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(54) **COMMUNAL SLOT SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR OPERATING SAME**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

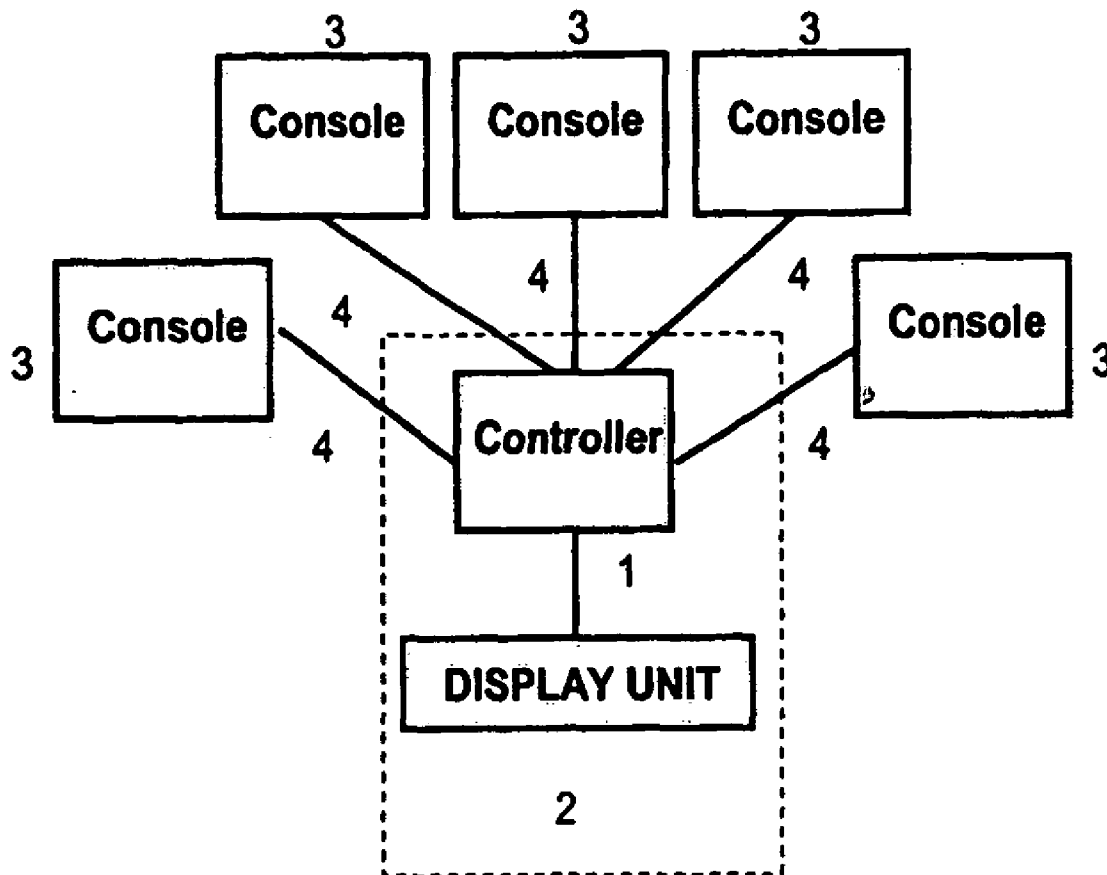
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A gaming machine system on which wagers are placed on game outcomes has at least one processor for determining a result of a slot machine game and a plurality of terminals communicatively linked to the processor. The game outcome at each terminal is determined by a single, communal game outcome result determined by the processor. The processor provides the communal result to all of said terminals, the resolution of all wagers at each terminal being dependent on said communal result.

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**Related U.S. Application Data**

(63) **Continuation-in-part of application No. 10/660,963, filed on Sep. 12, 2003.**



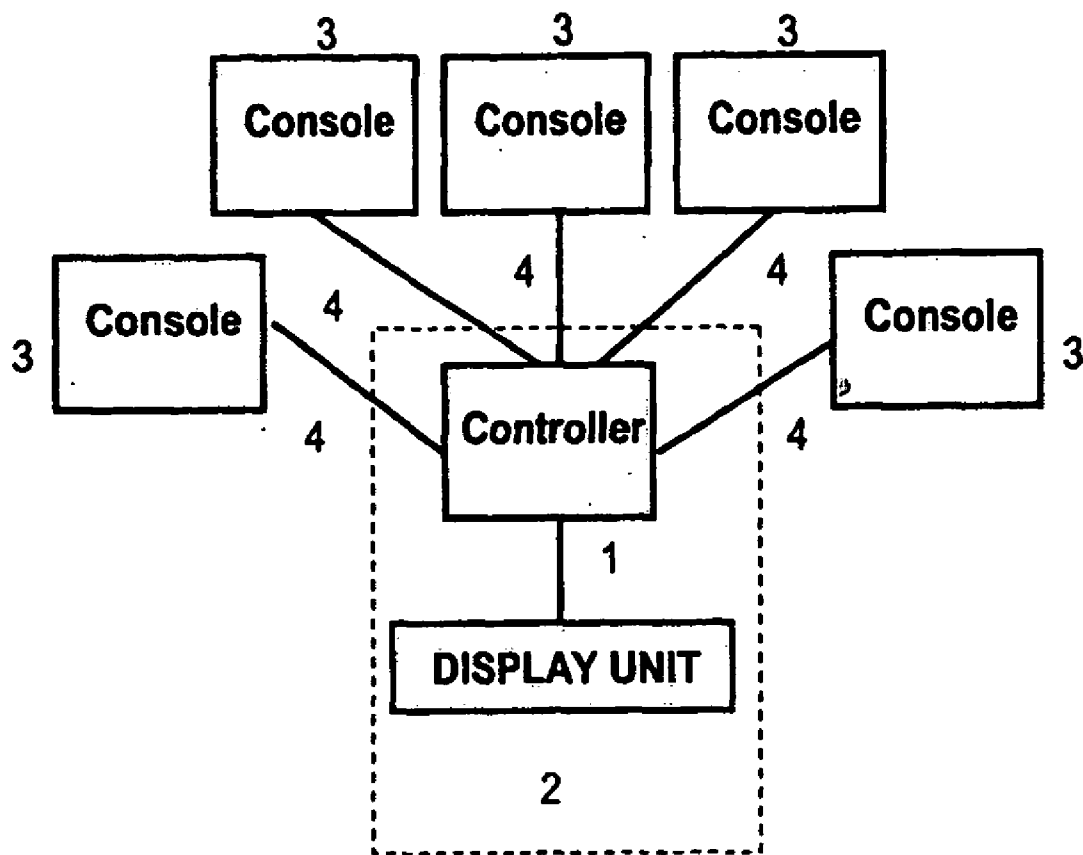


Figure 1

**COMMUNAL SLOT SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR OPERATING SAME**

RELATED APPLICATION DATA

[0001] This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/660,963, filed Sep. 12, 2003, and titled "Communal Slot System and Method for Operating Same."

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] 1. Field of the Invention

[0003] The present invention relates to gaming machine systems, and particularly gaming machine systems in which a communal slot machine game can be played on gaming machines that are linked together, and a method by which the gaming machines are allowed to operate by receiving communal results from a central gaming machine system.

[0004] 2. Background of the Art

[0005] The market in gaming machines is largely divided between slot machines and Multi-terminal Gaming Machines. A slot machine generally includes a plurality of moving reels, either real or simulated, disposed parallel to each other, and having a number of faces upon which various symbols are marked. Following activation by a player the reels are rotated a predetermined or random number of times in a slot machine (moving reel type) game. Once the reels stop they each show a face, and the combination of symbols shown on the faces determines whether the player receives a payout or not. Traditionally a slot machine is a standalone unit where every result is determined within that unit. Although in some arrangements additional jackpots may join a number of machines together, the results for that unit, as they relate to that machine, determines all the standard slot machine game results. That is, one person using one machine will not determine whether another person using another machine wins or loses on a particular draw. Such arrangements are within regulatory requirements for standalone machines.

[0006] The rules regulating multi-terminal machines are somewhat different. Traditionally, these games have been Casino-style table games like Blackjack and Roulette, where a group of players play against or for a common result. Generally such games pit each user independently against the house, such that again whether one player wins or loses will not affect the results of another player. It is because of the style of the game that such machines can be linked within regulatory requirements. The layout of these units typically involves a number of stations (generally from 2 to 12) linked to a central display or results console.

[0007] A primary advantage of these linked machines for the operator is that they are able to earn higher returns. This is achieved by allowing the user to gamble at higher bet levels. Typically a slot machine is differentiated from a multi-terminal machine in that the maximum bet on a slot machine is typically \$10 whereas it is typically \$100 for the multi-terminal machine. Some examples of machines that are linked in various fashions include U.S. Pat. No. 5,570,885 (Ornstein); U.S. Pat. No. 5,779,545 (Berg et al.); U.S. Pat. No. 6,099,408 (Schneir et al.); U.S. Pat. No. 6,264,557 (Schneir et al.); and U.S. Pat. No. 7,097,562 (Gagner); and

U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/660,963 (O'Halloran), the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] It is therefore an aspect of this invention to provide a gaming machine system and method of operating such with which higher returns to the casino can be achieved from a slot machine game whilst remaining within regulatory guidelines. There are also potential advantages to the casino in cost per player, and in the communal, shared play being enjoyable for players.

[0009] With the above aspect in mind the present invention provides in one aspect a gaming machine system including: a processor or processing means for facilitating the determination of determining a result of a slot machine game (which may be a distal or local processor, which may also act in a thin-client relationship with the individual terminals); and a plurality of individually operated player terminals linked via electronic communication systems (e.g., hard wired, wireless, networked or any other available method for transmitting electronic data between the terminals and the processor) to the processor, the outcome at each terminal being solely dependent on the single, communal result determined by the processor.

[0010] In the preferred system the processor is operatively coupled (i.e., transmits image data) to or includes at least one display system (CRT, plasma, LCD, LED or like unit) to enable players to view communal results determined by the processor. Ideally the processor is also adapted to determine individual payouts for each terminal based on wagers made at the terminal and the communal result determined by the processor and then transmit that information to each appropriate player terminal with respect to the wagers made from that terminal.

[0011] Ideally, the processor determines results at predetermined intervals, and the time to the next interval may be displayed on the display means and/or each terminal. That is, rather than waiting for all machines with credits available, the processor directs the system to 'spin' the symbols or enter a new game at specific time intervals. These time intervals may be preset at a fixed amount, or may be vary dependent upon the number of players at terminals or the size of the unit wager or the size of the average wager. For example, players at much larger unit wagers (e.g., minimum \$1.00 wager) may wish to play somewhat slower than players at the smallest unit wager (\$0.01) machines, and the system can be programmed to base the time intervals on one or more of these parameters.

[0012] A plurality of result displays for the communal results may be included for easier viewing, as by having four separate screens facing outward at 90 degrees with respect to each other, three screens positioned at 120 degrees or two back-to-back screens.

[0013] Each terminal may include a player interface that allows players to input any wagering instructions desired (e.g., amount of wagers, lines to be wagered, number of lines to be wagered, etc.) and displays a history of player wagers, previous communal results, or other selected data. The player interface may also assist the player to place wagers on the slot machine game.

[0014] In a further aspect, the present invention provides a method of operating a gaming machine system having processor and a plurality of terminals linked to the processor including the steps of: at least one player making a wager at a respective terminal; the processor determining the result of a slot machine game at a predetermined interval or time (or if only one machine is available for play with credits thereon, after a wager or series of wager commands have been entered); providing the same result to all terminals as a communal result; and awarding any payouts to the at least one player dependent on the communal result, the wager made by the player and the size of wager made by the player.

[0015] Preferably, once the communal result is determined, the processor provides data that causes a display of the time remaining until the next slot machine game. The display may be on a communal display and/or at each individual terminal.

[0016] In yet another aspect, the present invention provides a method of playing a communal slot machine game on a gaming machine system, including the steps of:

[0017] players making wagers at respective terminals included in said gaming machine system;

[0018] when said wagers have been made, rotating (or virtually rotating or providing any other virtual motion of symbols appearing in frames for display along paylines, such as by fade-in-fade-out display of symbols within a frame on paylines) a plurality of moving reels included in said gaming machine system to provide a set of images to be used in the play of a single wagering event. The spin may be for a predetermined (by the processor) or random number of times, each moving reel having symbols marked on faces thereof, to produce random events;

[0019] stopping the rotation or virtual rotation or any other form of motion of the symbols and of said moving reels to display a combination of said symbols representing a communal result; and

[0020] providing display information and result information of said communal result to all of said terminals, the outcome at each terminal being solely dependent on said communal result and the individual wagers entered at each terminal. That is, if a first terminal wagers on lines 1-8 with one unit of wager on each line, and a second terminal wagers on lines 1-15 with 5 units of wagers on each line, then the processor will determine winners for the first terminal based upon winning outcomes on paylines 1-8 at a wager rate of 1 unit, while for the second terminal, the processor will determine winning outcomes on each of lines 1-15 at a wager rate of 5 units per line, and transmit those results and crediting winning outcomes to the individual terminals. The game play itself and determination of winning results is preferably executed by should be effected and performed on the central processor or game controller rather than at the individual terminals.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0021] FIG. 1 is a conceptual diagram of an exemplary configuration of a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0022] The present invention capitalizes on higher maximum bets allowable for linked machines whilst still provid-

ing a slot machine (moving images, virtual moving images or reels or moving reel type) game, whereby a central game event result is dispensed to a series of linked terminals or consoles. By the term "game event" herein, what is meant is a single round of play of the device wherein a final display of symbols on a screen or reels is used to determine wagering outcomes based upon the resulting symbols provided from the round of play.

[0023] The preferred system of the present invention can be played on a plurality of linked consoles (the consoles or terminals may be physically linked or separate in a bank, but each are linked to a processor that acts as a game controller) which consoles may be, for example, each built similar to a standard slot machine so as to provide users with a familiar outlook or provided in a bank of consoles. Each console can be communicatively linked to a central display via communication means, such as a wired or wireless connection or hook up, as well as each console having its own viewing screen. This central display may be incorporated as part of a central display unit (display means) which is responsible for displaying a determined single result of a slot machine game event that is effective and common for all consoles during that game event, such that the outcome of the individual players' wagers at each console is solely dependent on this single result.

[0024] That is, a single slot machine game event is performed for each of the linked gaming consoles participating in the game. Each player of each console makes an individual wager on the result of the game (i.e., on each completed move of the moving reels) which result is to be communal to all of the participating consoles. The game is conducted and completed, and the single result thereof is effective for each of the participating consoles. Accordingly, the outcome of each of the players' wagers, i.e., win, loss, bonus round, bonus outcome or even result (push), at each participating console, and therefore the payout, depends on this communal game result and on no other factor. Consequently, the players are advantageously enabled to make higher wagers on the slot machine game than is conventionally provided by regulation.

[0025] A bonus event on the machine may be provided in a number of different ways. The bonus event for less than all players may be effected by a bonus game event being executed for those players who won or qualified for an entry to the bonus event while:

[0026] a) non-qualifying players wait;

[0027] b) non-qualifying players continue an underlying game event;

[0028] c) players get a number of free spins at a defined level of effective wagering (e.g., even if a non-qualifying player has made maximum wagers, the free spins may be at a lower wager amount); and

[0029] d) non-qualifying players are entitled to a small envy bonus potential so that if a player wins a major bonus event, such as a jackpot, non-qualifying players may get an envy award (e.g., 5x their last wager).

[0030] In playing the game, a player is required to undertake no actions other than to select a wager or an automatic set of wagers (e.g., 15 lines at 5 credits per line until credits are exhausted or the player cancels the wagering instruc-

tions). That is, it is not necessary for a player to initiate the game. Rather, the central display unit provides the game play and determines a result of the game based on the preexisting wagers, preferably at predetermined times or intervals. Ideally the central display unit determines the result, displays the result, and calculates all winning bets based on the individual wagers to provide the individual consoles the results of the outcomes.

[0031] In the play of the game system, numerous optional embodiments and formats are available. The device may allow between 2 and X players to place wagers and share a common result or outcome offer, wherein X is limited by either the physical structure capability of the number of communal terminals around the common display, or how many wireless distal connections are allowed to be connected to the processor. This could be 2-8, 2-12, 2-100 or potentially even more players.

[0032] The individual player may be able to exercise a decision to bet on an outcome being unique to that player's terminal, such as a player making a wager that every line wagered on will be a winning outcome, that a single slot machine game is performed for each of the linked gaming consoles participating in the game, or the like. In addition, each player of each console makes an individual wager on the result of the game (i.e., on each move of the moving reels) which is communal to all of the participating consoles. The game is conducted and the single result thereof is effective for each of the participating consoles. Accordingly, the outcome of each of the players' wagers, i.e., win, loss or even, at each participating console, and therefore the payout, depends on this communal game result and on no other factor. Consequently, the players are advantageously enabled to make higher wagers on the slot machine game than is conventionally provided by regulation. Each individual player screen may display every selected bet outcome for all paylines or only on those events that the individual player has wagered on in a visual format.

[0033] A representation of the result may appear on the player screen after the communal result is established by the processor.

[0034] The configuration of the gaming system may allow other units to be added, not necessarily in the proximity of the prime display device. These additional units would have a feed of the display that can be represented on a small display device. These other terminals could even be handheld wireless systems for players to input wagers.

[0035] There may be a display of game rules on the main screen as well as individual screens. And there may be a countdown to betting closure on a game, which may include audible and visual signals.

[0036] In the preferred system the linked player consoles are merely used as a terminal for the players to insert money and make wagers on the game. The terminals may have a player interface which displays a history of player wagers, previous results, credit status, time to next game event, or other selected data and may assist the player in making wagers on the game by providing information on the game and the manner of placing bets. Assistance may be as limited as "Please Place Wagers" to more sophisticated enticements such as "A 15-line wager would have returned 2x, while the previous 10 line wager returned only 1.5x." The consoles

need not determine any results themselves, especially if such a game event determination is required by regulatory requirements. If desired, a much simpler terminal can be used rather than a conventional slot machine. For example simple wagering terminals could be arranged in a bar or other area with a large, central display, and the processing power at each terminal needs to be much less than in a stand alone slot machine, as the terminal is operating as either a slave-master or thin client relationship to the central processor or game processor.

[0037] In more detail, in the present invention a communal slot system is provided in which the game played is a slot machine game using moving or virtually (rotating) reels or symbols with predetermined classes of winning outcomes dependent upon symbols provided at the conclusion of the gaming event, rather than the aforementioned standard simulated Casino-style table games played on multi-terminal machines. The result of the game is a result as typically created on a slot machine and the single result of a game event is a common result to all players on the individual consoles linked to the same central display unit. The players are rewarded for their wager or their wagers lost on the game based on the prizes generated by lines, scatter pays and other combinations of symbols displayed on the moving symbols or reels after the final symbols have been provided.

[0038] The central display unit (with image data provided thereto by a central controller) determines a result every x units of time (e.g., seconds or minutes) and displays the game event result of a display of symbols on a standard display unit with conventional display media. The display unit, and also a screen of each of the individual consoles if desired, shows the number of lines playable or played (selectable from 1 to y, where y is the maximum lines available, e.g., 9, 10, 15, or more lines maximum) and the amount bet per line. The determined result of the distribution of symbols at the conclusion of the spin or game event, and the winning/losing/pushing/bonusing outcomes are then fed to the individual consoles dependent on the bet configuration so as to attribute any winnings (payouts) to the players based on their bets, and display those outcomes to the players at the individual terminals.

[0039] In summary of the above description, the present invention provides a system and method which creates a slot machine game with a communal result that allows players to experience games together where all players wager their individual bets on the one communal result of the game determined by a single processor or central processor group, rather than at each individual player terminal.

[0040] Referring now to FIG. 1, a conceptual diagram of an exemplary arrangement of the present invention is shown. The central controller (1) monitors all player activity on the individual consoles (also referred to herein as terminals) (3) linked thereto via communication means (4) and keeps a record of all player transactions and game results. The controller (1) accepts all bet configurations in an allocated timeframe, and then dispenses the result of the game once the game has been played out. For example, in a slot machine game a number of moving reels are rotated or virtually rotated to result in a random drawing of a combination of symbols. A random number generator function is usually provided by the processor to assist in the determination of random events and random placement of symbols

in each game event. Winnings are then awarded to the players in accordance with their particular wagers based on the correspondence of this resulting combination with predetermined winning combinations. As such, upon completion of the game event, through the generation of the communal result, the relevant winnings/losses/pushes/bonuses (payouts) are awarded to each console (3) that played that game.

[0041] The system and method of the present invention is also applicable to the playing of a game having a jackpot mode, in which the controller (1) may, for example, generate and display several consecutive results and award any resulting jackpot amount based on the players' initial wagers. Other game modes and betting configurations possible for slot machine games are also included within the scope of the system and method of the present invention.

[0042] The individual consoles (3), which act as automated transaction stations, record all player bets and previous results and are used to place individual bets. These consoles (3) may be independent of each other in all respects except their common link to the result determination.

[0043] All results that are generated by the controller (1) may be visually displayed via a designated display unit (display means) (2) that also provides a visual representation of the game being played. This representation may show the random drawing of the combinations and all resulting winning combinations, and display a countdown to each game (i.e., the time remaining until the result of the next game is to be determined) based on the time allocation of the x units of time.

[0044] In the above description the controller (1) acts as processing means of the gaming machine system according to the present invention and the display unit (2) is provided in addition thereto, however, the controller and display unit may alternatively both be part of the processing means in accordance with the present invention as shown by the dashed line box in FIG. 1.

[0045] The communal game may itself have a unique appearance. The Appearance—the prime mode of display on a slot machine is the player's screen that represents the results ([e.g., the 5x3 reel video slot]), the player's available credit, how much is won in each game, the player bet level and various rules regarding the game. The design of the communal game is such that the 5x3 reel interface may be shown on a communal display with no reference to particular player's information. Each player's unique terminal displays that information as well as game rules and the like.

[0046] With regard to play functionality,—each player terminal and the central display has a countdown. A bet must be placed and confirmed before this countdown reaches zero for the player to be involved in the game. A game on a slot machine is activated by the player themselves with no countdown required.

[0047] It will be appreciated that the present invention may be used with any suitable slot game, configured for communal play. An underlying format for play of the communal game is on a system such as that described in the aforementioned parent, O'Halloran U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/660,963. That system may be described generally as capitalizing on higher maximum bets allowable for linked machines while still providing a slot machine (mov-

ing reel type) game, whereby a central result is dispensed to a series of linked terminals or consoles.

[0048] Depending on the specific application in which the system and method of the present invention is being utilized a number of display units (2) may be included for easier viewing by players, or in circumstances where the controller (1) is linked to consoles (3) in remote locations from the controller (1), such as in an adjoining room.

[0049] As described in the foregoing, the present invention involves the use of a slot machine game as a central determinant of game results to a number of players selecting wagers on the game. In this way a number of terminals playing a slot machine game can be linked as a multi-terminal gaming machine within regulatory requirements, since the results of the game are independent of the players' actions on the individual terminals. As a result, a higher return is provided for the players of the slot machine game than is typically possible for players of standalone slot gaming machines.

[0050] While the system and method of the present invention has been summarized and explained by illustrative example it will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that many widely varying embodiments and applications are within the teaching and scope of the present invention, and that the examples presented herein are by way of illustration only and should not be construed as limiting the scope of this invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A gaming machine system on which wagers are placed on a game outcome comprising: at least one processor for determining a result of a slot machine game; and a plurality of terminals communicatively linked to said processor, wherein the game outcome at each said terminal is determined by a single, communal game outcome result determined by said processor.

2. A gaming machine system as claimed in claim 1, wherein said processor is adapted to determine individual payouts for each terminal based on the communal result and any wagers made at the respective terminal.

3. A gaming machine system as claimed in claim 1, wherein said processor is operatively coupled to at least one display to provide data for displaying the communal result on the at least one display.

4. A gaming machine system as claimed in claim 3, wherein said processor determines communal results at predetermined time intervals, and a time to a next interval is displayed on the display and/or each terminal.

5. A gaming machine system as claimed in claim 1, wherein each terminal includes a player interface that displays a history of player wagers, previous communal results, or other selected data.

6. A gaming machine system as claimed in claim 5, wherein said player interface allows a player of each terminal to place wagers on the slot machine game.

7. A method of operating a gaming machine system having a processor and a plurality of terminals communicatively linked to the processor, said method including the steps of:

at least one player making a wager on a slot machine game at a respective terminal;

determining a result of the slot machine game with said processor;

using said result to all of said plurality of terminals as a communal result; and

awarding any payout to said at least one player dependent on the communal result and the wager made by said player.

**8.** A method as claimed in claim 8, further including the step of displaying the determined communal result on a display device with image signals from said processor.

**9.** A method as claimed in claim 8, wherein the step of determining the communal result is performed at a predetermined interval or time.

**10.** A method as claimed in claim 7, further including the step of, once the communal result is determined, displaying time remaining until a result of a next slot machine game is to be determined.

**11.** A method of playing a communal slot machine game on a gaming machine system, including the steps of:

multiple players making wagers at respective terminals included in said gaming machine system;

when said wagers have been made, providing a random set of symbols into at least one payline to display a communal result;

determining an effect of the communal result on each of the multiple players' wagers; and

resolving each of the multiple players' wagers.

**12.** The method of claim 11 wherein the random set of symbols are provided by reels of symbols or virtual reels of symbols.

**13.** The method of claim 12 wherein reels of symbols are provided and the processor controls rotation of a plurality of moving reels included in said gaming machine system to provide the random set of symbols.

**14.** The method of claim 13 wherein each reel has symbols marked on faces thereof; and the random set of symbols is provided by stopping the rotation of said moving reels to display a combination of said symbols representing a communal result.

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