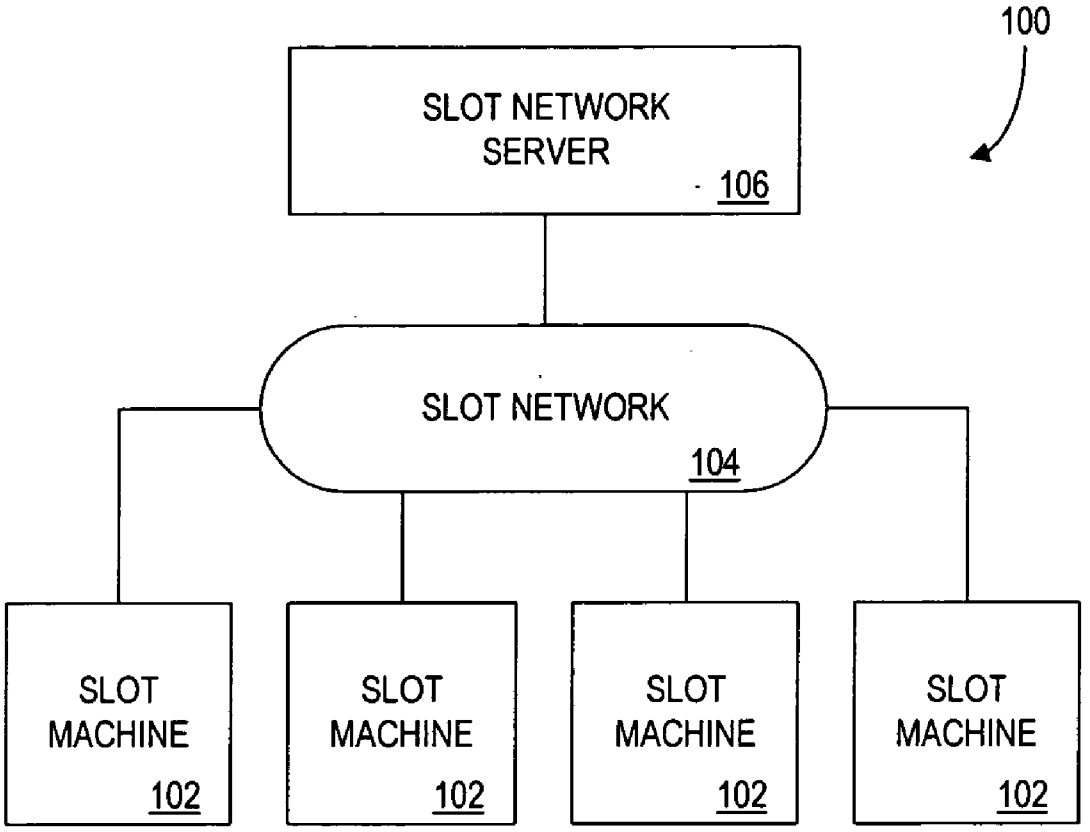

100
SLOT NETWORK SERVER
106
SLOT NETWORK
104
SLOT MACHINE
102
SLOT MACHINE
102
SLOT MACHINE
102
SLOT MACHINE
102

FIG. 1

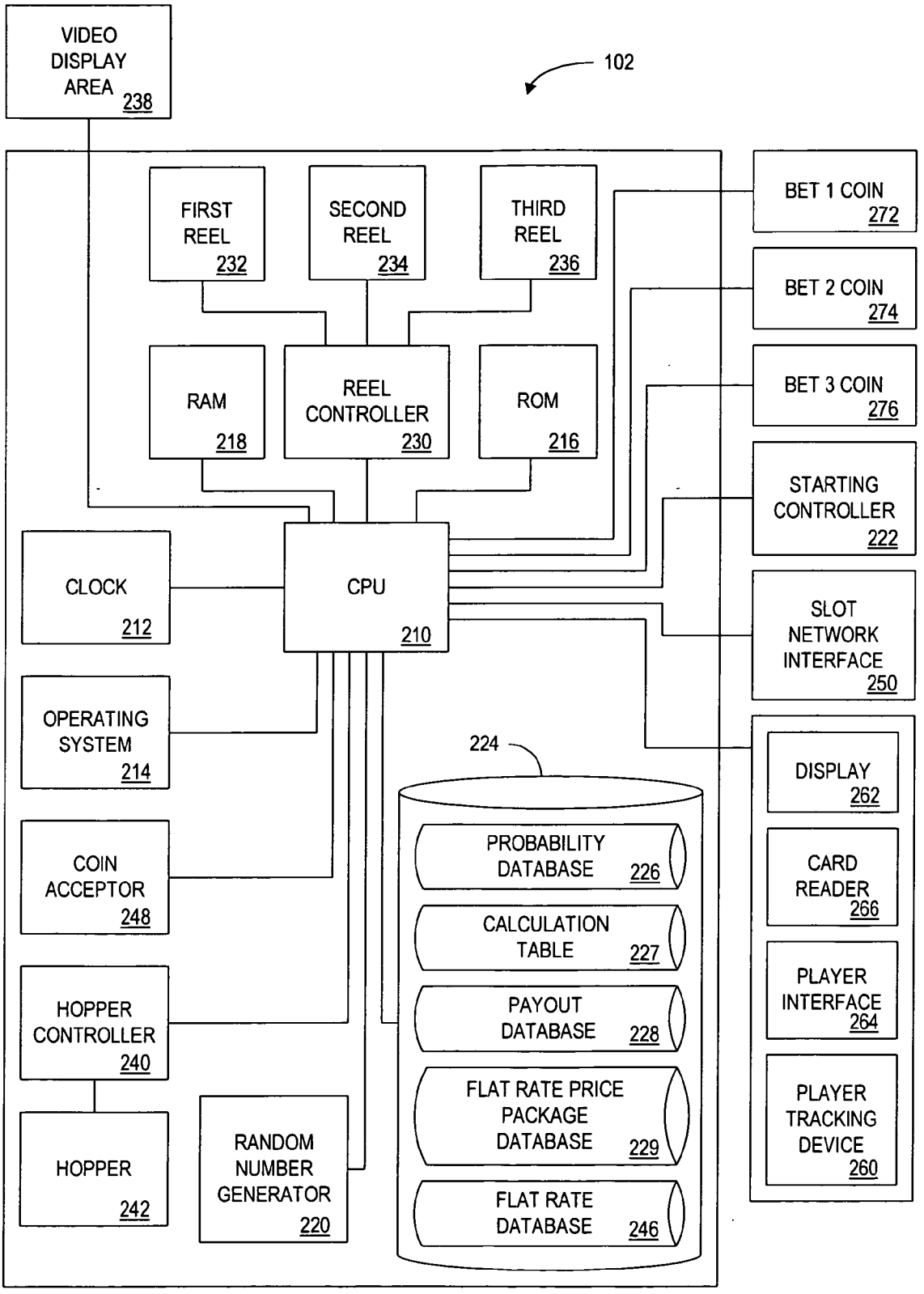

VIDEO DISPLAY AREA 238
102
FIRST REEL 232
SECOND REEL 234
THIRD REEL 236
BET 1 COIN 272
BET 2 COIN 274
BET 3 COIN 276
RAM 218
REEL CONTROLLER 230
ROM 216
STARTING CONTROLLER 222
CLOCK 212
CPU 210
SLOT NETWORK INTERFACE 250
OPERATING SYSTEM 214
224
DISPLAY 262
PROBABILITY DATABASE 226
CARD READER 266
COIN ACCEPTOR 248
CALCULATION TABLE 227
PLAYER INTERFACE 264
HOPPER CONTROLLER 240
PAYOUT DATABASE 228
FLAT RATE PRICE PACKAGE DATABASE 229
PLAYER TRACKING DEVICE 260
HOPPER 242
RANDOM NUMBER GENERATOR 220
FLAT RATE DATABASE 246

FIG. 2A

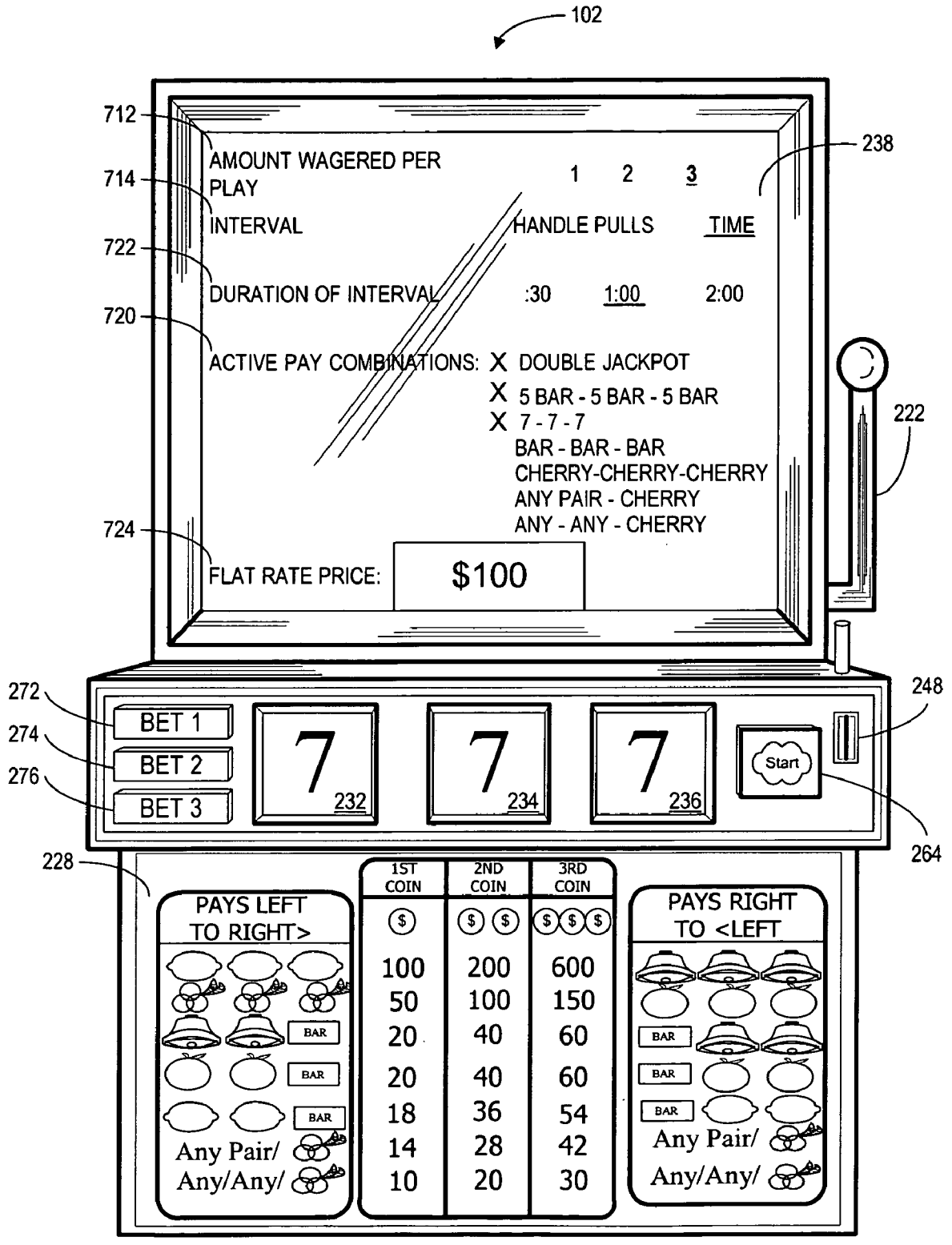

102
712
AMOUNT WAGERED PER PLAY
1 2 3
238
714
INTERVAL
HANDLE PULLS
TIME
722
DURATION OF INTERVAL
:30 1:00 2:00
720
ACTIVE PAY COMBINATIONS:
X DOUBLE JACKPOT
X 5 BAR - 5 BAR - 5 BAR
X 7 - 7 - 7
BAR - BAR - BAR
CHERRY-CHERRY-CHERRY
ANY PAIR - CHERRY
ANY - ANY - CHERRY
222
724
FLAT RATE PRICE:
$100
272
BET 1
274
BET 2
276
BET 3
7 232
7 234
7 236
Start
248
264
228
PAYS LEFT TO RIGHT>
1ST COIN
2ND COIN
3RD COIN
100 200 600
50 100 150
20 40 60
20 40 60
18 36 54
14 28 42
10 20 30
BAR
Any Pair/
Any/Any/
PAYS RIGHT TO <LEFT

FIG. 2B

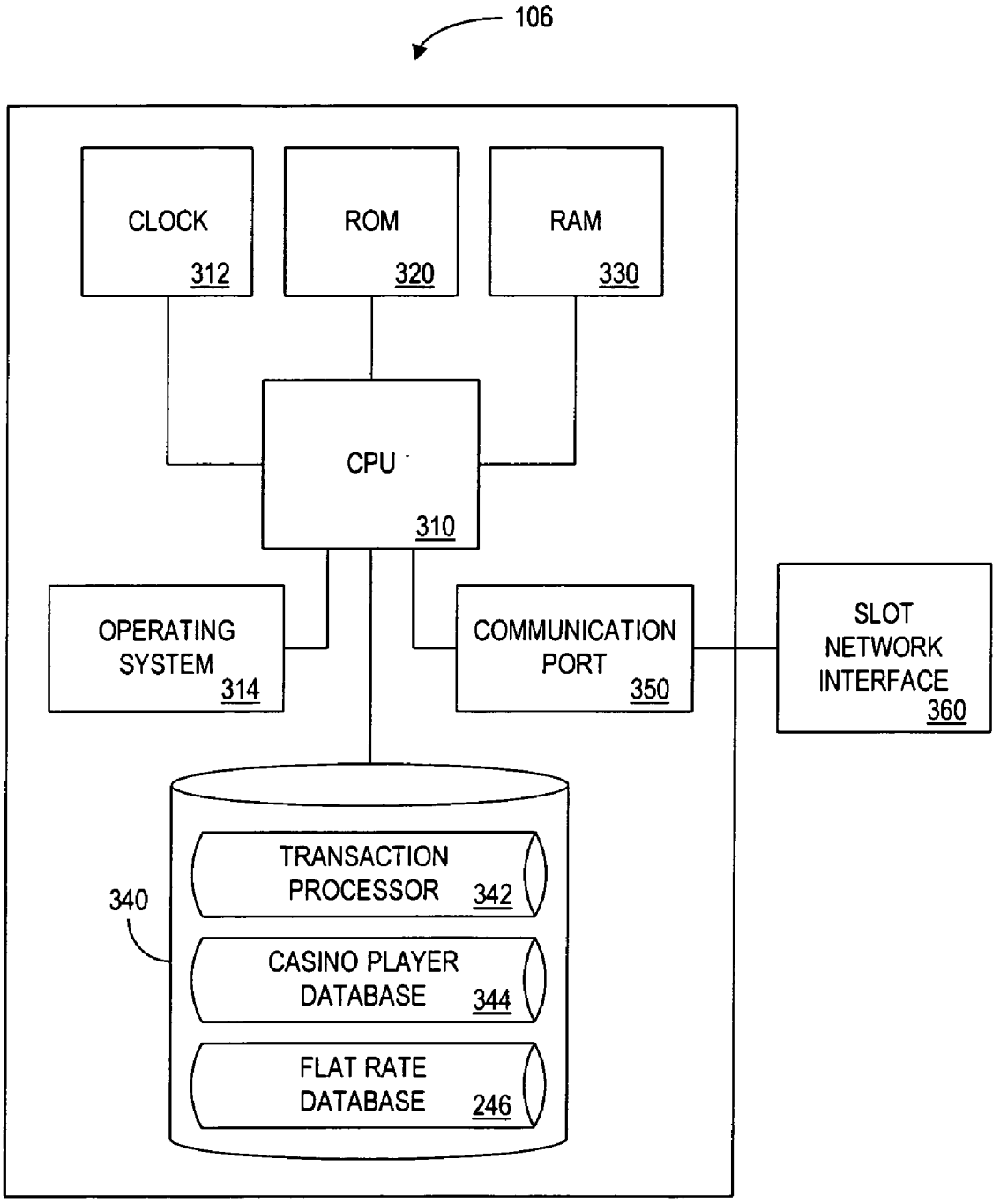

106
CLOCK
312
ROM
320
RAM
330
CPU
310
OPERATING SYSTEM
314
COMMUNICATION PORT
350
SLOT NETWORK INTERFACE
360
340
TRANSACTION PROCESSOR
342
CASINO PLAYER DATABASE
344
FLAT RATE DATABASE
246

FIG. 3

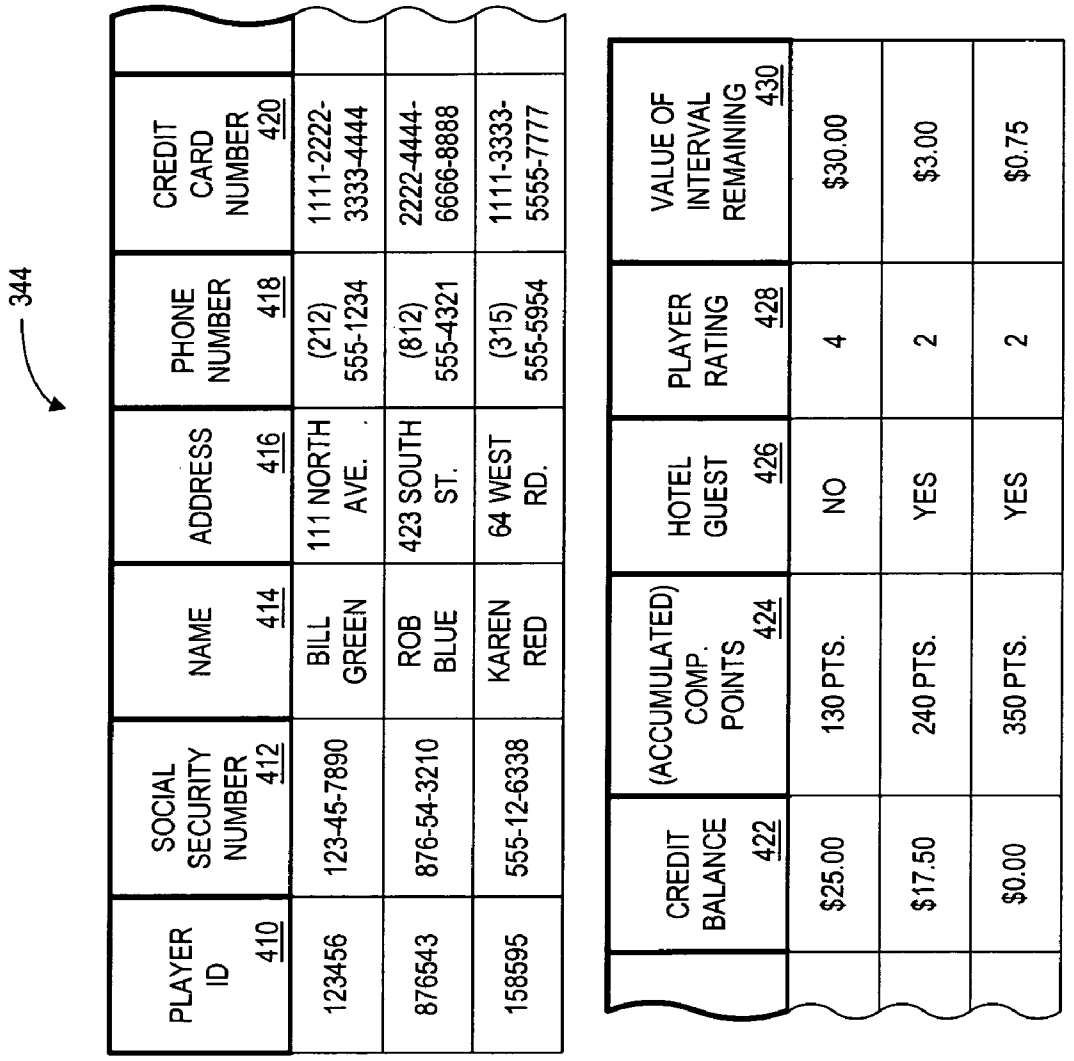
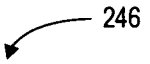
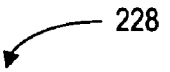

344
PLAYER ID 410
SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER 412
NAME 414
ADDRESS 416
PHONE NUMBER 418
CREDIT CARD NUMBER 420
123456
123-45-7890
BILL GREEN
111 NORTH AVE.
(212) 555-1234
1111-2222-3333-4444
876543
876-54-3210
ROB BLUE
423 SOUTH ST.
(812) 555-4321
2222-4444-6666-8888
158595
555-12-6338
KAREN RED
64 WEST RD.
(315) 555-5954
1111-3333-5555-7777
CREDIT BALANCE 422
(ACCUMULATED) COMP. POINTS 424
HOTEL GUEST 426
PLAYER RATING 428
VALUE OF INTERVAL REMAINING 430
$25.00
130 PTS.
NO
4
$30.00
$17.50
240 PTS.
YES
2
$3.00
$0.00
350 PTS.
YES
2
$0.75

FIG. 4



PLAYER ID NUMBER 510	PLAYER SELECTED PRICE PARAMETERS 512	FLAT RATE PRICE 514	INTERVAL REMAINING 516	TIME AUDIT DATA 518	MACHINE ID NUMBER 520
123456	TOP 3 JACKPOTS 90 MINUTES	$50.00	72 MINUTES	6/21/97 10:30 AM	A846
876543	ALL JACKPOTS 90 MINUTES	$200.00	3 MINUTES	6/21/97 11:00 AM	B623
158595	TOP JACKPOT 30 MINUTES	$30.00	15 MINUTES	6/21/97 11:30 AM 6/21/97 11:45 AM	C103

FIG. 5



PAY COMBINATION 610	1 COIN 620	2 COINS 630	3 COINS 640	PAY COMBINATION STATUS 650
DOUBLE JACKPOT	400	800	1200	ACTIVE
5BAR-5BAR-5BAR	50	100	150	ACTIVE
SEVEN-SEVEN -SEVEN	25	50	75	INACTIVE
BAR-BAR-BAR	20	40	60	INACTIVE
CHERRY-CHERRY-CHERRY	10	20	30	INACTIVE
ANY PAIR-CHERRY	5	10	15	INACTIVE
ANY-ANY-CHERRY	2	4	6	INACTIVE
NON WINNING OUTCOMES	0	0	0	N/A

FIG. 6

227

MACHINE TYPE 710	AMOUNT WAGERED PER PLAY 712	PLAYER RATING 714	TIME OF DAY 716	DAY OF THE WEEK 718	MACHINE USAGE 719	ACTIVE PAY COMBINATIONS 720	DURATION OF FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION 722	FLAT RATE PRICE 724
QUARTER DEUCES WILD	$0.25	2	2:00 AM	MONDAY	LOW	ALL	30 MIN.	$15.00
DOLLAR DOUBLE DIAMOND	$3	5	9:00 PM	SATURDAY	HEAVY	TOP 2	2 HRS.	$100.00
DOLLAR SUPER SEVENS	$3	3	4:00 PM	FRIDAY	MODERATE	TOP 1	1 HR.	$30.00

FIG. 7

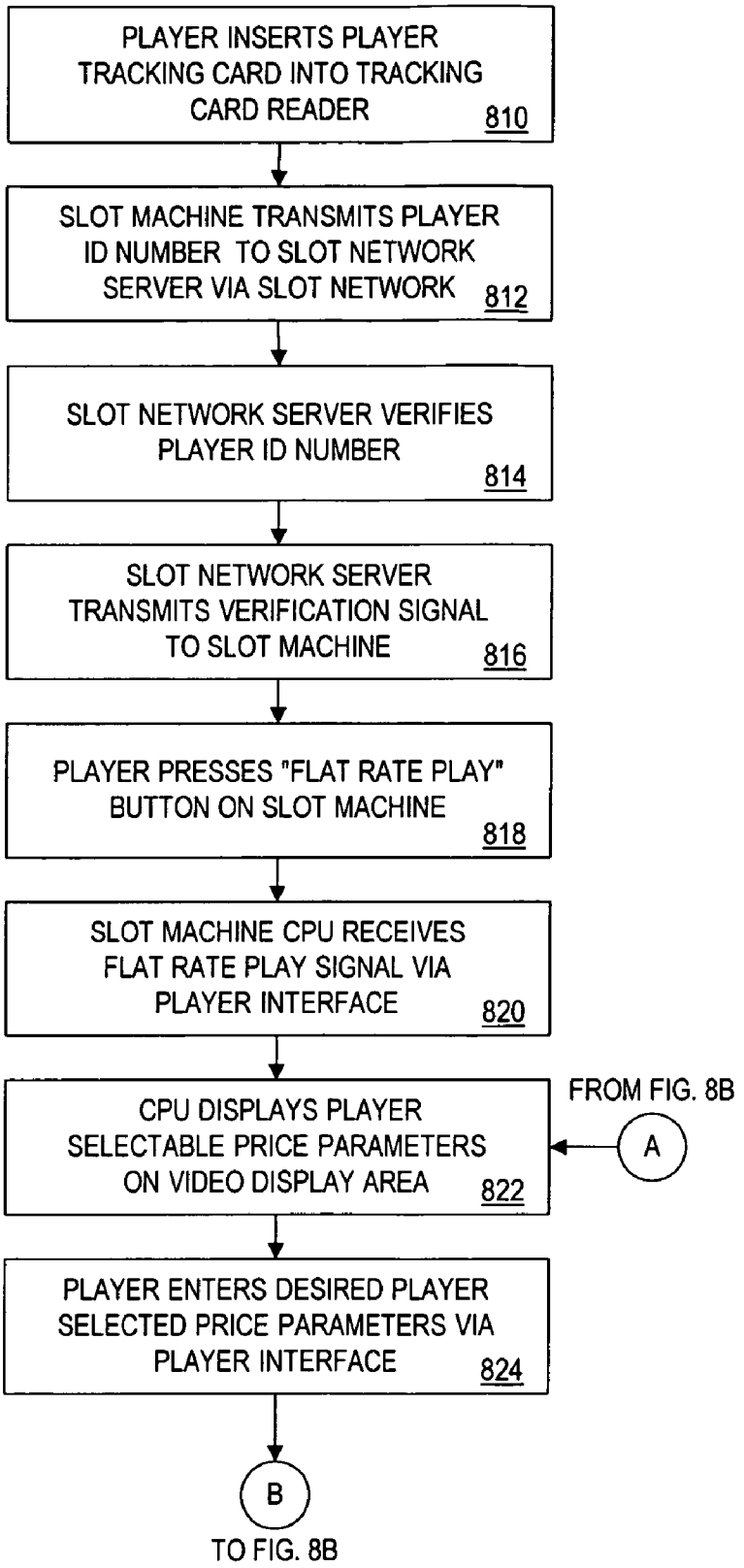

PLAYER INSERTS PLAYER TRACKING CARD INTO TRACKING CARD READER 810
SLOT MACHINE TRANSMITS PLAYER ID NUMBER TO SLOT NETWORK SERVER VIA SLOT NETWORK 812
SLOT NETWORK SERVER VERIFIES PLAYER ID NUMBER 814
SLOT NETWORK SERVER TRANSMITS VERIFICATION SIGNAL TO SLOT MACHINE 816
PLAYER PRESSES "FLAT RATE PLAY" BUTTON ON SLOT MACHINE 818
SLOT MACHINE CPU RECEIVES FLAT RATE PLAY SIGNAL VIA PLAYER INTERFACE 820
FROM FIG. 8B
A
CPU DISPLAYS PLAYER SELECTABLE PRICE PARAMETERS ON VIDEO DISPLAY AREA 822
PLAYER ENTERS DESIRED PLAYER SELECTED PRICE PARAMETERS VIA PLAYER INTERFACE 824
B
TO FIG. 8B

FIG. 8A

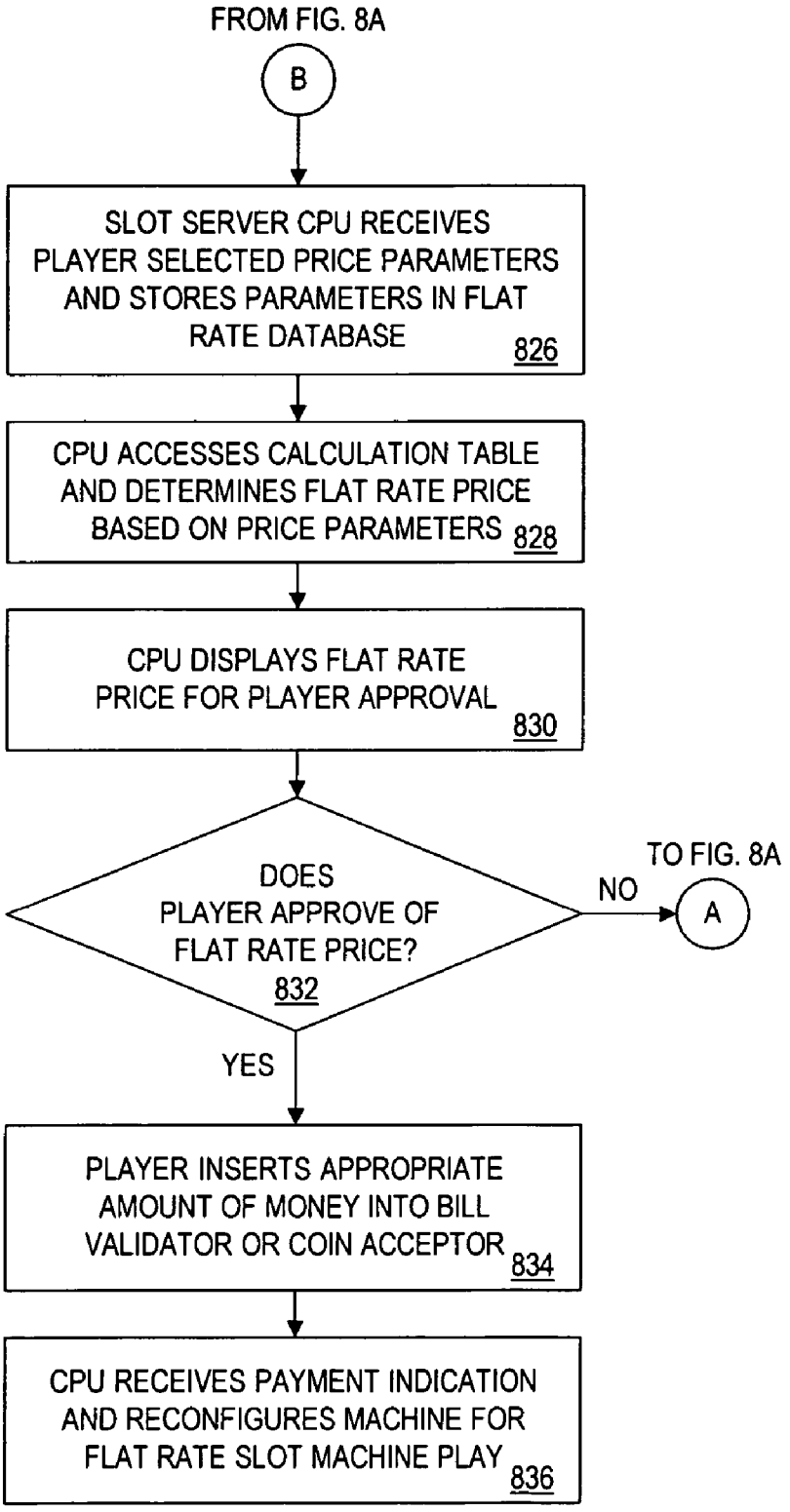

FROM FIG. 8A
B
SLOT SERVER CPU RECEIVES PLAYER SELECTED PRICE PARAMETERS AND STORES PARAMETERS IN FLAT RATE DATABASE 826
CPU ACCESSES CALCULATION TABLE AND DETERMINES FLAT RATE PRICE BASED ON PRICE PARAMETERS 828
CPU DISPLAYS FLAT RATE PRICE FOR PLAYER APPROVAL 830
DOES PLAYER APPROVE OF FLAT RATE PRICE? 832
NO
TO FIG. 8A
A
YES
PLAYER INSERTS APPROPRIATE AMOUNT OF MONEY INTO BILL VALIDATOR OR COIN ACCEPTOR 834
CPU RECEIVES PAYMENT INDICATION AND RECONFIGURES MACHINE FOR FLAT RATE SLOT MACHINE PLAY 836

FIG. 8B

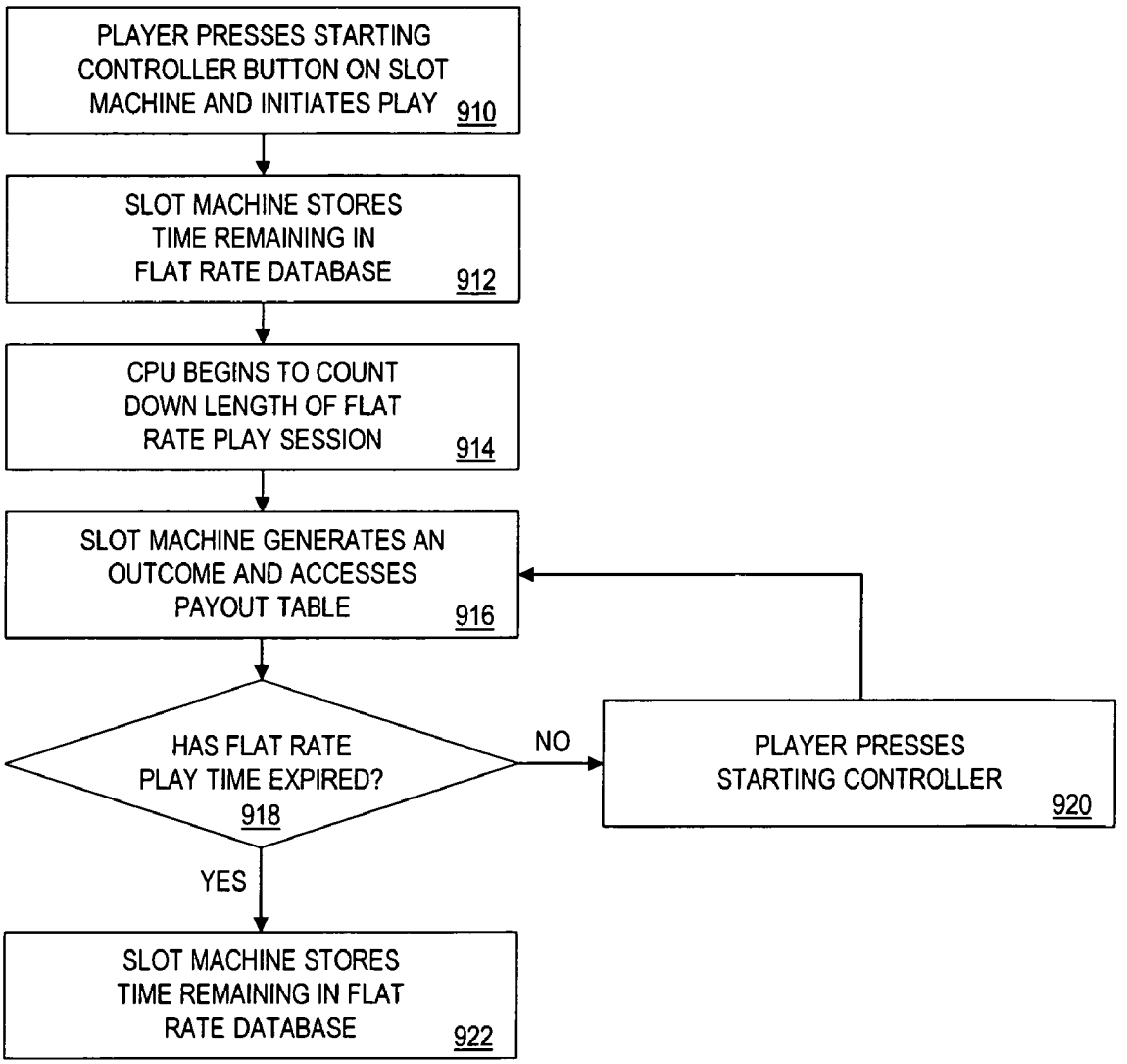

PLAYER PRESSES STARTING CONTROLLER BUTTON ON SLOT MACHINE AND INITIATES PLAY 910
SLOT MACHINE STORES TIME REMAINING IN FLAT RATE DATABASE 912
CPU BEGINS TO COUNT DOWN LENGTH OF FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION 914
SLOT MACHINE GENERATES AN OUTCOME AND ACCESSES PAYOUT TABLE 916
HAS FLAT RATE PLAY TIME EXPIRED? 918
NO
PLAYER PRESSES STARTING CONTROLLER 920
YES
SLOT MACHINE STORES TIME REMAINING IN FLAT RATE DATABASE 922

FIG. 9

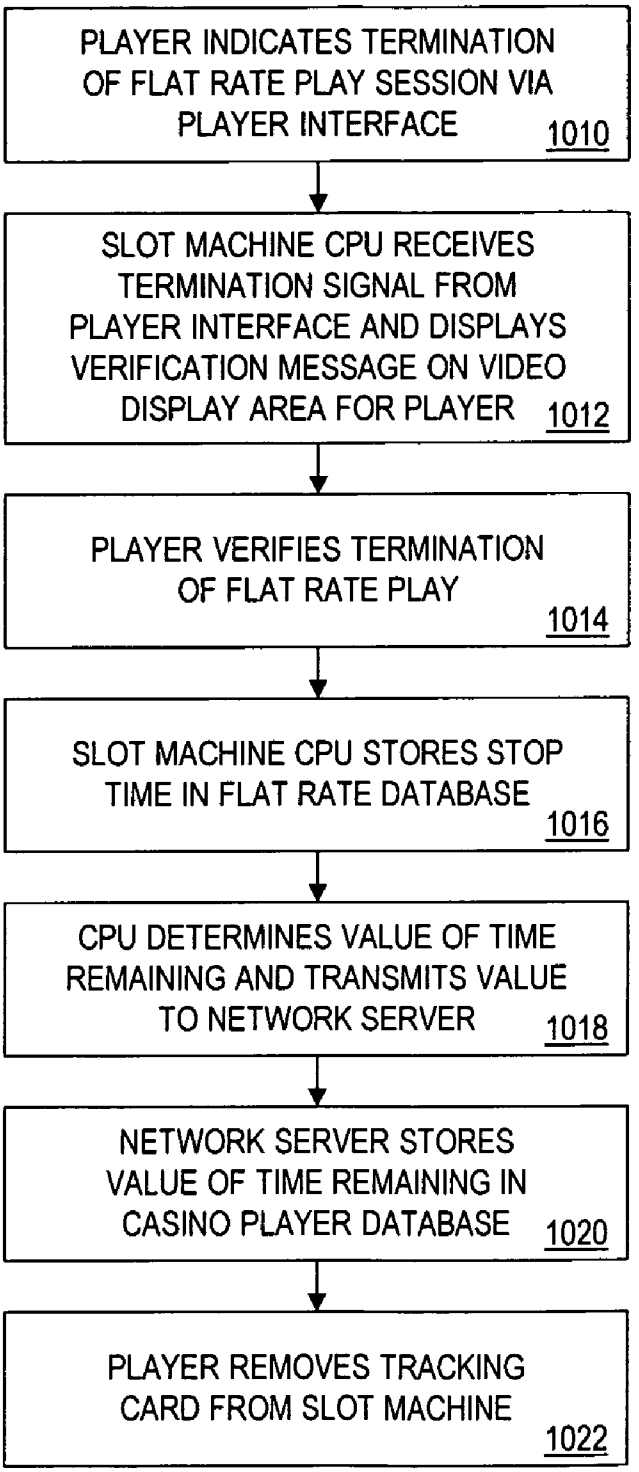

PLAYER INDICATES TERMINATION OF FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION VIA PLAYER INTERFACE 1010
SLOT MACHINE CPU RECEIVES TERMINATION SIGNAL FROM PLAYER INTERFACE AND DISPLAYS VERIFICATION MESSAGE ON VIDEO DISPLAY AREA FOR PLAYER 1012
PLAYER VERIFIES TERMINATION OF FLAT RATE PLAY 1014
SLOT MACHINE CPU STORES STOP TIME IN FLAT RATE DATABASE 1016
CPU DETERMINES VALUE OF TIME REMAINING AND TRANSMITS VALUE TO NETWORK SERVER 1018
NETWORK SERVER STORES VALUE OF TIME REMAINING IN CASINO PLAYER DATABASE 1020
PLAYER REMOVES TRACKING CARD FROM SLOT MACHINE 1022

FIG. 10

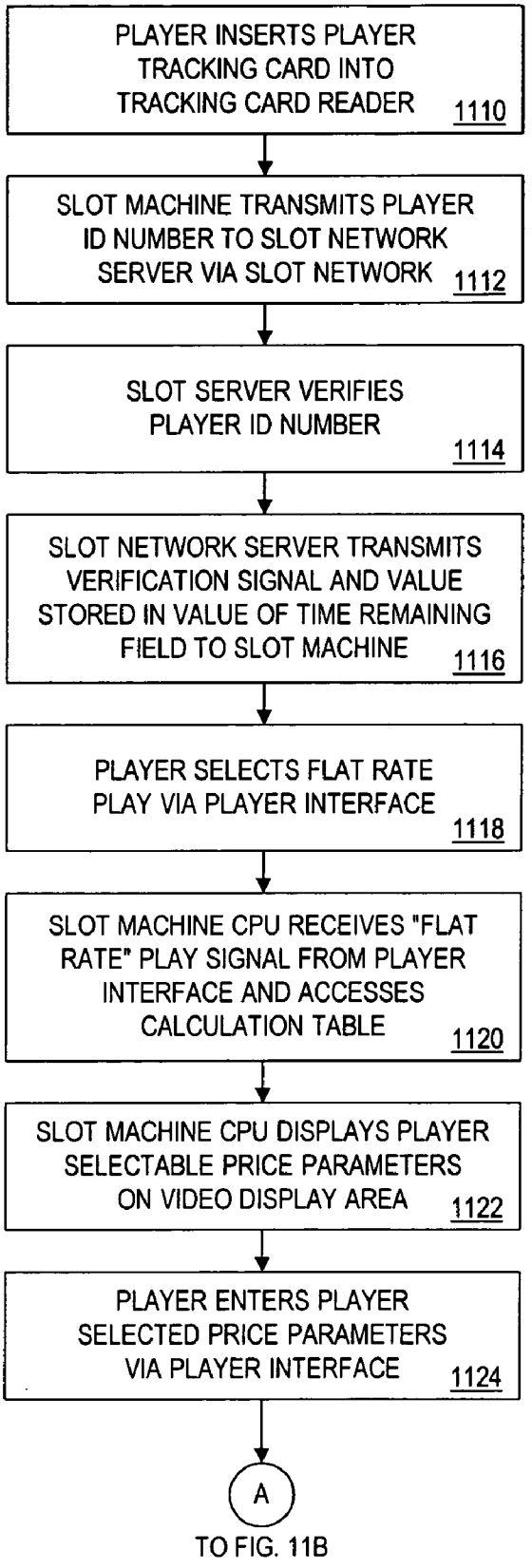

PLAYER INSERTS PLAYER TRACKING CARD INTO TRACKING CARD READER 1110
SLOT MACHINE TRANSMITS PLAYER ID NUMBER TO SLOT NETWORK SERVER VIA SLOT NETWORK 1112
SLOT SERVER VERIFIES PLAYER ID NUMBER 1114
SLOT NETWORK SERVER TRANSMITS VERIFICATION SIGNAL AND VALUE STORED IN VALUE OF TIME REMAINING FIELD TO SLOT MACHINE 1116
PLAYER SELECTS FLAT RATE PLAY VIA PLAYER INTERFACE 1118
SLOT MACHINE CPU RECEIVES "FLAT RATE" PLAY SIGNAL FROM PLAYER INTERFACE AND ACCESSES CALCULATION TABLE 1120
SLOT MACHINE CPU DISPLAYS PLAYER SELECTABLE PRICE PARAMETERS ON VIDEO DISPLAY AREA 1122
PLAYER ENTERS PLAYER SELECTED PRICE PARAMETERS VIA PLAYER INTERFACE 1124
A
TO FIG. 11B

FIG. 11A

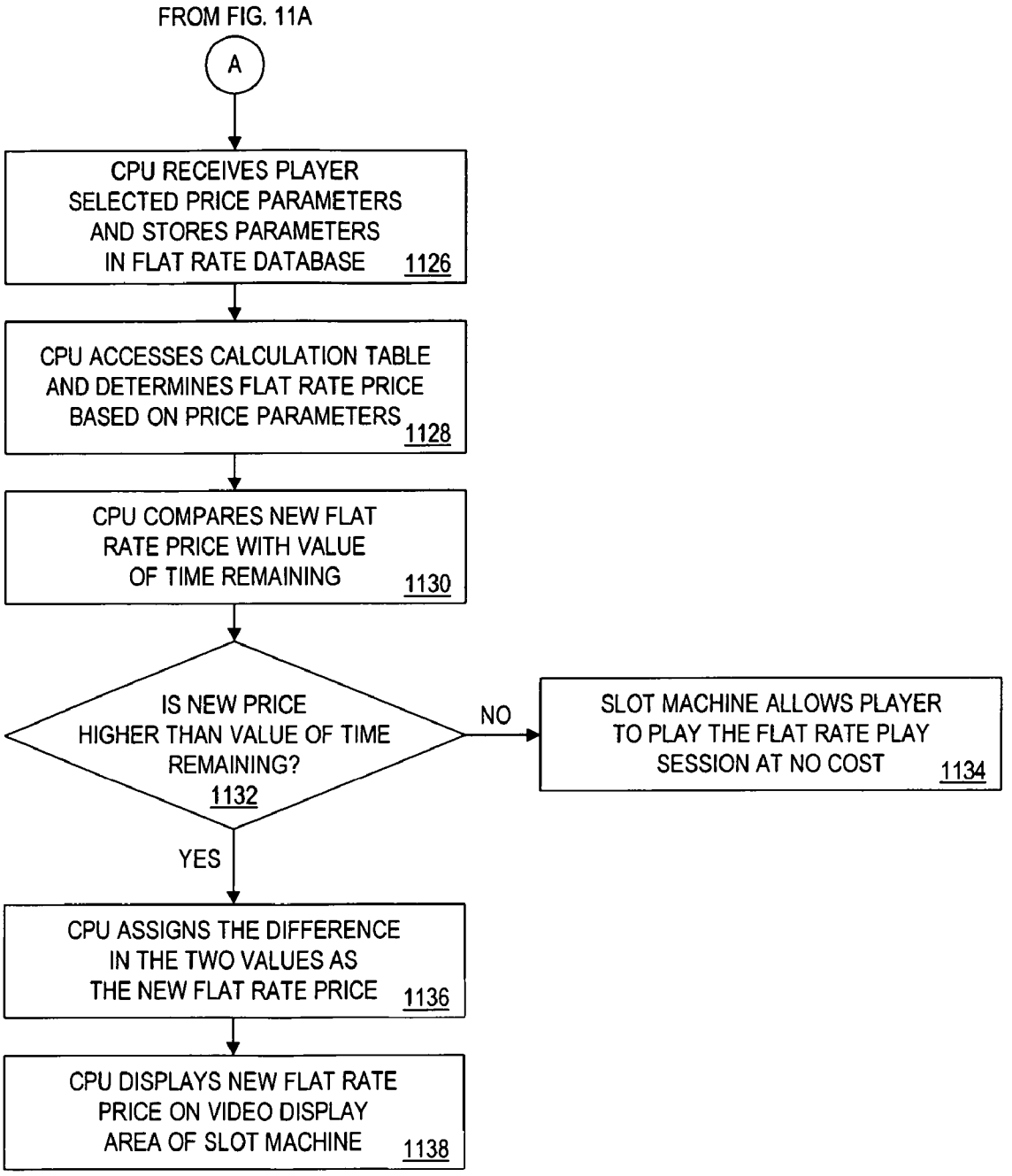

FROM FIG. 11A
A
CPU RECEIVES PLAYER SELECTED PRICE PARAMETERS AND STORES PARAMETERS IN FLAT RATE DATABASE 1126
CPU ACCESSES CALCULATION TABLE AND DETERMINES FLAT RATE PRICE BASED ON PRICE PARAMETERS 1128
CPU COMPARES NEW FLAT RATE PRICE WITH VALUE OF TIME REMAINING 1130
IS NEW PRICE HIGHER THAN VALUE OF TIME REMAINING? 1132
NO
SLOT MACHINE ALLOWS PLAYER TO PLAY THE FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION AT NO COST 1134
YES
CPU ASSIGNS THE DIFFERENCE IN THE TWO VALUES AS THE NEW FLAT RATE PRICE 1136
CPU DISPLAYS NEW FLAT RATE PRICE ON VIDEO DISPLAY AREA OF SLOT MACHINE 1138

FIG. 11B

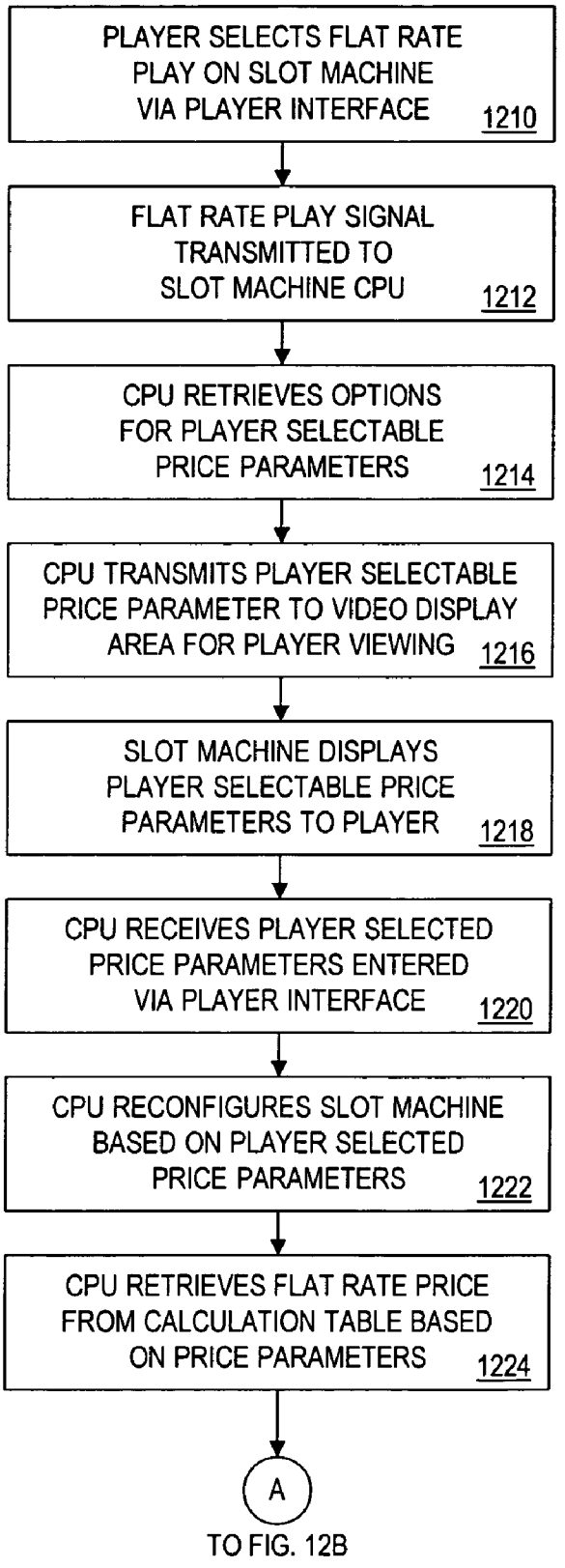

PLAYER SELECTS FLAT RATE PLAY ON SLOT MACHINE VIA PLAYER INTERFACE 1210
FLAT RATE PLAY SIGNAL TRANSMITTED TO SLOT MACHINE CPU 1212
CPU RETRIEVES OPTIONS FOR PLAYER SELECTABLE PRICE PARAMETERS 1214
CPU TRANSMITS PLAYER SELECTABLE PRICE PARAMETER TO VIDEO DISPLAY AREA FOR PLAYER VIEWING 1216
SLOT MACHINE DISPLAYS PLAYER SELECTABLE PRICE PARAMETERS TO PLAYER 1218
CPU RECEIVES PLAYER SELECTED PRICE PARAMETERS ENTERED VIA PLAYER INTERFACE 1220
CPU RECONFIGURES SLOT MACHINE BASED ON PLAYER SELECTED PRICE PARAMETERS 1222
CPU RETRIEVES FLAT RATE PRICE FROM CALCULATION TABLE BASED ON PRICE PARAMETERS 1224
A
TO FIG. 12B

FIG. 12A

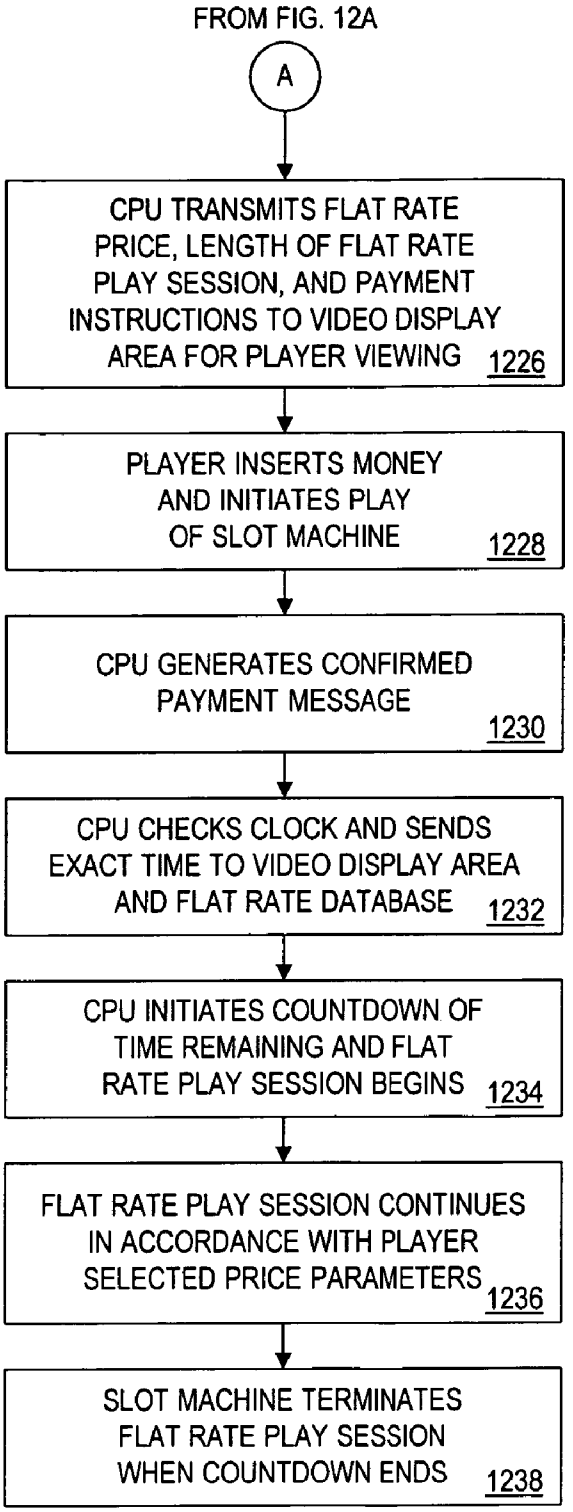

FROM FIG. 12A
A
CPU TRANSMITS FLAT RATE PRICE, LENGTH OF FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION, AND PAYMENT INSTRUCTIONS TO VIDEO DISPLAY AREA FOR PLAYER VIEWING 1226
PLAYER INSERTS MONEY AND INITIATES PLAY OF SLOT MACHINE 1228
CPU GENERATES CONFIRMED PAYMENT MESSAGE 1230
CPU CHECKS CLOCK AND SENDS EXACT TIME TO VIDEO DISPLAY AREA AND FLAT RATE DATABASE 1232
CPU INITIATES COUNTDOWN OF TIME REMAINING AND FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION BEGINS 1234
FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION CONTINUES IN ACCORDANCE WITH PLAYER SELECTED PRICE PARAMETERS 1236
SLOT MACHINE TERMINATES FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION WHEN COUNTDOWN ENDS 1238

FIG. 12B

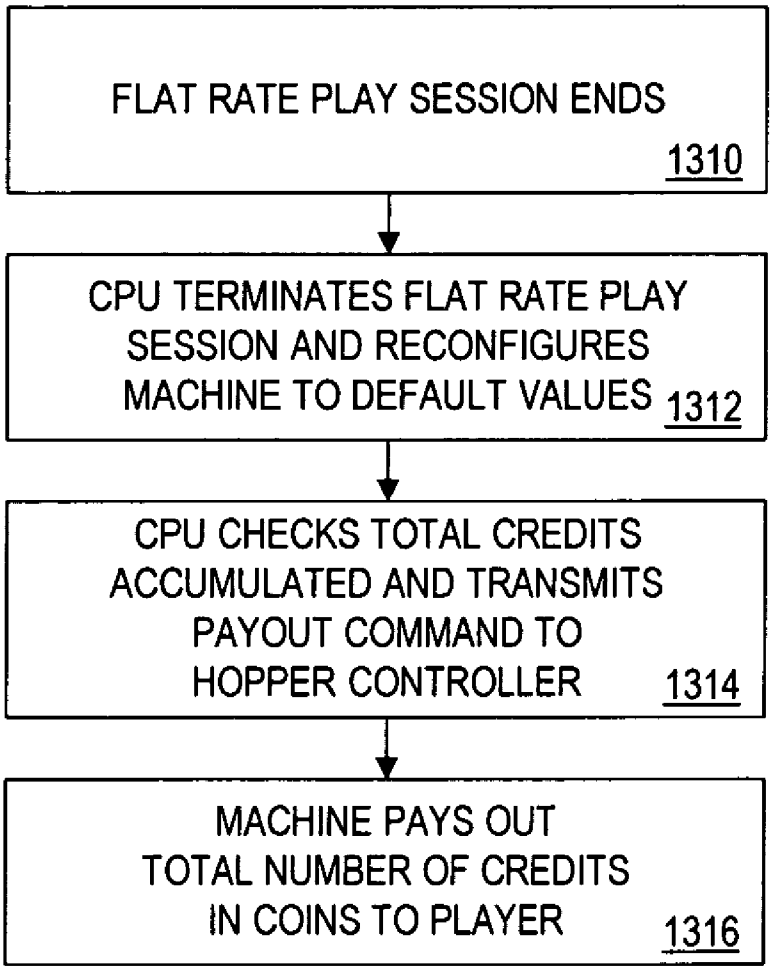

FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION ENDS
1310
CPU TERMINATES FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION AND RECONFIGURES MACHINE TO DEFAULT VALUES
1312
CPU CHECKS TOTAL CREDITS ACCUMULATED AND TRANSMITS PAYOUT COMMAND TO HOPPER CONTROLLER
1314
MACHINE PAYS OUT TOTAL NUMBER OF CREDITS IN COINS TO PLAYER
1316

FIG. 13

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PACKAGE NUMBER 1410	INTERVAL 1412	DURATION OF FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION 1414	AMOUNT WAGERED PER PLAY 1416	PAY COMBINATION STATUS 1418	FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION PRICE 1420
1	HANDLE PULLS	100 PULLS	3 COINS	ALL ACTIVE	$30.00
2	HANDLE PULLS	100 PULLS	3 COINS	TOP 3 ACTIVE	$20.00
3	HANDLE PULLS	250 PULLS	3 COINS	ALL ACTIVE	$75.00
4	HANDLE PULLS	250 PULLS	3 COINS	TOP 3 ACTIVE	$50.00
5	TIME	30 MINUTES	3 COINS	ALL ACTIVE	$40.00
6	TIME	30 MINUTES	3 COINS	DYNAMIC	$30.00
7	TIME	60 MINUTES	3 COINS	ALL ACTIVE	$80.00
8	TIME	60 MINUTES	3 COINS	DYNAMIC	$60.00
9	TIME	90 MINUTES	3 COINS	ALL ACTIVE	$120.00

FIG. 14

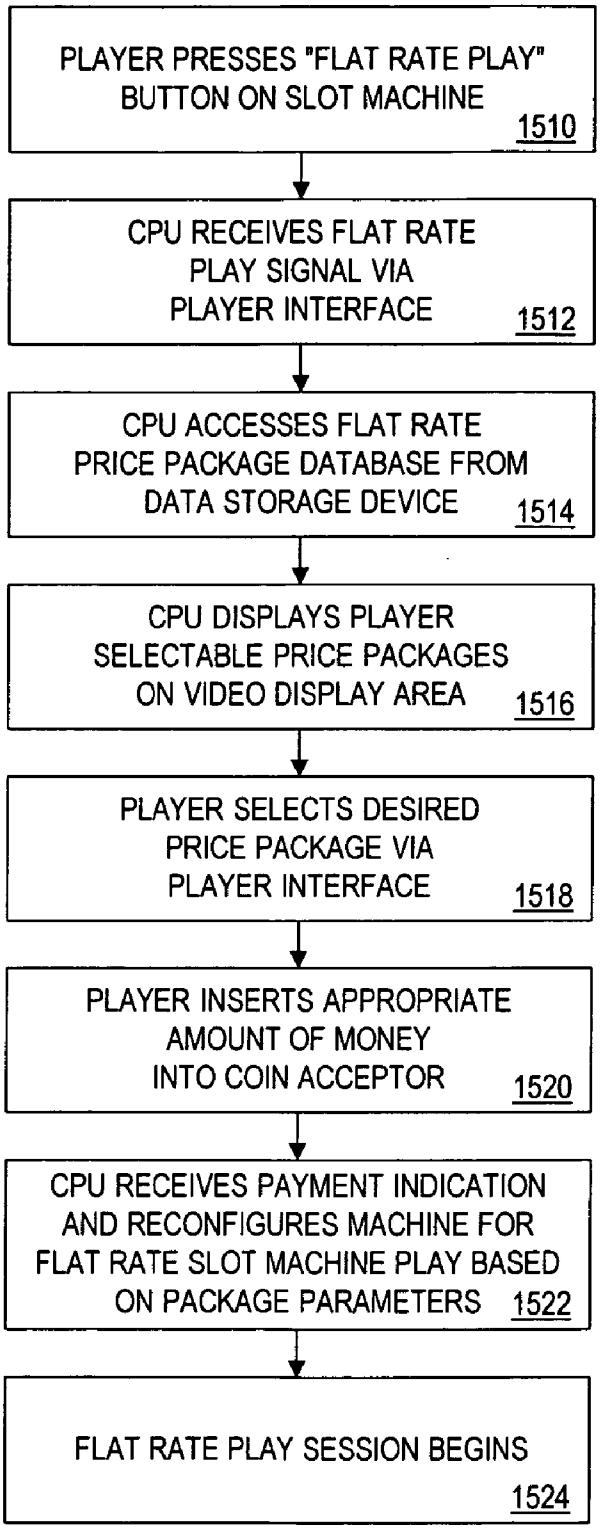

PLAYER PRESSES "FLAT RATE PLAY" BUTTON ON SLOT MACHINE 1510
CPU RECEIVES FLAT RATE PLAY SIGNAL VIA PLAYER INTERFACE 1512
CPU ACCESSES FLAT RATE PRICE PACKAGE DATABASE FROM DATA STORAGE DEVICE 1514
CPU DISPLAYS PLAYER SELECTABLE PRICE PACKAGES ON VIDEO DISPLAY AREA 1516
PLAYER SELECTS DESIRED PRICE PACKAGE VIA PLAYER INTERFACE 1518
PLAYER INSERTS APPROPRIATE AMOUNT OF MONEY INTO COIN ACCEPTOR 1520
CPU RECEIVES PAYMENT INDICATION AND RECONFIGURES MACHINE FOR FLAT RATE SLOT MACHINE PLAY BASED ON PACKAGE PARAMETERS 1522
FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION BEGINS 1524

FIG. 15

GAMING DEVICE FOR A FLAT RATE PLAY SESSION AND A METHOD OF OPERATING SAME

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] 1. Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention relates generally to the structure and operation of at least one gaming device, such as a slot machine, wherein a flat rate price purchases a flat rate play session comprising multiple plays.

[0003] 2. Description of Related Art

[0004] There are numerous types of gaming devices in use today. Most of these gaming devices, such as slot machines, video blackjack machines, video poker machines, and the like, require the player of the device to purchase individual plays at a set cost or wager per play. Because players can only purchase individual plays, they may stop playing after any individual play. Furthermore, having to purchase each individual play is inconvenient. Thus, a need exists for a gaming device allowing more convenient and efficient methods of play.

[0005] One scenario in which players seemingly purchase multiple plays on a gaming device during a flat rate play session is entry fee slot machine tournaments. Such tournaments typically involve players paying a fee for a set period of play determined by the casino. During such tournaments, each player plays a specific type and denomination of machine, also determined by the casino, and accumulates points rather than money. Those players accumulating the most points are awarded prizes.

[0006] Although slot machine tournaments are popular with some players, the tournaments are inflexible and not accommodating to individual player's preferences. The organizers set the time and duration of the tournament, the cost to play, the amount wagered per play, and the type of machines which are played.

[0007] Furthermore, the organizers must designate machines for the tournament. Because these machines are available only to tournament players and not the general public, the machine owners lose revenue for all machines designated but not played during a tournament. Thus, a need still exists for a gaming device which allows tournament style play without comprising the revenue stream of a casino, particularly where the player selects the time and duration of the period, the amount wagered per play, and the particular gaming device played.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] In accordance with the present invention, there is provided a method and apparatus article of manufacture for providing a gaming session using a gaming device. In one embodiment, the method includes identifying at least one price parameter, determining a flat rate price based upon the at least one identified price parameter, and initiating a flat rate play session of the gaming device upon receiving an indication of payment of the flat rate price. The flat rate play session spans a pre-established duration.

[0009] In one embodiment, the price parameter is a player selected price parameter, such as the amount wagered per play, jackpot structure, length of the flat rate play session, the type of gaming device, time of day, day of the week, and day of the year. In another embodiment, the price parameter is an operator selected price parameter, such as player status rating, availability of gaming devices, and anticipated availability of gaming devices.

[0010] A gaming device is also disclosed. In one embodiment, the gaming device comprises a player interface and a processor coupled thereto. The player interface is capable of receiving player input, such as a player selected price parameter. The processor is configured to determine a flat rate price based on the player input for initiating and operating the gaming device during the flat rate play session.

[0011] A gaming system is also disclosed. In one embodiment, the gaming system includes multiple gaming devices, each having a player interface, a controller coupled to each of the gaming devices and a processor coupled to each of the player interfaces. The player interfaces receive at least one player selected price parameter and an indication of player selection of a flat rate play session lasting a pre-established duration upon receipt of a flat rate payment. The controller communicates with the gaming devices and includes a memory device in which player information is stored. The processor is configured to determine the flat rate price based on the player selected price parameter. The processor is also configured to initiate the flat rate play session upon receipt of the flat rate payment.

[0012] A method of playing a gaming device is also disclosed. The method includes the steps of selecting to play the gaming device in an optional timed mode of operation for a flat rate price. The method also includes the step of providing a player selected price parameter. The flat rate price is based on the player selected price parameter. The method further includes the steps of paying the flat rate price and initiating operation of the gaming device in the timed mode of play.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0013] **FIG. 1** is an overall schematic view of a system according to one embodiment of the present invention, including a slot machine and a slot network server;

[0014] **FIG. 2*a*** is a schematic view of the slot machine of **FIG. 1**;

[0015] **FIG. 2*b*** is a plan view of the slot machine of **FIG. 1**;

[0016] **FIG. 3** is a schematic view of the slot network server of **FIG. 1**;

[0017] **FIG. 4** is a schematic view of a casino player database of the server of **FIG. 3**;

[0018] **FIG. 5** is a schematic view of the flat rate database of the slot machine of **FIG. 2**;

[0019] **FIG. 6** is a schematic view of the payout table of the slot machine of **FIG. 2**;

[0020] **FIG. 7** is a schematic view of the calculation table of the slot machine of **FIG. 2**;

[0021] **FIGS. 8*a*** and **8*b*** are overall flow diagrams of the operation of the system of **FIG. 1**;

[0022] **FIG. 9** is a detailed flow diagram of the operation of the system of **FIG. 1**;

[0023] **FIG. 10** is a flow diagram of the process of terminating play of the system of **FIG. 1**;

[0024] **FIGS. 11***a* and **11***b* are flow diagrams of the process of resuming play of the system of **FIG. 1**;

[0025] **FIGS. 12***a* and **12***b* are overall flow diagrams of the operation of another embodiment of the present invention;

[0026] **FIG. 13** is a flow diagram of the process of receiving a payout in the embodiment of **FIG. 12**;

[0027] **FIG. 14** is a schematic view of the flat rate price package database of the slot machine of **FIG. 2**; and

[0028] **FIG. 15** is an overall flow diagram of the operation of another embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0029] Certain preferred embodiments of the present invention will now be described in greater detail with reference to the drawings. Although the embodiments discussed herein are directed to reel slot machines, it should be understood that the present invention is equally applicable to other gaming devices, such as video poker machines, video blackjack machines, video roulette, video keno and the like.

[0030] The present invention is directed generally to a method and apparatus for operating a gaming device having a flat rate play session. As used herein, flat rate play session is defined as a period of play wherein the player need not make funds available for any play during the play session. The flat rate play session spans multiple plays of the gaming device. These multiple plays are aggregated into intervals or segments of play. It is to be understood that the term interval as used herein could be time, handle pulls, and any other segment in which slot machine play could be divided. For example, two hours, one hundred spins, fifty winning spins, etc. A player enters player identifying information and player selected price parameters at a gaming device. The price parameters define the flat rate play session, describing the duration of play, machine denomination, jackpots active, etc. The gaming device stores the player selected price parameters and proceeds to retrieve the flat rate price of playing the gaming device for the flat rate play session. The player selected price parameters, in combination with operator price parameters, determine the flat rate price. Should the player decide to pay the flat rate price, the player simply deposits that amount into the gaming device or makes a credit account available for the gaming device to debit. For example, it might cost twenty-five dollars to play for half an hour. Once the player initiates play, the gaming device tracks the flat rate play session and stops the play when the session is completed, usually when a time limit has expired. During the play session, the player is not required to deposit any coins. Payouts are made either directly to the player in the form of coins or indirectly in the form of credits to the credit balance stored in the machine. It should be understood that the player balance could be stored in a number of mediums, such as smart cards, credit card accounts, debit cards, and hotel credit accounts.

[0031] With reference to **FIG. 1**, a system **100** according to one embodiment of the present invention is shown. In general, the system **100** comprises multiple slot machines **102** and a slot network server **106**. In the present embodiment, each slot machine **102**, which is uniquely identified by a machine identification (ID) number, communicates with the slot network server **106** via a slot network **104**. The slot network **104** is preferably a conventional local area network controlled by the server **106**. It is to be understood, however, that other arrangements in which the slot machines **102** communicate with the server **106** are within the scope of the present invention.

[0032] As will be described in greater detail below, in one embodiment, the slot machine **102** communicates player identifying information to the slot network server **106**. The slot network server **106**, in turn, verifies the player identifying information. The slot machine **102** also calculates a flat rate price based on both player selected and casino determined price parameters and displays the flat rate price to the player. The player may then accept the flat rate price and initiate play. In another embodiment, the present invention may be practiced without server **106**, in an arrangement in which the slot machine **102** calculates the flat rate price.

[0033] With reference to **FIG. 2***a*, the slot machine **102** will now be described in greater detail. The slot machine **102** contains a Central Processing Unit (CPU) **210**, a clock **212**, and an operating system **214** (typically stored in memory as software). The CPU **210** executes instructions of a program stored in Read Only Memory (ROM) **216** for playing the slot machine **102**. The Random Access Memory (RAM) **218** temporarily stores information passed to it by the CPU **210** during play. Also in communication with the CPU **210** is a Random Number Generator (RNG) **220**.

[0034] With respect to gaming operations, the slot machine **102** operates in a conventional manner. The player starts the machine **102** by inserting a coin into coin acceptor **248**, or using electronic credit, and pressing the starting controller **222**. Under control of a program stored, for example in a data storage device **224** or ROM **216**, the CPU **210** initiates the RNG **220** to generate a number. The CPU **210** looks up the generated random number in a stored probability table **226**, which contains a list which matches random numbers to corresponding outcomes, and finds the appropriate outcome. Based on the identified outcome, the CPU **210** locates the appropriate payout in a stored payout table **228**. The CPU **210** also directs a reel controller **230** to spin reels **232**, **234**, **236** and to stop them at a point when they display a combination of symbols corresponding to the appropriate payout. When the player wins, the machine stores the credits in RAM **218** and displays the current balance in video display area **238**. In an alternate embodiment, the slot machine **102** dispenses the coins to a payout tray (not shown), and in another embodiment, the slot network server **106** stores the player credits.

[0035] A hopper controller **240** is connected to a hopper **242** for dispensing coins. When the player requests to cash out by pushing a cashout button (not shown) on the slot machine **102**, the CPU **210** checks the RAM **218** to see if the player has any credit and, if so, signals the hopper controller **240** to release an appropriate number of coins into a payout tray (not shown). A coin acceptor **248** is also coupled to the CPU **210**. Each coin received by the coin acceptor **248** is registered by the CPU **210**.

[0036] In alternate embodiments, the slot machine **102** does not include the reel controller **230** and reels **232**, **234** and **236**. Instead, a video display area **238** graphically

displays representations of objects contained in the selected game, such as graphical reels or playing cards. These representations are preferably animated to display playing of the selected game.

[0037] Also in communication with the CPU **210** is a player tracking device **260**. The tracking device **260** comprises a card reader **266** for reading player identifying information stored on a player tracking card. As used herein, the term player identifying information denotes any information or compilation of information that uniquely identifies a player. In the present embodiment, the identifying information is a player identification (ID) number. Although not so limited, the player tracking card of the present embodiment stores the player ID on a magnetic strip located thereon. Such a magnetic strip and device to read the information stored on the magnetic strip are well known.

[0038] The player tracking device **260** also includes a display **262** and a player interface **264**. The player interface **264** may include a keypad and/or a touchscreen display. In operation, as discussed below, the slot machine **102** displays a message prompting the player to enter player selected price parameters. In the present embodiment, a player may enter the player selected price parameters via the player interface **264**. Because the player interface **264** is part of the tracking device **260**, it is, therefore, in communication with the CPU **210**. Alternatively, input of selected price parameters may be accomplished through video display area **238** if it is configured with touch screen capabilities.

[0039] The slot machine **102** also includes a series of bet buttons **272**, **274**, **276**. The bet buttons include "Bet 1 coin"**272**, "Bet 2 coins"**274**, and "Bet 3 coins"**276**. The bet buttons **272**, **274**, **276** are coupled to the CPU **210**. Therefore, pressing one transmits a signal to the CPU **210** indicating how much a player is wagering on a given play.

[0040] The databases stored in the data storage device **224** include a probability table **226**, a calculation table **227**, a payout table **228**, a flat rate price package database **229**, and a flat rate database **246**. As discussed in greater detail below, the flat rate database **246** and the calculation table **227** store information related to the flat rate play session and calculation of the flat rate price, respectively. The flat rate price package database **229** stores information describing different pre-established flat rate packages as custom designed by the casino.

[0041] Also connected to the CPU **210** is a slot network interface **250**. The slot network interface **250** provides a communication path from the slot machine **102** to slot network server **106** through the slot network **104**. Thus, as discussed in greater detail below, information is communicated among the player tracking card, player tracking device **260**, slot machine **102**, and slot network server **106**.

[0042] With reference to **FIG. 2***b*, the plan view of slot machine **102**, will now be described below. **FIG. 2***b* depicts slot machine **102** displaying player selected price parameter options on video display area **238**. Included in the displayed parameters is amount wagered per play **712**, interval **714**, duration of interval **722**, and active pay combinations **720**. As will be described further below, after the player has selected the desired price parameters, the slot machine **102** displays a flat rate price **724**. Once the player has accepted the flat rate price and made the appropriate funds available, play may commence.

[0043] The slot network server **106** will now be described in greater detail with reference to **FIG. 3**. Like the slot machine **102** of **FIG. 2**, the slot network server **106** has a Central Processing Unit (CPU) **310**. The CPU **310**, which has a clock **312** associated therewith, executes instructions of a program stored in Read Only Memory (ROM) **320**. During execution of the program instructions, the CPU **310** temporarily stores information in the Random Access Memory (RAM) **330**.

[0044] Additionally, the CPU **310** is coupled to a data storage device **340**, having a flat rate database **246**, transaction processor **342** and a casino player database **344**. In general, the transaction processor **342** manages the contents of the data storage devices **340**. As discussed in detail below, the casino player database **344** stores information specific to each player, including player identifying information.

[0045] In order to communicate with the slot machines **102**, the slot network server **106** also includes a communication port **350**. The communication port **350** is coupled to the CPU **310** and a slot machine interface **360**. Thus, the CPU **310** can control the communication port **350** to receive information from the data storage device **340** and RAM **330** and transmit the information to the slot machines **102** and vice versa.

[0046] It is to be understood that because the slot machines **102** are in communication with the slot network server **106**, information stored in a slot machine **102** may be stored in the server **106** and vice versa. Thus, for example, in an alternate embodiment, the server **106** rather than the slot machine **102** includes the payout table **228**, flat rate database **246**, and/or calculation table **227**.

[0047] The casino player database **344** of the present embodiment, as shown in **FIG. 4**, includes multiple records having multiple fields of information. Specifically, the casino player database **344** comprises multiple records, each record being associated with a particular player, as identified by a player identification (ID) number. The fields within each record include: player identification (ID) number **410**, social security number **412**, name **414**, address **416**, telephone number **418**, credit card number **420**, credit balance **422**, complimentary information, such as total accumulated complimentary points **424**, whether the player is a hotel guest **426**, player status rating **428**, and value of interval remaining **430**. Having information related to one field, such as player ID **410**, allows the slot network server **106** to retrieve all information stored in corresponding fields of that player record.

[0048] It is to be understood that not all of these identifying fields are necessary for operation of the present embodiment. For example, the name **414**, social security number **412**, address **416**, telephone number **418**, credit card number **420**, and hotel guest **426** fields are merely representative of additional information that may be stored and used for other purposes. In one embodiment, credit card number **420** and hotel guest **426** are used for billing purposes and social security number **412** is used to generate tax forms when a player wins a jackpot over a given amount.

[0049] Complimentary points awarded **424** is further illustrative of additional information a casino may store in a player's record. As described below, a player's complimentary points are displayed to the player when a player tracking

card is inserted into the slot machine **102**. In an alternate embodiment, such points may be used in addition, or as an alternative to the credit balance **422** stored in RAM **218** of slot machine **102**.

[**0050**] The player status rating **428** contains information representative of the particular player's relative importance to the casino, as based upon the frequency and duration of the player's visits, the amount of money wagered, and the like.

[**0051**] The value of interval remaining field **430** stores the value of interval remaining in a flat rate play session when a player terminates the play session prior to its expiration. This field will be described in greater detail below.

[**0052**] The flat rate database **246** will now be described in greater detail with reference to **FIG. 5**. The flat rate database **246** comprises multiple records, each record pertaining to the flat rate play session of a particular player, as identified by that player's ID number. Consequently, one field in flat rate database **246** is the player ID number field **510**. Other fields include: player selected price parameters **512**, flat rate price **514**, interval remaining **516**, and time audit data **518**, and machine identification (ID) number field **520**. The machine ID number field **520** contains the machine ID number that uniquely identifies the slot machine **102**. It is to be understood that since both the casino player database **244** and the flat rate database **246** include a player ID field, **410** and **510**, respectively, the system **100** can correlate any player information stored in the casino player database **344**, with any player information stored in the flat rate database **246**.

[**0053**] The payout table **228** will now be described in greater detail with reference to **FIG. 6**. As shown in **FIG. 6**, the payout table **228** of the present embodiment can be logically represented by five fields of related information. The first field, a pay combination field **610**, identifies the set of possible pay combinations for a given slot machine **102**. Such possible pay combinations include winning pay combinations, or those in which a payout results, and non-winning pay combinations, in which the player receives no payout and consequently loses the amount wagered. Winning pay combinations include, for example, "DOUBLE JACKPOT-DOUBLE JACKPOT-DOUBLE JACKPOT" and "BAR-BAR-BAR." The pay combinations field **610** also includes a "NON-WINNING OUTCOMES" record, an entry representing the outcomes which result in no payout to the player, such as "PLUM-BELL-ORANGE.ö

[**0054**] The payout table **228** also includes three payout fields **620**, **630**, **640**. Such payout fields **620**, **630**, **640** contain the payout information for each of the possible pay combinations identified in the pay combinations field **610**. Each of the payout fields **620**, **630**, **640** is identified by the number of coins wagered on a particular play, as selected via the bet buttons **272**, **274**, **276**. In the present embodiment, payout table **228** contains a "1 coin" payout field **620**, which is accessed when one coin is wagered, a "2 coins" payout field **630**, which is accessed when two coins are wagered, and a "3 coins" payout field **640**, which is accessed when three coins are wagered. In other words, each field **620**, **630**, **640** corresponds to a bet button **272**, **274**, **276**, respectively. The payout information provides the number of coins won upon the occurrence of a particular pay combination. Thus, ôCHERRY-CHERRY-CHERRYö pays out ten coins when one coin is wagered.

[**0055**] Finally, the payout table **228** of the present embodiment includes a pay combination status field **650**. The pay combination status field **650** includes an indication for each winning pay combination, identified in the pay combination field **610**, of whether the player is eligible to win the payout for each outcome. As will be described below, the determination of whether a player is eligible to win a payout for a given outcome is made by the player as part of the player selected price parameters.

[**0056**] The calculation table **227** will now be described in greater detail with reference to **FIG. 7**. The calculation table **227** is used by the system **100** in determining the flat rate price **724** (field **514** in the flat rate database **246**) charged to the player. Specifically, the calculation table **227** contains multiple price parameters which are correlated to a flat rate price **724**. More specifically, these price parameters include player selected price parameters and operator selected price parameters. In general, player selected price parameters include any game related variable that defines the flat rate play session. Furthermore, operator selected price parameters are parameters which the operator of the slot machines **102** selects as affecting the flat rate price **724**. Thus, in the present embodiment, the player selected price parameters in the calculation table **227** include machine type **710**, amount wagered per play **712**, active pay combinations **720**, and length of the flat rate play session **722**. The operator selected price parameters in the calculation table **227** include player status rating **714**, time of day **716**, day of the week **718**, and machine usage **719**. In the present embodiment the flat rate price **724** is predetermined based upon the aforementioned price parameters and stored in the calculation table **227**, as will be described later in **FIGS. 14 and 15**. In an alternate embodiment the flat rate price **724** is calculated based upon these parameters as needed according to a price algorithm stored in memory. For example, the price algorithm may operate as follows:

Algorithm for calculating a flat rate price

The first step is to determine a "base" flat rate price. This would be calculated as follows:

> Price=(amount wagered)×(interval)×(expected coins awarded for all active pay combinations/amount wagered per play×cycle)

For example, the following base calculation represents a player selecting three dollar coins per handle pull, an interval of 500 handle pulls, top three pay combinations active:

> Base Price=($3)×(500)×(2,160/10,648)=$304.28

Further, this base flat rate price is adjusted by operator price parameters such as the following:

1. Time of Day (TD)

[**0057**] Times of the day in which the casino traffic tends to be heavy should result in the player paying a premium for the flat rate session, while quiet times in the casino should offer the player a discount over normal rates.

Midnight to 4 am	70%
4 am to 8 am	80%
8 am to 12 pm	90%
12 pm to 4 pm	100%
4 pm to 8 pm	120%
8 pm to Midnight	140%

2. Day of Week (DW)

[0058] With the heaviest volume of visitors falling on Fridays and Saturdays, these days will necessitate higher flat rate session costs.

Mon to Thur	80%
Friday	120%
Saturday	140%
Sunday	100%

3. Player Status Rating (PSR)

[0059] For top customers such as high rollers, the cost of a flat rate session may be reduced as a customer retention tool.

1 (High Roller)	80%
2 (Good customer)	90%
3 (Average)	100%
4 (Low)	120%

4. Slot Machine Usage (SMU)

[0060] When the majority of slot machines in the casino are being used, a premium is applied to the cost of the flat rate play session in order to more evenly distribute play.

Heavy	120%
Moderate	100%
Light	80%

Sample Calculation.

In addition to the above player selected price parameters, the following operator selected parameters are incorporated into the price:

The player is in the casino at 2 am on a Wednesday, there is low slot machine usage, and the player has an average rating. The calculations below reflect these conditions:

$$\text{Base} = \$304.28$$

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Final flat rate price} &= \text{Base} \times TD \times DW \times PSR \times SMU \\ &= \$304.28 \times 70\% \times 80\% \times 100\% \times 80\% \\ &= \$304.28 \times 44.8\% \\ &= \$136.32\end{aligned}$$

The casino may round up this price to $137 to avoid the need for small change.

[0061] As will be understood by those skilled in the art, the ultimate goal of slot machine players is to hit a jackpot payout. The enjoyment of the play, as well as the ability to maximize the chance of hitting a large jackpot, is increased by more play. Play can be increased both by playing longer, and by playing faster. As will be appreciated from a consideration of the process described below, the present invention permits both increased duration, by providing for play at discounted prices, and speed of play, by providing for minimal time delays between plays.

[0062] The flat rate price package database **229** will now be described in greater detail with reference to **FIG. 14**. The flat rate price package database **229** is used by the system **100** in providing the player with different price package options for flat rate play of the slot machine **100**. Specifically, the flat rate price package database **229** contains multiple combinations, or packages **1410**, of price parameters which correspond to pre-established flat rate prices. More specifically, these price parameters include but are not limited to, interval **1412**, duration of flat rate play **1414**, amount wagered per play **1416**, and pay combination status **1418**. Each combination of price parameters has corresponding flat rate play session prices **1420**. As will be described later in **FIG. 15**, the flat rate price package database **229** is accessed when the player determines he wishes to initiate a flat rate play session. Rather than let the player choose the price parameters, the slot machine **100** lists the different packages stored in the flat rate price package database **229**. The player then chooses the package he likes the most and play commences.

[0063] Having thus described the components of the present embodiment, the operation of the system **100** will now be described in greater detail with reference to **FIGS. 8-11**, and continuing reference to **FIGS. 1-7**. It is to be understood that the programs stored in ROM **320** of the slot network server **106** and ROM **216** of the slot machine **102** provide the function described below.

[0064] Turning first to **FIGS. 8*a*** and **8*b***, the general operation of the system **100** will be described. As shown in step **810**, the slot machine player first inserts the player tracking card into the card reader **266**. The card reader **266** then proceeds to read player identifying information from the tracking card. The player identifying information, namely the player ID number, is communicated from the slot machine **102** to the slot server **106** in step **812**.

[0065] Upon receiving the player identifying information, the slot network server **106** verifies the information in step **814**. Such verification includes the slot network server **106** searching the casino player database **344** for a record containing the received player ID number in the appropriate field **410**. Once the slot network server **106** verifies the player identifying information, the server **106** transmits a signal to the slot machine **102** acknowledging such verification in step **816**. In alternate embodiments, other information, such as the player's name **414**, complimentary point total **424**, and player status rating **428** are transmitted to the slot machine **102** for display.

[0066] In step **818**, the player selects flat rate play via the player interface **264**. The CPU **210** of slot machine **102**, in step **820**, then receives a signal from the player interface **264**, indicating that the player has selected flat rate play. For example, there could be a button specifically for triggering a flat rate play session. The CPU **210**, in response, accesses memory to retrieve player selectable price parameters. Player selectable price parameters are the choices available to a player for entering the player selected price parameters. These player selectable price parameters are controlled by a program stored in ROM **216**. Such player selectable price parameters, in the present embodiment, include the amount

wagered per play, (e.g. one, two, or three coins), the length of the flat rate play session, and possible jackpot structures, such as having only the "DOUBLE JACKPOT" and "5 BAR" jackpots active (as illustrated in the payout table **228** of **FIG. 6**). In an alternate embodiment, the player selectable price parameters are stored as part of the calculation table **227**.

[**0067**] Then, as shown in step **822**, the slot machine **102** displays the player selectable price parameters to the player. For example, the parameters could be listed on the video display area **238** for the player, as described previously in **FIG. 2***b*. Once the parameters appear, the player simply selects his desired settings. Alternatively, the player may accept one or more default settings. Once the player selectable price parameters are displayed on the display **238**, the player proceeds, in step **824**, to enter player selected price parameters via the player interface **264**. The player selected price parameters also include data which, although not directly inputted by the player, is selected by the player and identified by the slot machine **102**. In the present embodiment, such additional player selected price parameters include type of machine, time of day, and day of the week.

[**0068**] It is to be understood that the casino operator of the slot machines **102** may define the scope of the player selectable price parameters, and therefore limit the player selected price parameters in any manner. For example, the length of flat rate play may be limited to periods above a minimum time or to periods that are multiples of thirty minute intervals. The jackpot structure may require that some jackpots remain active.

[**0069**] Referring now to **FIG. 8***b*, the slot machine **102** CPU **210** receives the player selected price parameters in step **826**. Having received the player selected parameters, the CPU **210** then stores the player selected price parameters, the player identifying information, and the slot machine's machine ID number in a record in the flat rate database **246**. Specifically, the player ID number is stored in field **510**, the machine ID number is stored in field **520**, and the player selected price parameters are stored in field **512**. Although the player selected price parameters are illustrated as being stored in a single field (**512**), it is to be understood that each player selected price parameter may be stored in a separate field. It is also to be understood that in alternate embodiments the player selected price parameters need not be stored in a database, but could be stored in RAM **218**.

[**0070**] The slot machine **102** CPU **210** uses the player selected price parameters to determine the flat rate prices. Specifically, in step **828**, the CPU **210** accesses the calculation table **227** and searches for the flat rate price **724** corresponding to the received player selected price parameters **512**, which, in the present embodiment, include machine type **710**, amount wagered per play **712**, time of day **716**, day of the week **718**, active jackpots **720**, and the length of the flat rate play session **722**. The CPU **210** also incorporates operator selected price parameters for the flat rate price **724** such as player status rating **714** and machine availability **719**. As will be appreciated by one skilled in the art, the player status rating **714** is received from the casino player database **344** at any time prior to determination of the flat rate price **724**. Thus, in a preferred embodiment, the slot network server **106** transmits the player status rating **428** to the slot machine **102** along with the verification signal in step **816**.

[**0071**] By including the player status rating **714** in the calculation table **277**, a casino may reward frequent players who wager relatively large amounts of money with a lower flat rate price **724**. Thus, the system **100** rewards and encourages frequent play. By including active jackpots **720** in the calculation table **348**, the system **100** allows a casino to discount the flat rate price **724** for those players who choose to enable relatively few winning outcomes in the payout table **228**. Furthermore, by including the price parameters relating to time of day and day of the week in the calculation table **227**, a casino may charge a lower flat rate price **724** for sessions during weekday afternoons or between 2:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. in the mornings, thereby encouraging play of the slot machines **102** when they are typically idle.

[**0072**] It is to be understood that the aforementioned price parameters in the calculation table **227** are merely representative of the type of variables that may be considered in determining a flat rate price. Thus, it is within the scope of the present invention to include only some of the price parameters, all of the parameters, or additional parameters in the calculation table **227**.

[**0073**] As mentioned above, the flat rate price may be based partly upon the availability of slot machines **102**. In such an embodiment, the server **106** tracks whether each slot machine **102** is being used by noting whether outcomes are currently being received from a given slot machine **102**. In another embodiment, the server **106** tracks slot machine availability by tabulating the number of slot machines **102** for which flat rate play is currently enabled. In yet another embodiment, the server **106** tracks slot machine availability by identifying how many slot machines **102** have a player tracking card inserted therein.

[**0074**] Another price parameter which may be used is predicted or forecasted slot machine availability. Specifically, such a parameter accounts for anticipated availability of slot machines **102** based upon events at the casino. For example, the calculation table **227** correlates a lower flat rate price **724** to the time of day **716** corresponding to an event, such as a show which many casino players attend. On the other hand, the calculation table **227** correlates a higher flat rate price to the time of day **716** corresponding to the end of the event or heavier casino traffic. This enables a casino to effectively revenue manage their slot machines without resorting to a change in hold percentage which requires regulatory approval.

[**0075**] It is to be understood that accounting for slot machine availability need not be accomplished in the calculation table **227**. Rather, in an alternate embodiment, a schedule of events is stored in RAM **218** which is accessed prior to transmitting the flat rate price **724** to the player. If the event schedule indicates that an event is ending during the requested flat rate play session, then the flat rate price **724** will be incremented accordingly.

[**0076**] In another embodiment, the flat rate price is based only on operator selected price parameters. A slot machine **102** according to such an embodiment could, for example, provide discounted flat rate play sessions based on player status rating, thereby offering 100 plays for the price of 90 or discounted timed sessions. To encourage repeat, high stakes play, higher player status ratings result in greater discounts.

[0077] Having determined the flat rate price **724**, the slot machine **102**, in step **830**, displays the duration of the flat rate play session **722** and the flat rate price **724** and requests approval from the player. Once the player accepts the terms of the flat rate play session, flat rate play commences.

[0078] If the player does not approve the flat rate price **724**, then the player indicates so via the player interface **264**. As indicated by path A in **FIGS. 8***a* and **8***b*, the slot machine **102** repeats its operation from step **822**. On the other hand, if the player approves the flat rate price **724**, the player indicates such approval via the player interface **264** in step **832**. Following such approval, the slot machine **102** prompts the player to enter an appropriate amount of money in step **834**. In the present embodiment, the player deposits coins into the coin acceptor **248**. In one embodiment, the player deposits a casino token as payment for the flat rate session. Such tokens may be denominated in dollars, or represent a number of handle pulls. A casino could thus sell a fifty handle pull token, usable on a particular denomination and/or type of machine. Such a token may additionally serve to activate the flat rate session, eliminating the need for the player to select flat rate play via player interface **264**. Alternatively, the player's credit balance **422** may be debited to pay for the flat rate play session.

[0079] Once the CPU **210** registers the receipt of money, the CPU **210** reconfigures the slot machine **201** for the flat rate play session in step **836**. Specifically, the CPU **210** generates a signal, or a flag in memory, indicating that there is no need to accept the coins between plays. CPU **210** further sets the active field **650** in the payout table **228** according to the jackpot structure entered by the player.

[0080] The operation of the slot machine **102** during the flat rate play session will now be described with reference to **FIG. 9** and continuing reference to **FIGS. 1-7**. During the flat rate play session, a slot machine **102** operates generally as described above with reference to **FIG. 2**. However, the slot machine **102** is reconfigured to operate according to the player selected price parameters, if such parameters affect play, and to operate continuously, without requiring payment between each play. Specifically, the flat rate play session begins when the player presses the starting controller **222** in step **910**. The CPU **210** also initiates a countdown of the length of the flat rate play session as stored in the player selected parameters field **512** of the flat rate database **246**. With the start of the session, the CPU **210** stores the start time of the flat rate play session in the flat rate database **246**. Specifically, the start time is stored in the time audit data field **520** in step **912**. In step **914**, the CPU **210** begins to count down the duration of the flat rate play session. Next, in step **916**, the slot machine **102** generates an outcome and accesses payout table **228** to determine the appropriate corresponding number of coins to be paid out.

[0081] Furthermore, in step **918**, after each outcome is generated, the slot machine **102** determines whether the countdown of the interval remaining **516** has reached zero. It is to be understood that the countdown may be implemented in either software or hardware. Additionally, it is understood that the countdown process discussed herein may be replaced with any suitable means for tracking the duration of the flat rate play session. Interval remaining **516** may also represent the number of handle pulls remaining.

[0082] In the event that the countdown has not reached zero, the player presses the starting controller **222** in step **920**, thereby initiating another play of the slot machine **102**. In the event that the countdown has reached zero, the CPU **210** generates a signal indicating that the flat rate play session has concluded. The slot machine **102** displays a message indicating this to the player and, in step **922**, stores the end time of the session in the time audit data field **518** of the flat rate database.

[0083] In an alternate embodiment, the player selected price parameters include the "time between plays." In this embodiment, the CPU **210** of slot machine **102** controls the time between generating outcomes of successive plays in the slot machine **102** to equal the received "time between plays" player selected price parameter. In another alternate embodiment, the slot machine **102** tracks the number of plays during the flat rate play session. If the number of plays exceeds a predetermined limit, the slot machine **102** automatically terminates the flat rate play session, regardless of the duration of the flat rate play session.

[0084] Turning now to **FIG. 10**, the operation of the system **100** when the player terminates the flat rate play session prior to the expiration of the session will be described. In step **1010**, the player indicates a desire to terminate the flat rate play session via the player interface **264**. Consequently, the slot machine **102** CPU **210** receives a termination signal and, in step **1012**, displays a message to the player, asking the player to verify termination of the flat rate play session. If the player does not verify termination, then the session continues as described above with reference to **FIG. 9**. On the other hand, if the player verifies termination, shown as step **1014**, the CPU **210** proceeds to store the stop time in the time audit data field **518** of the flat rate database **246** in step **1016**.

[0085] It is to be understood that having both the start time and the stop time of the flat rate play sessions stored in the flat rate database **246** allows the casino to perform an audit of the session. Specifically, should a player allege that the flat rate play session was shorter than that which was paid for, the casino may access the flat rate database **246** and retrieve the actual start and stop time from the time audit data field **520**. In the present embodiment, this time includes an indication of the day, hour, and minute of the play session.

[0086] Next, in step **1018**, CPU **210** determines the value of the interval remaining in the flat rate play session and transmits the value to the server **106**. In order to determine the value of the interval remaining, the CPU **210** accesses the calculation table **227**. The value of interval remaining will equal the flat rate price **724** corresponding to the price parameters (i.e., the machine type **710**, amount wagered per play **712**, player status rating **714**, time of day **716**, etc.) used to determine the original flat rate price charged to the player. When determining the value of the interval remaining, however, the value in the length of flat rate play session field **722** is not the original length of the session, but rather is equal to the actual interval remaining in the flat rate play session. Stated succinctly, the slot machine **102** identifies the flat rate price **724** corresponding to the actual interval remaining in the flat rate play session.

[0087] Once the value of interval remaining is determined, the slot machine **102** transmits the value to the slot network server **106**. Upon receiving the value of interval remaining, the server **106** stores the value in field **430** of the casino player database **344** in the player's record, as identified by

the player ID number **410**. Storing the value is shown as step **1020**. Finally, in step **1022**, the player removes the player tracking card.

[**0088**] The process of resuming play at another slot machine **102** will now be described with reference to **FIGS. 11***a* and **11***b*. The initial operation of the system **100**, as indicated by steps **1110-1128**, proceeds generally as described above with reference to steps **810-828** of **FIGS. 8***a* and **8***b*.

[**0089**] However, once the CPU **210** of slot machine **102** determines a new flat rate price based on the relevant price parameters, the CPU **210** determines whether the player must deposit additional funds.

[**0090**] Specifically, in step **1130**, the CPU **210** compares the new flat rate price **724** with the value of interval remaining **430**. The server **106** transmits the value of interval remaining **430**, as stored in the casino player database **344**, to the slot machine **102** in step **1116** so that the comparison may be performed. As indicated by step **1132**, the comparison involves determining whether the new flat rate price **724** is higher than the value of interval remaining **430**.

[**0091**] If the new price **724** is not higher than the value of interval remaining **430**, then, in step **1134**, the slot machine allows the player to play the flat rate session at no cost. However, if the new flat rate price **724** is higher than the value of interval remaining **430**, then, in step **1136**, the CPU **210** assigns the difference in the two values as the new flat rate price. Thus, in step **1138**, the CPU **210** displays the new flat rate price on the video display area **238** of the slot machine **102**. Thereafter, operation of the system continues as described above with reference to steps **832-836** of **FIG. 8***b*.

[**0092**] In an alternate embodiment, when a player terminates the flat rate session early, the value of the interval remaining is added to the player's credit balance, as stored in field **422** of the casino player database **344**.

[**0093**] It is to be understood that an embodiment of the present invention need not include both a slot machine and slot network server. For example, an embodiment employing only a slot machine **102** is within the scope of the present invention. Such an embodiment will now be described with reference to **FIGS. 12***a*, **12***b*, and **13**, and continuing reference to **FIGS. 2, 5**, and **7**. Such an embodiment utilizes the slot machine **102** of **FIG. 2**.

[**0094**] Initially, the player selects flat rate play on the slot machine **102** in step **1210**. Once the player selects flat rate play, the flat rate play signal is transmitted from the player interface **264** to the CPU **210** in step **1212**. The CPU **210** then proceeds, in step **1214**, to retrieve the player options for selectable price parameters. Then, in step **1216**, the CPU **210** transmits the player selectable price parameter options to the video display area **238** for viewing.

[**0095**] Once the player selectable price parameter options have been displayed to the player, the player inputs the player selected price parameters through the player interface **264**. Then, in step **1220**, the CPU **210** receives the player selected price parameters from the player interface **264**.

[**0096**] Once the CPU **210** receives the player selected price parameters, the CPU **210** reconfigures the slot machine **102**. Specifically, the CPU **210** generates a signal, or a flag in memory, indicating that there is no need to accept the coins between plays. CPU **210** further sets the pay combination status field **650** in the payout table **228** according to the jackpot structure entered by the player. In an alternate embodiment in which the player selectable price parameters include the time between the handle pulls, the CPU **210** sets an internal timer.

[**0097**] Furthermore, once the slot machine **102** CPU **210** receives the player selected price parameters, it proceeds to access the calculation table **227**. By accessing the calculation table **227**, the CPU **210** retrieves the flat rate price for the flat rate play session. Retrieving the flat rate price is shown as step **1224**. Once the CPU **210** retrieves the flat rate price, it proceeds to transmit the price, the length of the flat rate play session, and payment instructions to the video display area **238** for player viewing in step **1226**.

[**0098**] In step **1228**, the player reads the data and instructions on the video display area **238** and inserts money into the coin acceptor **248** or a bill acceptor (not shown) in order to initiate play of the slot machine **102**. In an alternate embodiment, the player enters a stored value card such as a "smart card" into the card reader **266**. Such a smart card has the players credit balance stored thereon. Payment using a smart card further entails the CPU **210** debiting the player's balance on the smart card by the amount of the flat rate price. Further, the player may enter a credit card into the card reader **266**.

[**0099**] In step **1230**, the CPU **210** generates a confirmed payment message indicating that the player has deposited sufficient funds to cover the flat rate price. Consequently, the CPU **210**, in step **1232**, sends the current time to both the video display area **238** and the time audit field **518** of flat rate database **246**. Next, in step **1234**, the CPU **210** initiates the countdown of the interval remaining in the flat rate play session as stored in field **516**. The length of the flat rate play session received from the player is initially stored in field **516**. The slot machine **102** decrements, or counts down, this value as the flat rate play session begins.

[**0100**] As shown in step **1236**, the flat rate play session continues in accordance with the player selected price parameters, if such parameters affect play, in step **1236**. During such play, the CPU **210** stores and updates the player's accumulated credits in RAM **218**. In an alternate embodiment, the slot machine pays out jackpots as they occur. Finally, in step **1238**, the CPU **210** terminates the flat rate play session when the countdown ends.

[**0101**] In an alternate embodiment, the interval of the flat rate play session is not a time period, but rather is a maximum number of plays. In such an embodiment, the slot machine **102** stores the number of plays in the flat rate database **246**, as described previously in **FIG. 9**, and, in step **916**, increments a counter for each outcome generated. The counter may be implemented in either software or hardware. Furthermore, in step **918**, the slot machine **102** compares the number of plays stored in the flat rate database **246** to the value of the counter. If the value of the counter equals the stored number of plays, then the flat rate play session is terminated.

[**0102**] Turning now to **FIG. 13**, the process of receiving a payout from the present embodiment will be described. As

shown as step **1310**, the flat rate play session ends upon the termination of the countdown. Specifically, as shown in step **1312**, the slot machine **102** CPU **210** terminates the flat rate play session by reconfiguring the slot machine **102** to its default values. For example, the CPU **210** resets the pay combination status field **650** in the payout table **228** to reflect the original jackpot structure. The CPU **210** also generates a signal indicating that coins must be received for each play. In short, the player selected price parameters are no longer in effect.

[**0103**] In step **1314**, the CPU **210** checks the total credits accumulated, as stored in the RAM **218**, and transmits a payout command to the hopper controller **240**. Consequently, in step **1316**, the slot machine **102** pays out the total number of credits to the player.

[**0104**] An alternate embodiment of the present invention will now be described with reference to **FIG. 15**. The operation of slot machine **100**, as indicated by steps **1510**-**1524** below, proceeds generally as described with reference to **FIG. 14**. In this embodiment, the player selects from a list of casino determined price packages, rather than choosing individual price parameters. Each price package, as stored in the flat rate price package database **229** described above, is a combination of different price parameters which correspond to a flat rate play session price.

[**0105**] In step **1510**, the player presses a ôflat rate playö button on the slot machine **100**. The slot machine **102** CPU **210** receives flat rate play signal from the player interface **264** in step **1512**. In this case, the player interface is an actual ôflat rate playö button located on the outside of the slot machine **100**. Next, in step **1514**, the CPU **210** access flat rate price package database **229** from data storage device **224**. The CPU **210** then displays the player selectable price packages on video display area **238** in step **1516**. It is to be understood that the CPU **210** need not display the packages on the video display area **238**, as those package options could be displayed elsewhere on the body of the slot machine **100**. Alternatively, player interface **264** could incorporate several ôflat rate playö buttons, each representing a different flat rate price package.

[**0106**] Next, in step **1518**, the player selects the desired price package via the player interface **264**. Having already seen what the price of the selected package is, the player then deposits the appropriate amount of money into coin acceptor **248** in step **1520**. For example, the player may have chosen price package four which costs fifty dollars. In return for fifty dollars deposited into the slot machine, the player receives two hundred and fifty handle pulls, with three coins wagered per pull, with the top three jackpots active in his flat rate play session. These parameters are specified in the flat rate price package database **229**.

[**0107**] In step **1522**, the CPU **210** receives an indication of payment from the coin acceptor **248** and reconfigures the parameters of slot machine **100** to meet the specifications of the flat rate price package selected by the player. Finally, in step **1524**, flat rate play begins.

[**0108**] It is noted that the flat rate price package database **229** could be located at the slot network server **106** and not at each individual slot machine **100**. When it is located at the server, certain casino or operator selected parameters could be used to determine the price. For example, there could be different flat rate price packages for different times during the day which are based on projected or actual casino traffic and/or slot machine usage.

[**0109**] As will be appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art, the key step in getting players to wager money on gaming devices, such as slot machines, is to bring the players to the casino floor. One way in which casinos can bring additional players to the casino floor, and thereby increase total revenues, is by giving away free samples or rewards with a minimum displacement of traditional pay-per-play players. The present invention may be employed for such a purpose.

[**0110**] In one embodiment, for example, the casino could declare a free-play period. During the free-play period, likely chosen by the casino to correspond to down time, when most gaming devices are idle, players insert their player tracking cards into the gaming devices and initiate play without being charged. Specifically, the casino programs the calculation table **227** so that the flat rate price **724** is zero for a given time of day **716** and day of the week **718**. It is anticipated that during such a free-play period, the casino will alter the jackpot structure, causing only a selected jackpot to be active. Thus, the lure of free jackpots will bring additional players to the casino floor who will likely continue playing after the free-play period ends. A further benefit of this embodiment is that it would incent players to become slot club members. This would result in an increase of players who return to the casino and the customer base which the casino markets to through mailings.

[**0111**] It is also to be understood that play of the slot machines during the free-play period need not occur as described above. Thus, in an alternate embodiment, the reels **232**, **234**, **236** of the slot machines **102** continuously spin, regardless of whether a player has inserted a tracking card, with the server **106** periodically signalling a jackpot on a random machine. Only when a player has inserted a player tracking card is the jackpot awarded. The server **106** randomly selects a machine ID number and, if the machine **102** is not being played by a pay-per-play player, the server **106** transmits a signal to that slot machine **102** directing it to produce a winning outcome.

[**0112**] In an alternate embodiment that achieves substantially the same result of attracting additional players to the floor during down times, the casino issues guests a player tracking card or a smart card having a predetermined free credit balance associated therewith. The casino could then restrict the day and time in which the players could use the free card in a flat rate play session. In another embodiment, the cards provided to guests contain an indication of time, rather than money, for use during a flat rate play session.

[**0113**] Although the foregoing embodiments employ static jackpot structure, which stay the same throughout the flat rate play session, it is within the scope of the present invention to employ dynamic jackpot structures, which change during the flat rate play session. In one such embodiment, the dynamic jackpot structure starts with a given number of active jackpots, as indicated in the pay combination status field **650** of the payout table **228**. As the flat rate play session progresses, the number of active jackpots changes. Specifically, as the interval remaining in the flat rate play session decreases, fewer pay combinations are

made active. In other words, the slot machine **102** CPU **210** monitors the time and, every fifteen minutes, for example, causes the pay combination status field **650** to change from ôactiveö to ôactiveö for a given pay combination **610**. Alternatively, the CPU **210** changes the pay combination status field **650** after a predetermined number of plays.

[**0114**] As will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, a dynamic jackpot structure based on the time progression of the flat rate play session can increase the revenue generated by the slot machines **102**. Specifically, such a dynamic jackpot structure could be used with a flat rate play session whose duration is not a fixed time, but rather a given number of plays. Because fewer jackpots will be active as time progresses, players have an incentive to use their fixed number of plays within a short time period. Stated succinctly, the present invention increases speed of play.

[**0115**] In another embodiment, the jackpot structure is dynamic based not on the progression of the flat rate play session, but rather on the outcomes generated by the slot machine **102**. One such embodiment involves changing a particular jackpot from ôactiveö to ôinactiveö upon a player hitting the outcome corresponding to that pay combination. For example, a player may begin the flat rate play session with all jackpots active. On one play, the slot machine **102** generates a "CHERRY-CHERRY-CHERRY" outcome **610**. Upon accessing the payout table **228**, the CPU **210** determines that ten coins are to be paid out, credits the player's accumulated credits accordingly, and causes the pay combination status field **650** corresponding to the "CHERRY-CHERRY-CHERRY" outcome **610** to change from ôactiveö to ôinactiveö. Thus, a player can only hit a given jackpot once. As will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, such a dynamic jackpot structure will allow slot machine operators to further discount the flat rate price to attract additional players. Furthermore, it is anticipated that players will be willing to forego hitting the same jackpot multiple times because their focus is typically on hitting the highest jackpot once.

[**0116**] These and other dynamic jackpot structures may be implemented as either a player selected price parameter or an operator selected price parameter. When implemented as a player selected price parameter, the dynamic jackpot structure is displayed to the player as a player selectable price parameter option. The player, in turn, selects it via the player interface **264**. When implemented as an operator selected price parameter, the dynamic jackpot structure is displayed for player viewing prior to player approval of the flat rate price. Whether the price parameters are selected by the player or the casino operator, the dynamic jackpot structure affects the flat rate price generally as described above, namely, as a field in the calculation table **227** or as a variable in the price algorithm.

[**0117**] Although the foregoing preferred embodiments employ slot machines, it is within the scope of the present invention to employ other types of gaming devices, such as video poker machines, video roulette machines, and the like. For example, in an embodiment using a video poker machine, the player selected price parameters include identifying only specific card hands, such as a royal flush, as active in the jackpot structure.

[**0118**] Thus, while the present invention has been described in terms of certain preferred embodiments, other embodiments that are apparent to those of skill in the art are also intended to be within the scope of the present invention. Accordingly, the scope of the present invention is intended to be limited only by the claims appended hereto.

1-59. (canceled)

60. A method of conducting a flat rate play session at a gaming device, comprising:

receiving, at a gaming device, a payment for a flat rate play session;

initiating, in response to the payment, the single play;

initiating, at the gaming device, the flat rate play session,

wherein the flat rate play session is a period of play of the gaming device during which a player need not make funds available for any play, the period encompassing a plurality of plays;

determining, via a processor, a beginning time for the flat rate play session;

determining an end time for the flat rate play session upon a satisfaction of a predetermined condition, thereby determining a duration of the flat rate play session,

such that the duration is a first duration if the predetermined condition is satisfied at around a first time and the duration is a second duration if the predetermined condition is satisfied at around a second time; and

stopping the flat rate play session upon determining the end time.

61. The method of claim 60, wherein determining an end time for the flat rate play session comprises determining that a predetermined number of plays have occurred.

62. The method of claim 61, wherein

the duration is a first duration if a first period of time elapses from the beginning time before the predetermined number of plays have occurred, and

the duration is a second duration if a second period of time elapses from the beginning time before the predetermined number of plays have occurred.

63. The method of claim 60, wherein determining an end time for the flat rate play session comprises determining that a predetermined number of winning plays have occurred.

64. The method of claim 63, wherein

the duration is a first duration if a first period of time elapses from the beginning time before the predetermined number of winning plays have occurred, and

the duration is a second duration if a second period of time elapses from the beginning time before the predetermined number of winning plays have occurred.

65. The method of claim 60, wherein initiating a flat rate play session comprises:

determining that the player has selected a flat rate play feature of the gaming device, and initiating the flat rate play session in response to the player's selection.

66. The method of claim 65, wherein determining that the player has selected the flat rate play feature comprises:

determining that the player has pressed a button corresponding to flat rate play session feature, the button being a button on the gaming device.

67. The method of claim 60, wherein initiating a flat rate play session comprises:

determining which of a plurality of flat rate price packages a player has purchased, the flat rate price package defining one or more parameters of the flat rate play session, and

initiating a flat rate play session in accordance with the one or more parameters.

68. The method of claim 60, wherein determining an end time comprises:

determining that the predetermined condition has occurred; and

setting the end time based on the satisfaction of the predetermined condition.

69. The method of claim 60, wherein initiating a flat rate play session comprises:

configuring the gaming device to allow, during the flat rate play session, initiation of plays without requiring payment between the plays.

70. The method of claim 69, wherein initiating the flat rate play session further comprises:

setting a maximum time that is allowed to elapse, during the flat rate play session, between plays.

71. The method of claim 60, wherein determining a beginning time of the flat rate play session comprises:

storing the beginning time of the flat rate play session in memory.

72. The method of claim 60, wherein stopping the flat rate play session comprises:

outputting to the player a message indicating that the flat rate play session has ended.

73. The method of claim 60, wherein stopping the flat rate play session comprises:

configuring the gaming device to require payment between plays.

74. The method of claim 60, further comprising:

controlling, during the flat rate play session, a time between plays.

75. The method of claim 60, further comprising:

extending the flat rate play session beyond the end time.

76. A device, comprising:

a processor; and

a storage device in communication with said processor and storing instructions adapted to be executed by said processor to:

determine that a player has provided payment for a flat rate play session;

initiate, at a gaming device, the flat rate play session,

wherein the flat rate play session is a period of play of the gaming device during which a player need not make funds available for any play, the period encompassing a plurality of plays;

determine, by the processor, a beginning time for the flat rate play session;

determine an end time for the flat rate play session upon a satisfaction of a predetermined condition, thereby determining a duration of the flat rate play session,

such that the duration is a first duration if the predetermined condition is satisfied at around a first time and the duration is a second duration if the predetermined condition is satisfied at around a second time; and

stop the flat rate play session upon determining the end time.

77. A system, comprising:

a controller operable to communicate with a plurality of gaming devices, the controller being further operable to:

receive an indication of receipt, at a gaming device of the plurality of gaming devices, a payment for a flat rate play session;

authorizing, at the gaming device, initiation of the flat rate play session,

wherein the flat rate play session is a period of play of the gaming device during which a player need not make funds available for any play, the period encompassing a plurality of plays;

determine a beginning time for the flat rate play session;

determine an end time for the flat rate play session upon a satisfaction of a predetermined condition, thereby determining a duration of the flat rate play session,

such that the duration is a first duration if the predetermined condition is satisfied at around a first time and the duration is a second duration if the predetermined condition is satisfied at around a second time; and

stop the flat rate play session upon determining the end time; the system further comprising

the plurality of gaming devices.

78. A medium storing instructions adapted to be executed by a processor to perform a method of operating a gaming device, said method comprising:

receiving, at a gaming device, a payment for a flat rate play session;

initiating, in response to the payment, the flat rate play session;

wherein the flat rate play session is a period of play of the gaming device during which a player need not make funds available for any play, the period encompassing a plurality of plays;

determining a beginning time for the flat rate play session;

determining an end time for the flat rate play session upon a satisfaction of a predetermined condition, thereby determining a duration of the flat rate play session,

such that the duration is a first duration if the predetermined condition is satisfied at around a first time

and the duration is a second duration if the predetermined condition is satisfied at around a second time; and

stopping the flat rate play session upon determining the end time.

79. A method of operating a gaming device, the method comprising:

initiating, at a gaming device, a flat rate play session,

wherein the flat rate play session comprises a period of time during which a plurality of plays may be initiated by a player without the player having to make funds available between plays, and further

wherein the flat rate play session is of a variable duration, such that an end time for the flat rate play session is not determinable at initiation of the flat rate play session;

tracking, via a processor, plays initiated on the gaming device during the flat rate play session;

determining, based on the plays, that the flat rate play session is to be terminated; and

terminating the flat rate play session.

80. The method of claim 79, further comprising:

determining the time at which the flat rate play session is terminated based on the plays, thereby determining the duration of the flat rate play session upon termination of the flat rate play session.

81. The method of claim 79, wherein determining that the flat rate play session is to be terminated comprises:

determining that a maximum number of plays has been initiated on the gaming device.

82. The method of claim 79, wherein determining that the flat rate play session is to be terminated comprises:

determining that a characteristic of at least one outcome of at least one play satisfies a predetermined condition.

83. The method of claim 79, wherein initiating the flat rate play session comprises:

receiving, from a player of the gaming device, a selection of the flat rate play session; and

initiating the flat rate play session in response to the selection.

84. The method of claim 83, wherein the selection comprises a selection of an option from a menu of options output to the player via the gaming device.

85. A device, comprising:

a processor; and

a storage device in communication with said processor and storing instructions adapted to be executed by said processor to:

initiate, at a gaming device, a flat rate play session,

wherein the flat rate play session comprises a period of time during which a plurality of plays may be initiated by a player without the player having to make funds available between plays, and further

wherein the flat rate play session is of a variable duration, such that an end time for the flat rate play session is not determinable at initiation of the flat rate play session;

track, by the processor, plays initiated on the gaming device during the flat rate play session;

determine, based on the plays, that the flat rate play session is to be terminated; and

terminate the flat rate play session.

86. A medium storing instructions adapted to be executed by a processor to perform a method of operating a gaming device, said method comprising:

initiating, at a gaming device, a flat rate play session,

wherein the flat rate play session comprises a period of time during which a plurality of plays may be initiated by a player without the player having to make funds available between plays, and further

wherein the flat rate play session is of a variable duration, such that an end time for the flat rate play session is not determinable at initiation of the flat rate play session;

tracking, via a processor, plays initiated on the gaming device during the flat rate play session;

determining, based on the plays, that the flat rate play session is to be terminated; and

terminating the flat rate play session.

87. A system, comprising:

a controller operable to communicate with a plurality of gaming devices, the controller being further operable to:

initiate, at a gaming device of the plurality of gaming devices, a flat rate play session,

wherein the flat rate play session comprises a period of time during which a plurality of plays may be initiated by a player without the player having to make funds available between plays, and further

wherein the flat rate play session is of a variable duration, such that an end time for the flat rate play session is not determinable at initiation of the flat rate play session;

track plays initiated on the gaming device during the flat rate play session;

determine, based on the plays, that the flat rate play session is to be terminated; and

terminate the flat rate play session; the system further comprising

the plurality of gaming devices.

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