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(54) **SYSTEM FOR INITIATING A GROUP PLAY FEATURE ON A PLURALITY OF CASINO GAMES**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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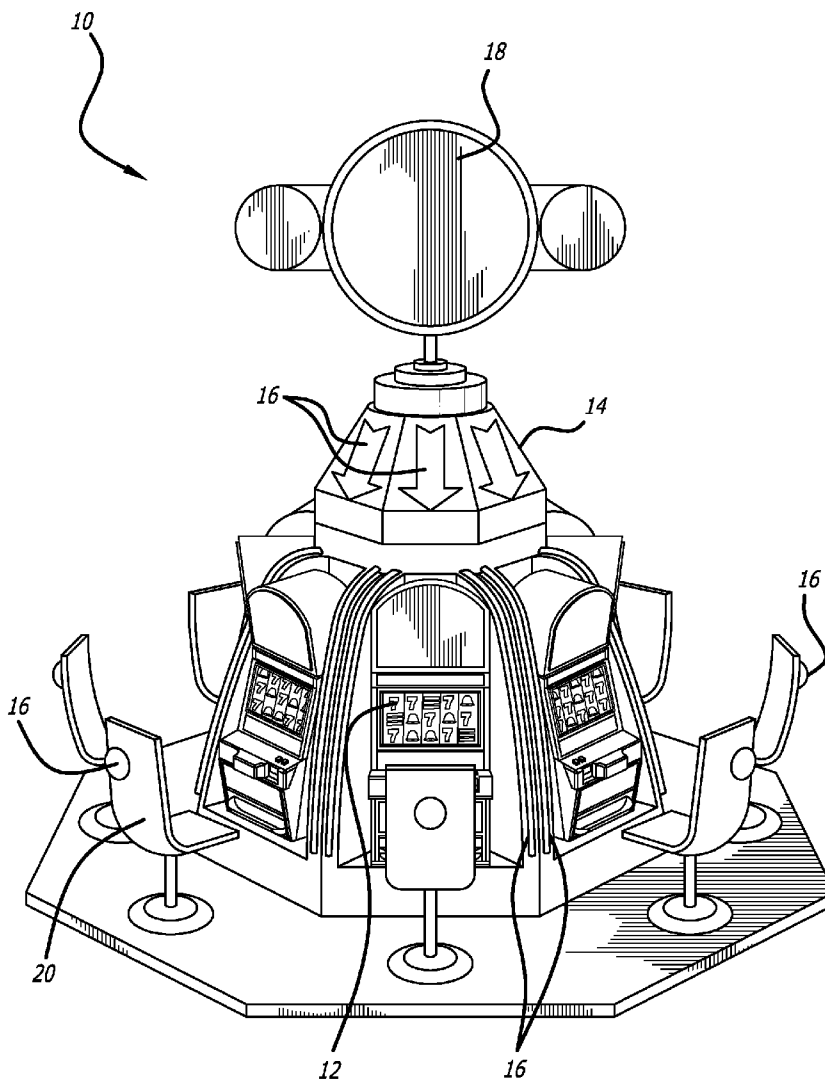
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The present invention is directed to a gaming system including a group play feature. The system includes a plurality of gaming machines associated with one another, and a plurality of indicators with one indicator associated with one gaming machine. There is also a bonus feature module in communication with the plurality of gaming machines and the plurality of indicators. A random event in one of the plurality of gaming machines triggers a bonus feature, and the bonus feature module activates the plurality of indicators in a sequential order to highlight one game machine at a time. The activation of the indicators in a sequential order stops leaving only the activation of the indicators on one gaming machine that is awarded a bonus.



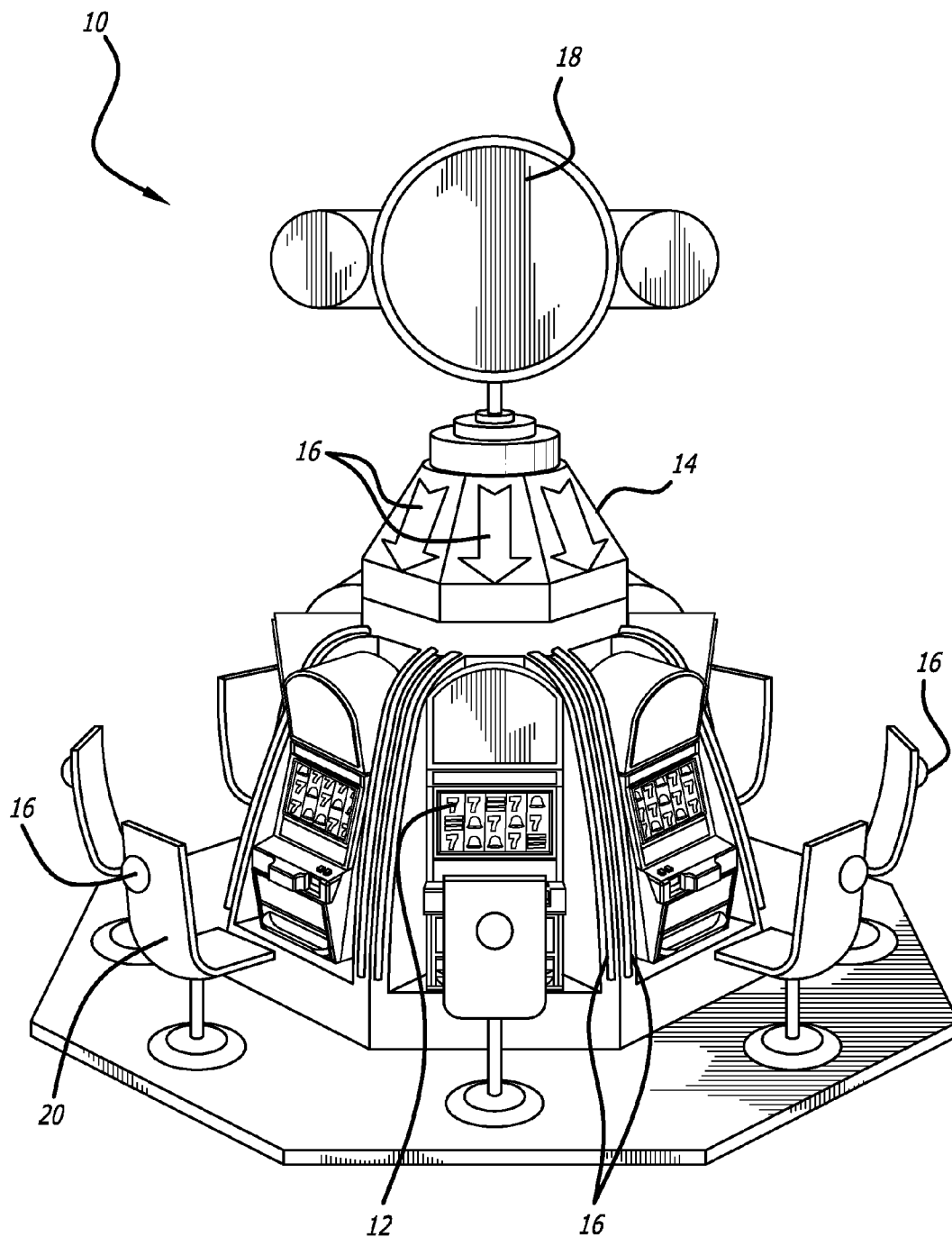


FIG. 1

FIG. 2A

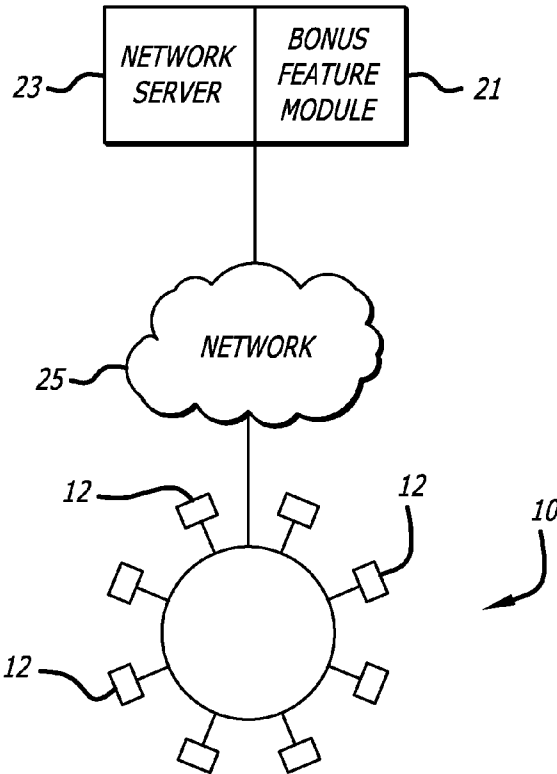
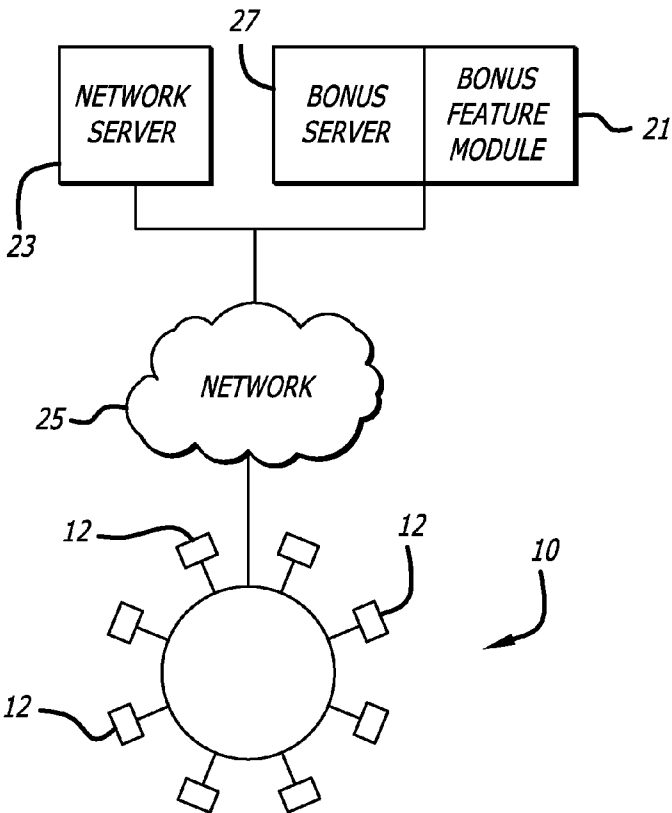


FIG. 2B



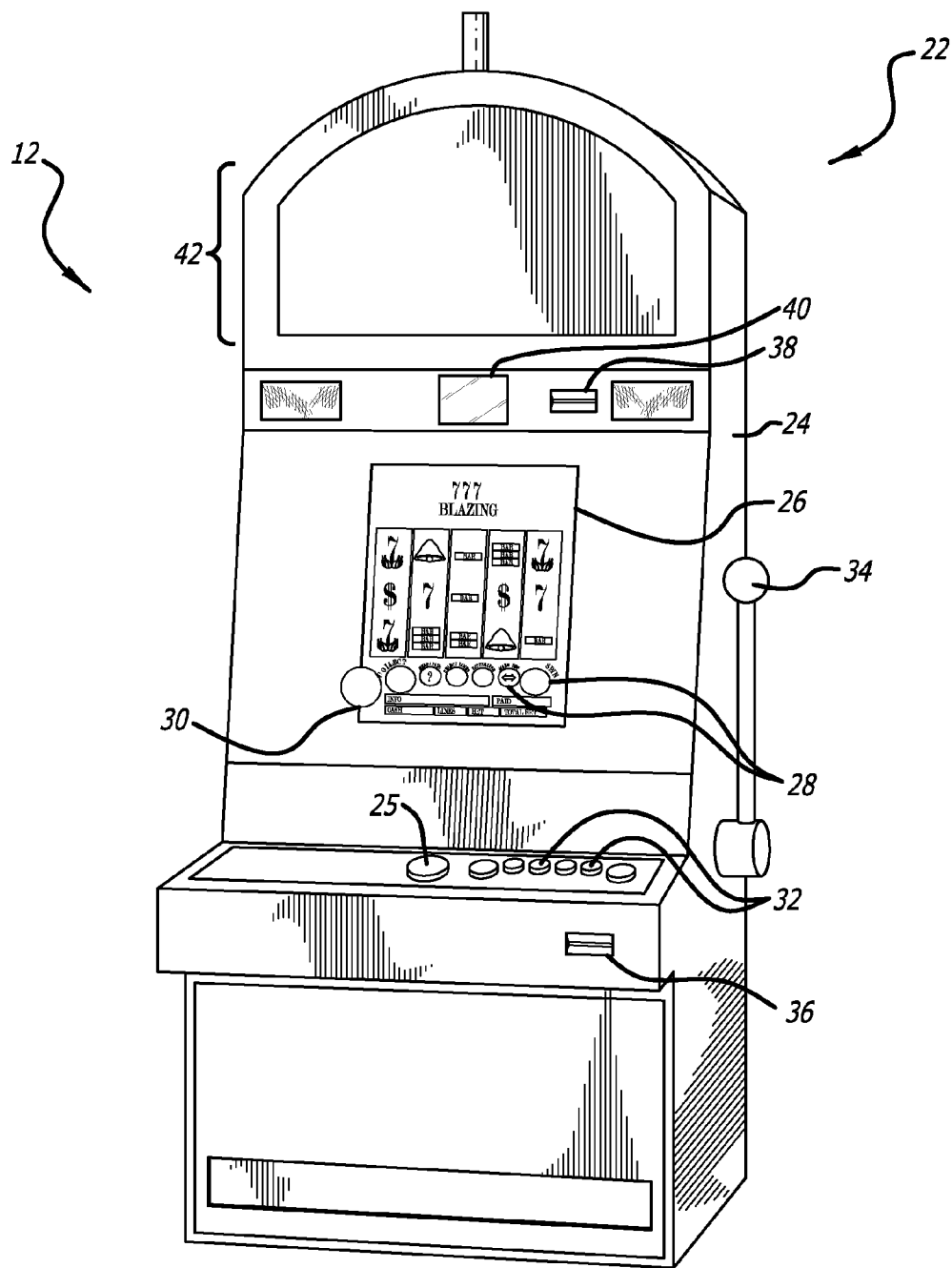
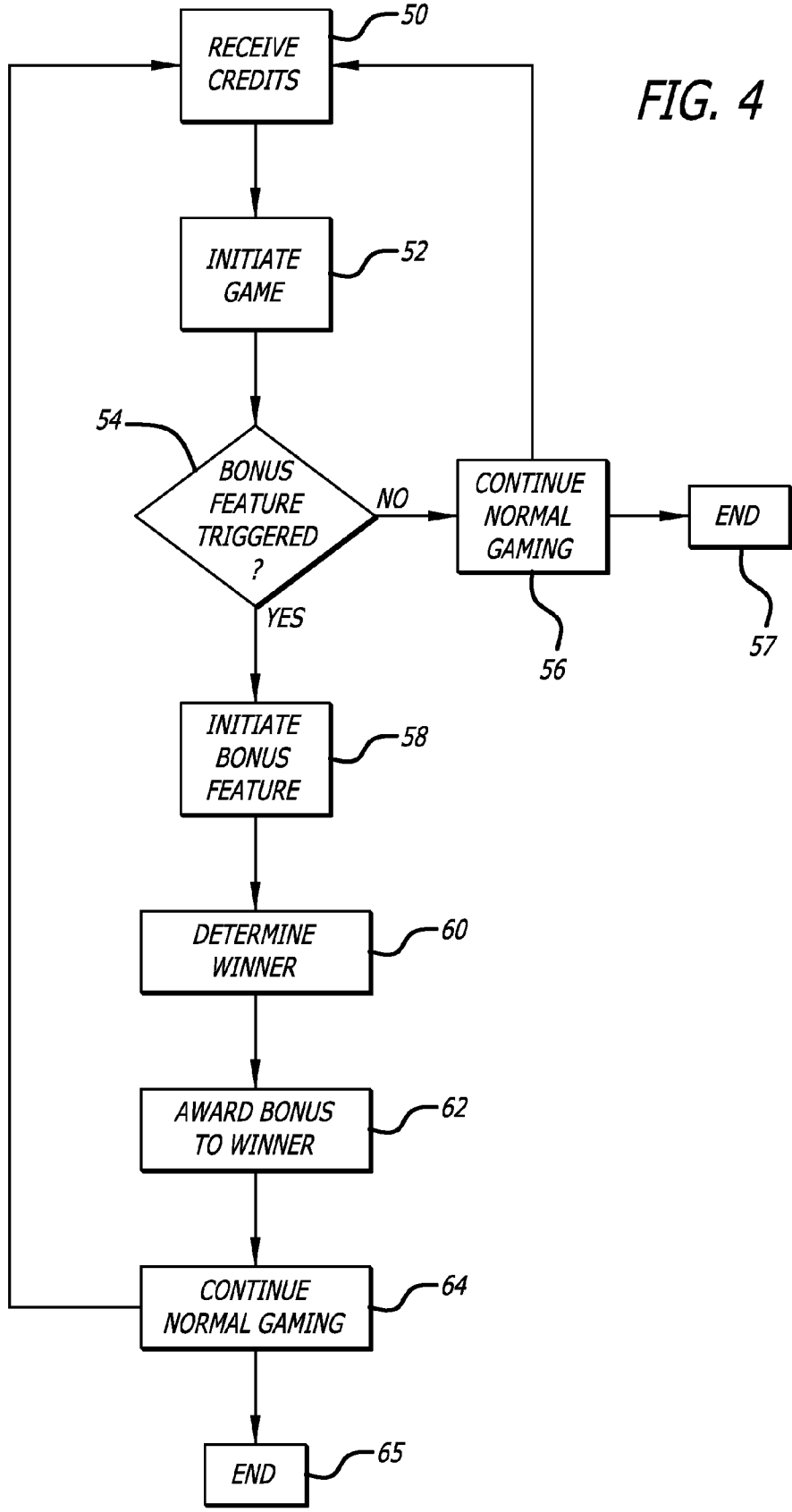


FIG. 3

FIG. 4



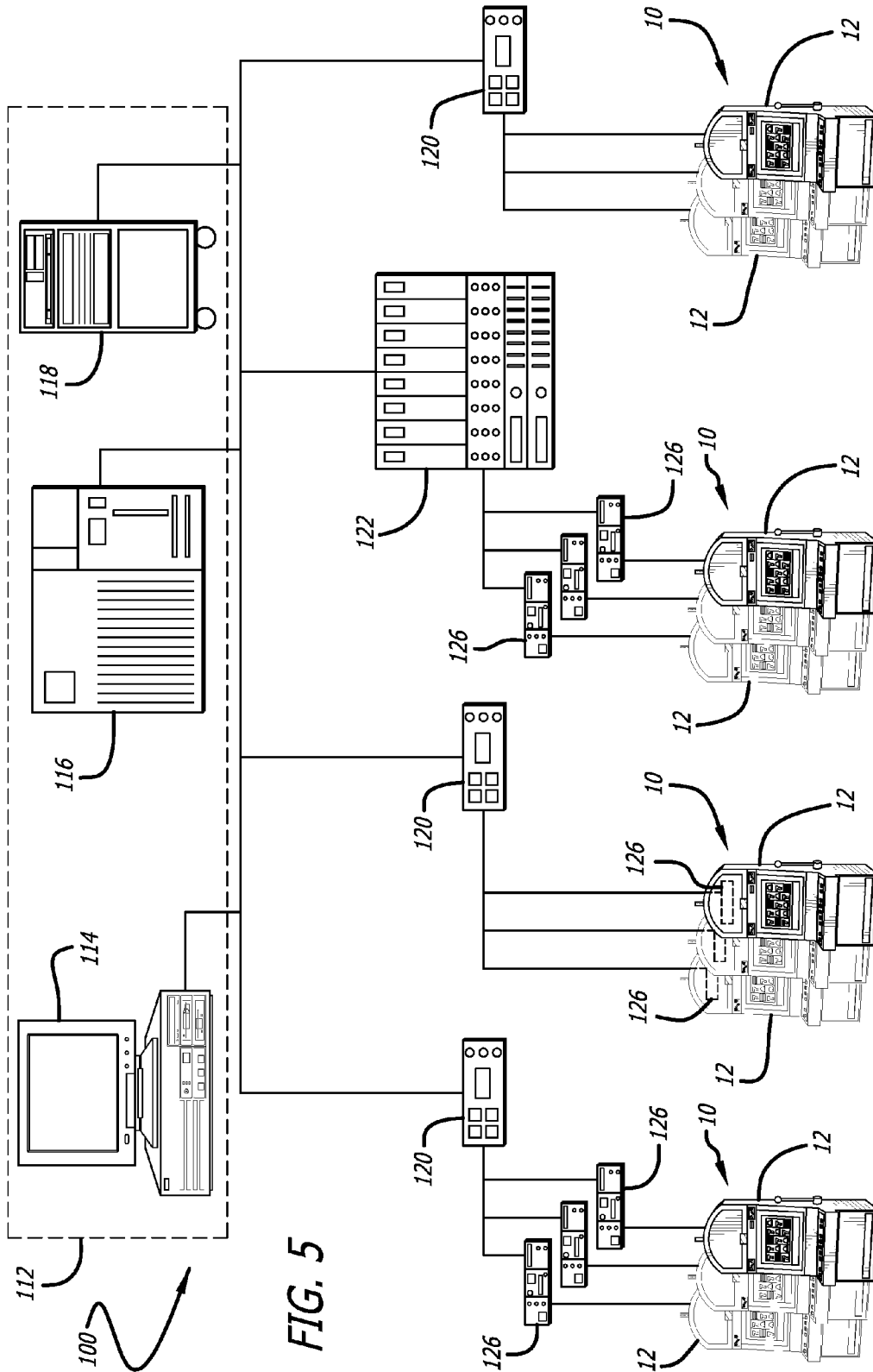


FIG. 5

**SYSTEM FOR INITIATING A GROUP PLAY  
FEATURE ON A PLURALITY OF CASINO  
GAMES**

**CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED  
APPLICATIONS**

**[0001]** This application is related to co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. \_\_\_\_\_, filed \_\_\_\_\_.

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**BACKGROUND**

**[0003]** Many games of chance and gaming machines have been developed that have various features designed to capture and maintain player interest. Traditionally, games garner player interest by providing the player with the opportunity to win cash awards based upon a player's wager. For example, games may include one or more bonus games or the opportunity to win progressive jackpots in order to maintain player interest.

**[0004]** Additionally, over the years, games have grown in both sophistication and in the types of gaming features used to maintain a player's interest. For example, the mechanical reels of traditional gaming machines have been replaced with video depictions of spinning reels. These video gaming machines may provide a richer gaming experience for players by including graphics or animation as part of the game. However, there is a continuing need for games that provide player excitement and diversity of game play without creating overly complex games that unacceptably diminish player comfort.

**SUMMARY**

**[0005]** Briefly, and in general terms, various embodiments are directed to a group play feature of a gaming system including a plurality of gaming machines associated with one another. There may also be a plurality of indicators with one indicator associated with each gaming machine. A bonus feature module is in communication with the plurality of gaming machines and the plurality of indicators, wherein a triggering event in one of the plurality of gaming machines triggers a bonus feature. The bonus feature module activates the plurality of indicators in a sequential order until the bonus feature module stops the sequential progression of the indicators, leaving only one gaming machine's indicator(s) activated. The player at this machine is awarded a bonus.

**[0006]** In one embodiment, there is a network server in communication with the plurality of gaming machines, and the system may also include a player tracking system in communication with the network server, wherein the player tracking system includes a database of player accounts.

**[0007]** In one embodiment, the bonus feature module is stored on the network server, however, the bonus feature module may be stored on a bonus server, wherein the bonus server is in communication with the plurality of gaming machines, and possibly in connection with the network

server. In another embodiment, the bonus feature module is stored on one of the plurality of gaming machines.

**[0008]** In one embodiment, the plurality of gaming machines used with the system are positioned together in a circular bank, and there may be eight gaming machines positioned together. It will be appreciated, however, that, there may be any number of gaming machines used with the system. Further, the associated gaming machines can be positioned in any formation.

**[0009]** In a certain embodiment, the system includes a central display unit disposed on top of the plurality of gaming machines in the circular bank, wherein the plurality of indicators are located on the central display unit. The plurality of indicators may be lights disposed on the seat backs of chairs positioned around the gaming machines or lights positioned on the central display unit or anywhere on or around the gaming machines. In one embodiment, the plurality of indicators or lights illuminate in a sequential circular motion around the circular bank indicating or highlighting each individual gaming machine at a time when the bonus feature is triggered. More than one light may be illuminated or flashed at a time to highlight one gaming machine if the one gaming machine is associated with more than one light. The frequency of illuminating the lights sequentially in a circular motion around the circular bank may increase or decrease to create more excitement among the players.

**[0010]** Still in another embodiment, the system may also include a plurality of sensors each associated with one of the plurality of gaming machines and in communication with the bonus feature module. The sensors communicate to the bonus feature module the presence of a player at a gaming machine. Pressure sensors, heat sensors, motion sensors, or the like, can be used to detect the presence of a player at a gaming machine. In this way, only occupied gaming machines may be used during the bonus feature.

**[0011]** One embodiment of a gaming system including a bonus feature operates by initiating a game on at least one of a plurality of gaming machines associated with one another and arranged in a circular bank or any other shape, pattern, or random pattern on the casino floor. The gaming system determines whether a triggering event has occurred on any of the plurality of gaming machines. If a triggering event occurs, the system initiates a bonus feature on all of the plurality of gaming machines. In one embodiment, the system activates an announcement when the bonus feature is triggered. The announcement may be visual, audible, or both to generate excitement that the bonus feature is about to start. The bonus feature includes illuminating indicators or lights associated with each of the plurality of gaming machines in a sequential order around the circular bank for an amount of time. In this embodiment, the lights associated with each gaming machine light up one after the other to highlight one gaming machine at a time. A frequency of illuminating the indicators or lights associated with each gaming machine in a sequential order around the bank of associated gaming machines may be increased or decreased to enhance the excitement of the bonus feature. The sequential order of illuminating the lights comes to a stop, leaving only one indicator illuminated to designate a winner of the bonus feature. A bonus is awarded to the winner of the bonus feature, and the bonus may be monetary or any other prize or items, as decided by the administrator of the bonus feature system.

**[0012]** In another embodiment, the excitement of playing the gaming machines can be enhanced by providing addi-

tional means of excitement at each player location. For example, the player seats can vibrate by placing a vibration device within the seat as light passes by the player. Still further, other tactile providers can be used in the seat or at the gaming machine to increase the excitement when the bonus feature becomes activated.

**[0013]** In a certain embodiment, the trigger event to start the bonus feature is a winning outcome, a randomly selected game outcome, a specialized bonus symbol, a predetermined number of maximum wagers, a predetermined number of paylines played, a player card level, time of play, frequency of play, a mystery pay, or a combination thereof. The trigger may also be based upon a player's gaming activity, level within a club, based upon chance, or on a skill based outcome.

**[0014]** In one embodiment, the system may determine or track which of the plurality of gaming machines are being activated by a player. Therefore, when awarding a bonus to the winner, a gaming machine not being activated or occupied by a player is prevented from being awarded a bonus. The frequency or likelihood of a bonus award can be randomly awarded to a player or the bonus can be weighted so that players with high club rankings, greater play activity, higher wagering activity and the like are more likely to be awarded the bonus. This can be accomplished using the networked system or bonus module to monitor and track the players at each gaming machine to properly weight the prize award.

**[0015]** This concept can also be used with tournaments, progressives, and system based gaming to award prizes to a player. For example, the system may define a winner of a system based game prize, and then the gaming machine lights flash in sequential order and stop on the winning gaming machine previously selected by the system.

**[0016]** Other features and advantages will become apparent from the following detailed description, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, which illustrate by way of example, the features of the various embodiments.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

**[0017]** FIG. 1 depicts one embodiment of a circular bank of gaming machines configured for use with a group play feature;

**[0018]** FIG. 2A depicts a diagram of one embodiment of a gaming system wherein a bonus feature module is stored on a network server;

**[0019]** FIG. 2B depicts a diagram of another embodiment of a gaming system wherein a bonus feature module is stored on a bonus server separate from the network server;

**[0020]** FIG. 3 depicts one embodiment of a gaming machine associated with the bank of gaming machines shown in FIG. 1;

**[0021]** FIG. 4 depicts a flow diagram of one method of presenting a group play feature on associated gaming machines; and

**[0022]** FIG. 5 depicts a diagram of one embodiment of a gaming system including a plurality of gaming machines presenting a group play feature.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION

**[0023]** Generally, various embodiments disclosed herein are directed to a group play feature involving a plurality of gaming machines associated together, wherein a bonus feature is triggered (generally by random) by one of the associated gaming machines and a player at one of the plurality of

gaming machines is awarded a bonus. In one embodiment, the plurality of gaming machines are arranged in a circular bank, and each gaming machine has associated with it at least one identifier or indicator. The identifier can be visible, tactile and/or audible, and may include any colored or white lights located in the center of the circular bank, on the seatbacks of the chairs surrounding the gaming machines, and in other locations associated with the gaming machines as well. When the bonus feature is triggered, an announcement may be made to the players, either visually, tactilely, audibly, or any combination thereof. Thereafter, the lights associated with each gaming machine are illuminated sequentially, one at a time, around the circular bank in an increasingly faster fashion. In another embodiment, the frequency of illuminating the lights in a sequential manner is decreased. The winner of the bonus feature is identified when the sequential progression of the indicators ceases so that only one of the gaming machines indicators remains activated. It is perceived by the players that a single light is moving in a circular motion around the bank of gaming machines and then comes to a stop at one gaming machine. The player at the gaming machine with the illuminated light or indicator at the end of the bonus feature is awarded a bonus. In one embodiment the bonus payout is weighted to players betting the maximum amount.

**[0024]** The gaming system disclosed herein effectively employs a popular group play dynamic in an observable and alluring manner, while repurposing existing library games, thereby extending their floor lives. Additionally, the games in the system can be easily swapped in and out for any event, including a promotional event.

**[0025]** Referring now to the drawings, wherein like reference numerals denote like or corresponding parts throughout the drawings, there are shown various embodiments of a gaming machine system presenting a group play dynamic with a bank of associated gaming machines including a bonus feature. More specifically, as shown in FIG. 1, a circular bank of gaming machines **10** is shown to include eight individual gaming machines **12** that are all associated together. In this embodiment, there are eight linked gaming machines that each appear to be a "wedge" or one-eighth of the circular bank. It has been contemplated that other game bank designs, such as square, rectangular, oval, star, or any other shape can be used on the casino floor. Machines situated around the casino floor may also be chosen in no particular pattern. Also, more or less than eight gaming machines may be associated with each other and included in the group play feature.

**[0026]** Still referring to FIG. 1, in one embodiment, a central display unit **14** is disposed above the circular bank of gaming machines **10**. The central display unit may include indicators or lights **16**, each used to identify one of the plurality of gaming machines **12**. There also may be a promotional display **18** disposed above the central display unit to promote the group play feature within the casino. In some embodiments, the indicators **16** can also be located on the seatbacks of chairs **20** disposed around the gaming machines, or between the gaming machines as shown in FIG. 1. In other embodiments, the indicators can be located on the screen of the gaming machine, e.g., a portion of the screen or the entire screen can flash a different color. Any combination of such indicators may also be used.

**[0027]** In one embodiment, a bonus feature module **21** is in communication with the plurality of gaming machines **12** and the plurality of indicators **16**. The bonus feature module **21** monitors the plurality of gaming machines for the occurrence



of an event in one of the plurality of gaming machines. The event may be any predetermined or random event, such as, but not limited to, exceeding an “n<sup>th</sup> coin in” threshold, a winning outcome, a randomly selected game outcome, a specialized bonus symbol, a predetermined number of maximum wagers, a predetermined number of paylines played, a player card level, time of play, frequency of play, a mystery pay, or a combination thereof. The trigger may also be based upon a player’s gaming activity or level within a club, based upon chance or a skill based outcome. Once the triggering event is detected on at least one of the gaming machines, the bonus feature module 21 will initiate the bonus feature on all associated gaming machines, or on all qualifying gaming machines. Also, the bonus feature module 21 will determine (typically in a random manner) the bonus feature winner and award a bonus to the winning player. The bonus may be any monetary award or a prize.

**[0028]** In one embodiment, the triggering event is random. However, it has been contemplated that the triggering event may be pseudo-random, skill based, or a combination thereof.

**[0029]** The frequency or likelihood of a bonus award can be randomly awarded to a player or the bonus can be weighted so that players with high club rankings, greater play activity, higher wagering activity and the like are more likely to be awarded the bonus. This can be accomplished using the networked system or bonus module to monitor and track the players at each gaming machine to properly weight the prize award.

**[0030]** The bonus feature module 21 may be stored on any of the plurality of gaming machines 12. The bonus feature module can be a processor assembly including a processor, memory tangibly embodying instructions which comprise an operating system and one or more applications. Operating system and applications are comprised of instructions which, when read and executed by the computer processor causes the function to be performed. In one embodiment shown in FIG. 2A, the bonus feature module 21 may be stored on a network server 23 that is in communication with the plurality of gaming machines 12 through a network 25. In another embodiment shown in FIG. 2B, the bonus feature module 21 may be stored on a bonus server 27, separate from the network server 23, wherein the bonus server is in communication with the plurality of gaming machines 12 through the network 25. It has been contemplated that the bonus server 27 can be located within any one of the gaming machines, in the center of the circular bank of gaming machines, remote from the gaming machines, or on the back end system.

**[0031]** FIG. 3 depicts an embodiment of one of the gaming machines 12 in the circular bank 10, which is a five reel slot game 22. The machine includes a gaming cabinet 24 that houses a display screen 26. Optionally, the display 26 may include a touch screen system (not shown). In other embodiments, the five reel video slot game can be replaced by any game, including mechanical slots, video keno, video poker, video blackjack, video roulette, Class II bingo, games of skill, or games of chance involving some player skill. For the sake of brevity and clarity, the following disclosure and examples of the game is a slot-type game, but those skilled in the art will appreciate that any of the above-referenced games or others may be presented in the gaming machine 12.

**[0032]** The game 22 includes a dedicated set of buttons 28 having functions such as, but not limited to, a collect button (or cash-out), select lines button, bet per line button, max bet button, and a spin button. A max bet button 30 is also dis-

closed and allows the player to place a maximum wager. In one embodiment, the bonus payout is weighted to players placing maximum wagers.

**[0033]** The gaming machine 22 shown in FIG. 3 also includes a player interface having a set of buttons 32 for the game presented on the display 26. The buttons 32 function as input mechanisms and may include mechanical buttons, electromechanical buttons, or touch screen buttons. While FIG. 3 illustrates a gaming machine having both touch screen buttons and mechanical buttons, other contemplated embodiments have only mechanical buttons or touch screen buttons. According to one embodiment, the buttons 32 are backlit to indicate whether the button is active. In another embodiment, one input mechanism is a universal button module that provides a dynamic button system adaptable for use with various games, as disclosed in U.S. application Ser. No. 11/106,212, entitled “Universal Button Module”, filed Apr. 14, 2005 and U.S. application Ser. No. 11/223,364, entitled “Universal Button Module”, filed Sep. 9, 2005, which are both hereby incorporated herein by reference. Additionally, other input devices, such as, but not limited to, a touch pad, track ball, mouse, switches, toggle switches, are included with the gaming machine to also accept player input. Optionally, one or more handles 34 may be “pulled” by a player to initiate a slots-based game.

**[0034]** In yet another embodiment, a cellular phone or other input device (e.g., PDA), separate and apart, from the gaming machine 12 may also be used to input various player choices and information to enhance the player’s interactive experience with the gaming machine. In this embodiment, the gaming machine 12 also includes an IR sensor, RF sensor, BLUETOOTH receiver, or other means for receiving input from a cellular phone or other wireless input devices. Furthermore, inputting information via these devices provides an added level of security as any key presses may be hidden from view. In yet another embodiment, a player may call or send a text message or a short message service (SMS) to the gaming machine.

**[0035]** As shown in FIG. 3, the gaming machine 12 includes a ticket reader/ticket printer slot 36 that is associated with a cashless gaming system (not shown). According to one embodiment, the slot 36 is used for the ticket reader and ticket printer. Accordingly, the same slot 36 may be used to insert and/or issue a ticket. However, in alternate embodiments, separate slots (not shown) may be provided for the ticket acceptor and the ticket printer. In one embodiment, the ticket reader (not shown) of the cashless gaming system is capable of accepting previously printed vouchers, paper currency, promotional coupons, or the like. The ticket printer (not shown) of the cashless gaming system generates vouchers having printed information that includes, but is not limited to, the value of the voucher (i.e., cash-out amount) and a barcode that identifies the voucher. In another embodiment, the gaming machine may allow a player insert credit onto the gaming machine through an electronic funds transfer from a player’s account. In this embodiment the slot may be a card reader for reading a credit or debit card from the player.

**[0036]** Additionally, each gaming machine 12 is in communication with a player tracking system (not shown). The player tracking system allows a casino to monitor the gaming activities of various players. The player tracking system typically includes a database of all qualified players (i.e., those players who have enrolled in a player rating or point accruing program). Generally, the database for the player tracking

system is separate from the gaming machines. Additionally, the player tracking system is able to store data relating to a player's gaming habits as well as the player's preferences for gaming machine configuration. That is, a player can accrue player points that depend upon the amount and frequency of their wagers. Casinos can use these player points to compensate the loyal patronage of players. For example, casinos may award or "comp" a player free meals, room accommodations, tickets to shows, and invitations to casino events and promotional affairs.

**[0037]** The player tracking system is operatively connected to one or more input components on the gaming machine **12**. These input components include, but are not limited to, a player card slots **38** for receiving a player tracking card, a keypad or equivalent, and a display **40**. Accordingly, the gaming activity of the players may be tracked. Alternatively, the gaming machine includes no slot at all. If the gaming machine does not include a player card slot, the players may input player identification via a touch screen, keypad, or other input mechanisms that are associated with the player tracking system in lieu of inserting a player tracking card.

**[0038]** In another embodiment, each gaming machine **12** includes an Internet connection or other known network connections to link the plurality of gaming machines together. According to one embodiment, the Internet connection is used for web browsing, prize redemption, or access to other gaming or non-gaming information. With the various gaming machines in communication with one another (or a system host), the gaming machines **12** may participate in the group bonus feature. In one embodiment, the bonus is randomly paid out to a single gaming machine, and alternatively, the bonus is paid out to all or all eligible gaming machines. It has been contemplated that to be eligible, a player must be betting the maximum amount or have played a certain amount of money over a period of time, played for a certain amount of time, or any other determining feature.

**[0039]** The main cabinet **24** of the gaming machine **12** also houses a CPU, circuitry, and software for receiving signals from the player-activated buttons **28** and one or more handles **34**, operating the games, and transmitting signals to the game display and speakers. In one embodiment, the game **22** and the bonus feature are operated by separate processors that are in communication with one another. In yet another embodiment, the game **22** and the bonus feature are operated remotely via one or more servers.

**[0040]** In various embodiments, one or more game programs may be stored in a memory (not shown) comprising a read only memory (ROM), volatile or non-volatile random access memory (RAM), a hard drive or flash memory device or any of several alternative types of single or multiple memory devices or structures. Optionally, each gaming machine **12** includes one or more data repositories for storing data. Examples of information stored by the gaming machines **12** include, but are not limited to, accounting data, maintenance history information, short and/or long-term play data, real-time play data, and sound data. In one embodiment, the data repository also stores display content configurations for various games and gaming machines.

**[0041]** In FIG. 3, the gaming machine **12** includes a top box **42** on the main cabinet **24**. According to one embodiment, the top box is a separate and distinct component that is affixed to the main cabinet. In another embodiment, the top box is an area that is partitioned from the main cabinet. Alternatively, the top box and the main cabinet may be contiguous areas

with the outward appearance of two distinct components. The top box may include a secondary display for displaying game information (e.g., name of the game, animation, one or more pay tables, game information, one or more help menus, progressive jackpot or game information, tournament game information, or any combination thereof) or non-game related information (e.g., news, advertisements, messages, promotions, or any combination thereof). In one embodiment, the secondary display presents a secondary game such as, but not limited to, a bonus game, progressive game, or a continuation game of the primary game. In yet another embodiment, the top box also includes a display glass that includes the name of the game, artwork, game instructions, pay table, or other information relating to one or more games presented on the gaming machine **12**. In one embodiment, the secondary display may be used as the indicator **16** during the bonus feature, where the secondary display flashes or displays a symbol or color.

**[0042]** One of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that not all gaming machines have all these components and may have other components in addition to, or in lieu of, those components mentioned here. Furthermore, while these components are viewed and described separately, various components may be integrated into a single unit in some embodiments.

**[0043]** Referring now to FIG. 4, a flow diagram is shown representing one method of performing the group feature with the bonus feature module. At step **50**, at least one of the plurality of gaming machines **12** receives credits from a player. The credits may be in the form of cash, cashless voucher, promotional credits, electronic fund transfers, or any other form of credit. One or more players may play the associated gaming machines **12**. In some embodiments, a certain number of the eight machines need to be actively played or occupied by a player in order for the bonus feature to be initiated. In other embodiments, only one of the plurality of machines **12** needs to be played or occupied to activate the bonus feature.

**[0044]** At step **52**, the active gaming machines **12** initiate the player-selected game. At step **54**, while the gaming machines **12** are being played, the bonus feature module **21** monitors all of the gaming machines in the bank of associated gaming machines **10** and determines whether a triggering event has been established. In one embodiment, the triggering event may be any predetermined or random event, such as, but not limited to, exceeding an "n<sup>th</sup> coin in" threshold, a winning outcome, a randomly selected game outcome, a specialized bonus symbol, a predetermined number of maximum wagers, a predetermined number of paylines played, a player card level, time of play, frequency of play, or a combination thereof. The trigger may also be based upon a player's gaming activity, level within a club, based upon chance, or on a skill based outcome.

**[0045]** If the bonus feature module determines that no trigger event has occurred at any of the plurality of associated gaming machines **12**, the game being played on each gaming machine continues as normal as indicated by step **56**, and the game play ends as indicated by step **57** or continues by playing more credits at step **50**. Alternatively, if a trigger event is detected, the bonus feature module **21** initiates a bonus feature on all associated gaming machines **12** in the bank of gaming machines **10** at step **58**. In one embodiment, the initiation of the bonus feature may include an announcement being made at the circular bank of gaming machines **10**, either

visibly, tactilely, audibly, or any combination thereof. An audible message may play through speakers associated with the individual gaming machines **12** or the central display unit **14**. Separately or in conjunction with the audible message, a display may be shown on the display **26** or secondary display of each gaming machine **12**, either on the entire display or in a separate box displayed in front of the main game. It will be appreciated that any display associated with each particular gaming machine **12**, may be used. Also, it has been contemplated that the visible announcement could be a message displayed on the central display unit **14**, or could be the illumination or flashing of lights associated with the central display unit, the individual gaming machines **12**, or chairs **20**. The visible, tactile, and/or audible announcement of the bonus feature creates excitement for the players, which, in turn increases the player's interest in playing the gaming machines associated with the group bonus feature.

**[0046]** In one embodiment, after the announcement of the bonus feature, all of the lights go dim momentarily right before the bonus feature begins. Then, the indicators or lights **16** associated with the gaming machines **12** illuminate and exciting music may play through speakers associated with the gaming machine. The current gaming machine in the cycle has its lights go dim, and the lights associated with the adjacent slot machine moving in a sequential direction are then illuminated. Following this pattern, the currently activated lights go dim and the next adjacent slot machine in the sequence illuminate, and so on and so forth. The lights associated with each gaming machine are illuminated sequentially, and continue around and around the circular bank in a faster, increasingly exciting fashion. Increasing the frequency of illuminating the lights enhances excitement for the players during the bonus feature. In another embodiment, the frequency of illuminating the lights sequentially decreases or remains the same. This embodiment holds the suspense for the player. Also, each player's location during the bonus feature can include other means to enhance excitement. For example, the chairs **20** can vibrate as the gaming machines' lights illuminate. This can be accomplished by disposing a vibration device in the seat and/or back of the chair. Other tactile features can be associated with the chair or gaming machine to increase the excitement of the players. E.g., the seats can heat or cool as the potential to win the bonus increases or decreases.

**[0047]** Eventually, the sequential illumination of the lights ceases and only the lights associated with a single gaming machine remain illuminated indicating a winner at step **60**. At step **62**, the winning player is awarded a bonus, which can be a monetary award, or any item of value, or a prize. Then regular game play for the circular bank of gaming machines **10** resumes as indicated at step **64**, where the game play ends at step **65** or continues by playing more credits at step **50**.

**[0048]** In other embodiments, when the bonus feature is initiated, the sequential illumination of the lights **16** associated with the gaming machine could illuminate in any set or random order. In other embodiments, more than one gaming machine's lights can illuminate at once. Also, in an embodiment that does not include a circular bank of gaming machines, the lights are illuminated in any order from one machine to the next until a winner is determined.

**[0049]** This concept can also be used with tournaments, progressives, and system based gaming to award prizes to a player. For example, the system may allow a winner of a

system based game prize, and then the gaming machine lights flash in sequential order and stop on the winning gaming machine.

**[0050]** It has been contemplated that the bonus feature module can randomly determine the winner of the bonus feature play before, during, or at the conclusion of the bonus feature play. In one embodiment, the bonus payout is weighted to max bet players. It will be appreciated that weighting may be applied to any criteria or combination thereof.

**[0051]** In one embodiment, the bonus feature module or the network server may monitor the number of gaming machines **12** that are actively being played in the bank of gaming machines **10** participating in the bonus feature. It may be a requirement for initiating the bonus feature that all of the associated gaming machines are occupied, or any number of gaming machines may be required by a bonus feature administrator. The bonus feature module may communicate with the network server to monitor which gaming machines are activated by a player tracking member. In another embodiment, the bonus feature module may also be in communication with the processors of each individual gaming machine to monitor whether the gaming machine is currently being played, or whether credits are currently available on the gaming machine.

**[0052]** In another embodiment, sensors can be used with the system, and the sensors can be in communication with the bonus feature module to monitor the presence of a player sitting or standing at a gaming machine. Pressure sensors in the seats can be used to determine if a player is sitting at a gaming machine. Motion, heat sensors, biometric sensors (including finger and eye scanners), radio-frequency identification ("RFID") technology, and any other technology can also be used to detect the presence of a player at a gaming machine. In this way, only occupied gaming machines may be used during the bonus feature.

**[0053]** The bonus feature module may be programmed so that only an active gaming machine (player currently playing machine) can be chosen as the bonus feature winner. Still, in another embodiment, any of the associated gaming machines may be chosen as the winning machine regardless of whether a player is currently playing the machine. If a player-less gaming machine happens to win the bonus, the award may or may not be paid out depending on the desires of the bonus feature administrator. If the bonus is paid out to a player-less gaming machine, the first player to reach the winning gaming machine can claim the bonus. In other embodiments, the bonus feature module is programmed so that only gaming machines currently occupied (player sitting at machine whether or not they are playing on the machine) by a player can be chosen as the bonus feature winner.

**[0054]** Referring now to FIG. **5**, a casino gaming system **100** is illustrated. The casino gaming system **100** comprises one or more gaming machines **12** and may include one or more banks of associated gaming devices **10**. The gaming machines **12** illustrated in FIG. **3** act as terminals for interacting with a player playing a casino game. Networking components facilitate communications between a system server **112** and game management units **126** that control displays for carousels of gaming machines **12** across a network. Game management units (GMU's) **126** connect gaming machines to networking components and may be installed in the gaming machine cabinet or external to the gaming machine **12**. The function of the GMU **126** is similar to the function of a

network interface card connected to a desktop personal computer (PC). Some GMU's 126 have much greater capability and can perform such tasks as presenting and playing a game using a display (not shown) operatively connected to the GMU 126. In one embodiment, the GMU 126 is a separate component located outside the gaming machine 12. Alternatively, in another embodiment, the GMU 126 is located within the gaming machine 12. Optionally, in an alternative embodiment, one or more gaming machines 12 connect directly to a network and are not connected to a GMU 126. In certain embodiments, the GMU 126 may have the capacity to act as the bonus feature module.

[0055] The gaming machines 12 are connected via a network to a network bridge 120, which is used for networking, routing and polling gaming machines, including slot machines. The network bridge 120 connects to a back end system 112. Optionally, the gaming machines 12 may connect to the network via a network rack 122, which provides for a few number of connections to the back end system 112. Both network bridge 120 and network rack 122 may be classified as middleware, and facilitate communications between the back end system 112 and the game management units 126. The network bridges 120 and network rack 122 may comprise data repositories for storing network performance data. Such performance data may be based on network traffic and other network related information. Optionally, the network bridge 120 and the network rack 122 may be interchangeable components. For example, in one embodiment, a casino gaming system may comprise only network bridges and no network racks. Alternatively, in another embodiment, a casino gaming system may comprise only network racks and no network bridges. Additionally, in an alternative embodiment, a casino gaming system may comprise any combination of one or more network bridges and one or more network racks.

[0056] The back end system 112 may be configured to comprise one or more servers, and as previously stated, the back end system can house the bonus feature module. The type of server employed is generally determined by the platform and software requirements of the gaming system. In one embodiment, as illustrated in FIG. 5, the back end system 112 is configured to include three servers: a slot floor controller 114, a casino management server 116 and a casino database 118. The slot floor controller 114 is a part of the player tracking system for gathering accounting, security and player specific information. The casino management server 116 and casino database 118 work together to store and process information specific to both employees and players. Player specific information includes, but is not limited to, passwords, biometric identification, RFID, player card identification, and biographic data. Additionally, employee specification information may include biographic data, biometric information, job level and rank, passwords, authorization codes and security clearance levels.

[0057] Overall, the back end system 112 performs several functions. For example, the back end system 112 can collect data from the slot floor as communicated to it from other network components, and maintain the collected data in its database. The back end system 112 may use slot floor data to generate a report used in casino operation functions. Examples of such reports include, but are not limited to, accounting reports, security reports, and usage reports. The back end system 112 may also pass data to another server for other functions. Alternatively, the back end system 112 may pass data stored on its database to floor hardware for interac-

tion with a game or game player. For example, data such as a game player's name or the amount of a ticket being redeemed at a game may be passed to the floor hardware. Additionally, the back end system 112 may comprise one or more data repositories for storing data. Examples of types of data stored in the system server data repositories include, but are not limited to, information relating to individual player play data, individual game accounting data, gaming machine accounting data, cashable ticket data, sound data, and optimal display configurations for one or more displays for one or more system game.

[0058] Of course, one will appreciate that the gaming system 100 may also comprise other types of components, and the above illustrations are meant only as examples and not as limitations to the types of components or games used in a casino gaming system presenting a group play feature.

[0059] One of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that not all group bonus feature systems have all these components and may have other components in addition to, or in lieu of, those components mentioned here. Furthermore, while these components are viewed and described separately, various components may be integrated into a single unit in some embodiments.

[0060] The various embodiments described above are provided by way of illustration only and should not be construed to limit the claimed invention. Those skilled in the art will readily recognize various modifications and changes that may be made to the claimed invention without following the example embodiments and applications illustrated and described herein, and without departing from the true spirit and scope of the claimed invention, which is set forth in the following claims.

What is claimed:

1. A gaming system, comprising:

- a plurality of gaming machines, the gaming machines positioned for association with one another during a bonus feature;
- a plurality of indicators with one indicator associated with each gaming machine; and
- a bonus feature module in communication with the plurality of gaming machines and the plurality of indicators, wherein a triggering event in one of the plurality of gaming machines triggers the bonus feature, the bonus feature module activates the plurality of indicators in a sequential order until the bonus feature module stops the progression of the plurality of indicators so that only one gaming machine indicator remains activated and a bonus is awarded.

2. The system of claim 1, further comprising a network server in communication with the plurality of gaming machines.

3. The system of claim 2, further comprising a player tracking system in communication with the network server, wherein the player tracking system includes a database of player accounts.

4. The system of claim 2, wherein the bonus feature module is stored on the network server.

5. The system of claim 1, wherein the bonus feature module is stored on a bonus server, wherein the bonus server is in communication with the plurality of gaming machines.

6. The system of claim 1, wherein the bonus feature module is stored on one of the plurality of gaming machines.

7. The system of claim 1, wherein the plurality of gaming machines are positioned together in a circular bank.

**8.** The system of claim **7**, wherein eight gaming machines are positioned together in the circular bank.

**9.** The system of claim **7**, further comprising a central display unit disposed on top of the plurality of gaming machines in the circular bank, wherein the plurality of indicators are located on the central display unit.

**10.** The system of claim **7**, wherein the plurality of indicators are lights that illuminate in a sequential circular motion around the circular bank indicating each individual gaming machine at a time when the bonus feature is triggered.

**11.** The system of claim **10**, wherein the frequency of illuminating the lights in a circular motion around the circular bank increases.

**12.** The system of claim **1**, wherein the plurality of indicators are lights disposed on the seat backs of chairs positioned around the gaming machines.

**13.** The system of claim **1**, wherein the bonus feature module activates an announcement when the bonus feature is triggered.

**14.** A gaming system, comprising:

a plurality of gaming machines networked with one another and arranged in a circular bank;

a plurality of indicators each identifying one gaming machine; and

a bonus feature module in communication with the plurality of gaming machines and the plurality of indicators, wherein a triggering event occurring at one of the plurality of gaming machines triggers a bonus feature and activates the plurality of indicators in a sequential circular motion around the circular bank, highlighting each individual gaming machine one at a time, until the bonus feature module stops the sequential circular motion of the plurality of indicators so that only one gaming

machine indicator is activated, and a player at the one gaming machine is awarded a bonus.

**15.** The system of claim **14**, wherein the bonus is monetary.

**16.** The system of claim **14**, wherein the bonus is a prize.

**17.** The system of claim **14**, wherein bonus feature module determines if a player is present at each of the plurality of gaming machines and prevents a player-less gaming machine from being awarded the bonus.

**18.** The system of claim **17**, further comprising a plurality of sensors each associated with one of the plurality of gaming machines, and the sensors are in communication with the bonus feature module, wherein the sensor communicates to the bonus feature module the presence of a player at a gaming machine.

**19.** A gaming system, comprising:

a plurality of gaming machines networked with one another and arranged in a circular bank;

a central unit disposed on top of the plurality of gaming machines arranged in a circular bank, the central unit including lights for identifying each of the plurality of gaming machines; and

a bonus feature module in communication with the plurality of gaming machines and the plurality of lights, wherein an event associated with one of the plurality of gaming machines triggers a bonus feature and illuminates the lights in a sequential circular motion around the circular bank, until the bonus feature module stops the sequential circular motion of the lights so that only one gaming machine indicator is activated, and a player at the one gaming machine is awarded a bonus.

**20.** The system of claim **19**, wherein the bonus feature module increases the frequency of illuminating the lights in a sequential circular motion around the circular bank.

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