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(54) SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR DELIVERING MYSTERY AWARDS

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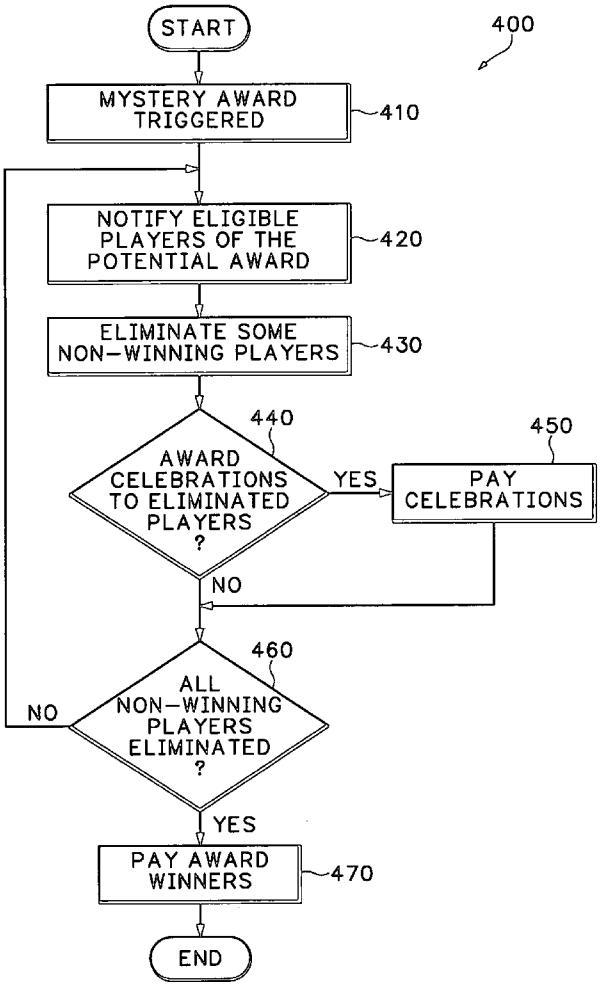
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A gaming system, comprising a plurality of gaming machines operating over a network, includes a bonus server for providing a promotion implementing a mystery award. The method for delivering a mystery award to a player over the computer gaming network comprises determining an award is to be delivered. A group of players eligible for the determined award is selected and notified of their eligibility to win the award. A portion of the group is then eliminated, thereby resulting in remaining eligible members. The eliminated members are notified of their elimination and the remaining eligible members are again eliminated from eligibility in subsequent steps until one or more award winners are selected. The one or more award winners are awarded the mystery award, and the eliminated players can be awarded a celebration (e.g. consolation) prize.



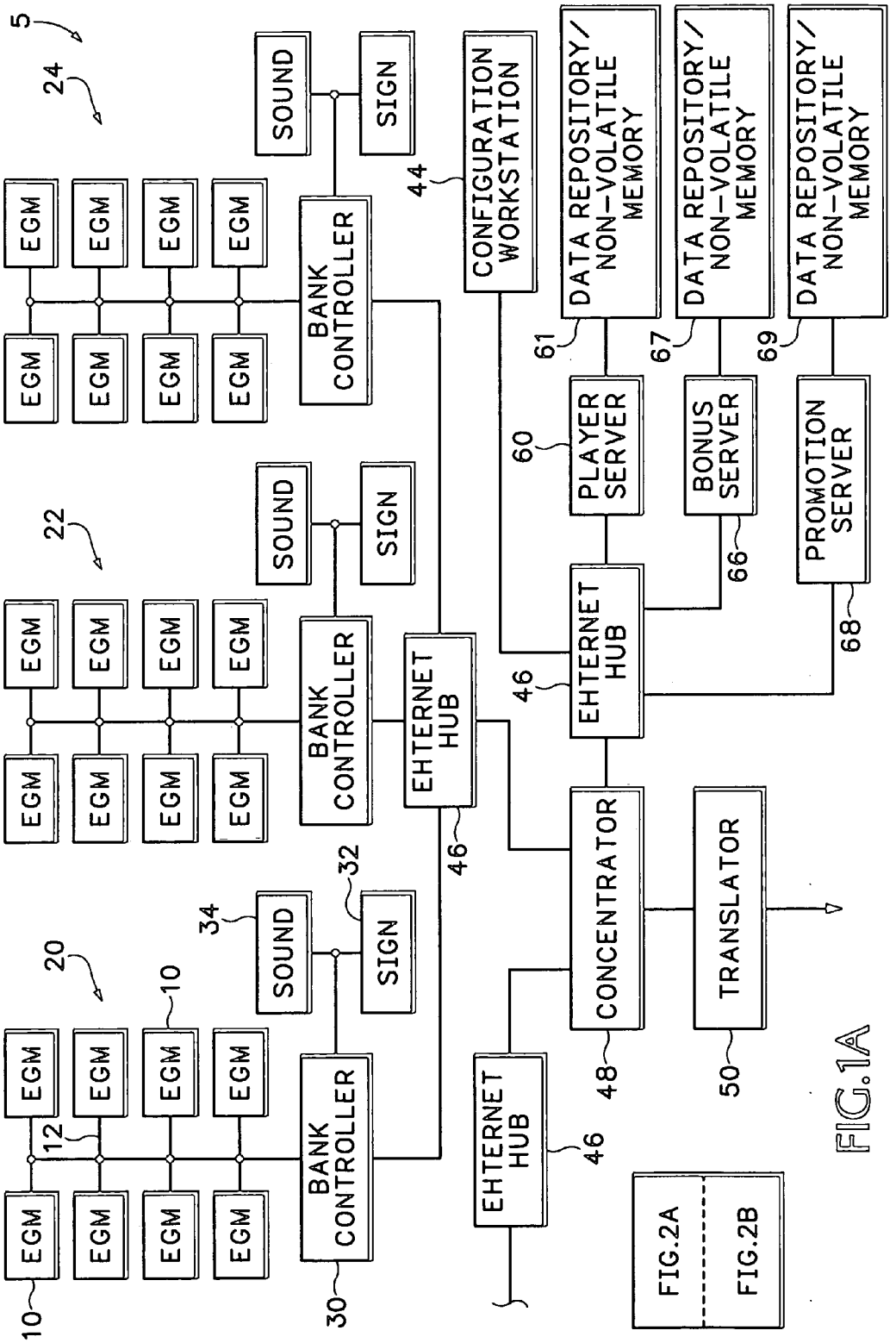

5
24
22
20
10
12
EGM
BANK CONTROLLER
SOUND
SIGN
30
32
34
44
CONFIGURATION WORKSTATION
46
EHTERNET HUB
48
CONCENTRATOR
50
TRANSLATOR
60
PLAYER SERVER
61
DATA REPOSITORY/ NON-VOLATILE MEMORY
66
BONUS SERVER
67
DATA REPOSITORY/ NON-VOLATILE MEMORY
68
PROMOTION SERVER
69
DATA REPOSITORY/ NON-VOLATILE MEMORY
FIG.2A
FIG.2B

FIG.1A

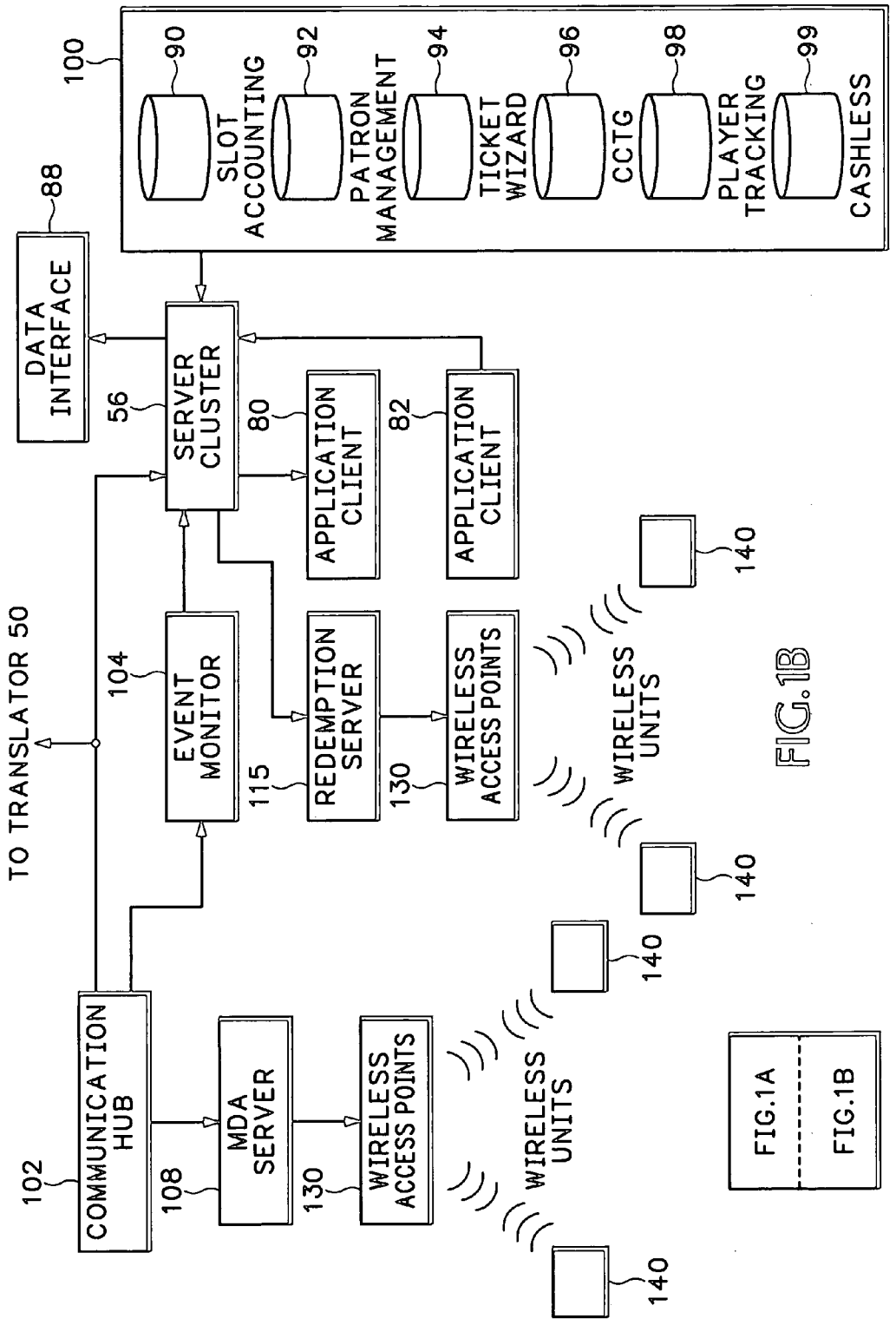

100
90
SLOT ACCOUNTING
92
PATRON MANAGEMENT
94
TICKET WIZARD
96
CCTG
98
PLAYER TRACKING
99
CASHLESS
88
DATA INTERFACE
56
SERVER CLUSTER
80
APPLICATION CLIENT
82
APPLICATION CLIENT
TO TRANSLATOR 50
104
EVENT MONITOR
115
REDEMPTION SERVER
130
WIRELESS ACCESS POINTS
WIRELESS UNITS
140
140
140
140
102
COMMUNICATION HUB
108
MDA SERVER
130
WIRELESS ACCESS POINTS
WIRELESS UNITS
FIG.1A
FIG.1B

FIG.1B

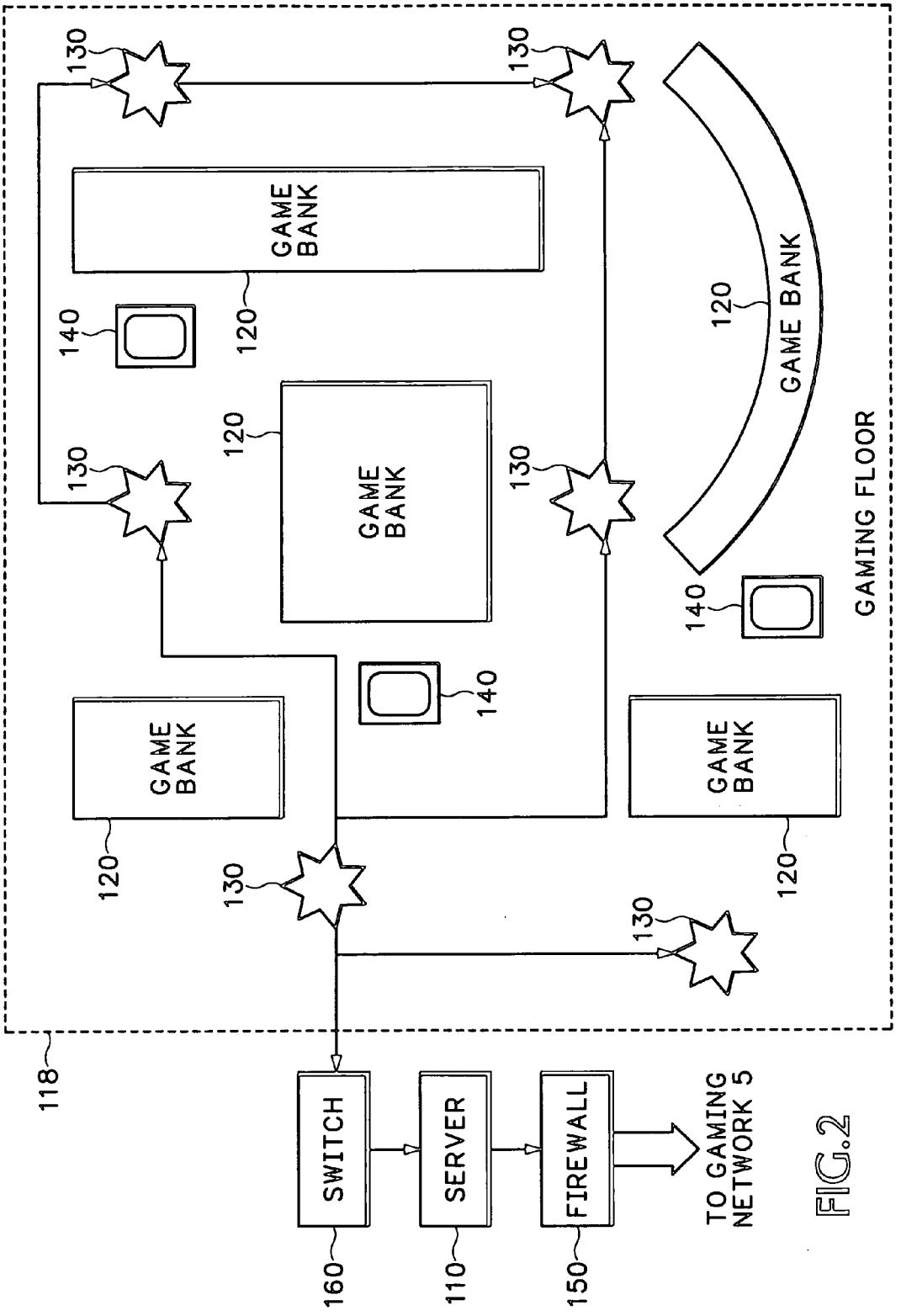

GAMING FLOOR
GAME BANK
120
130
140
118
SWITCH
SERVER
FIREWALL
160
110
150
TO GAMING NETWORK 5

FIG.2

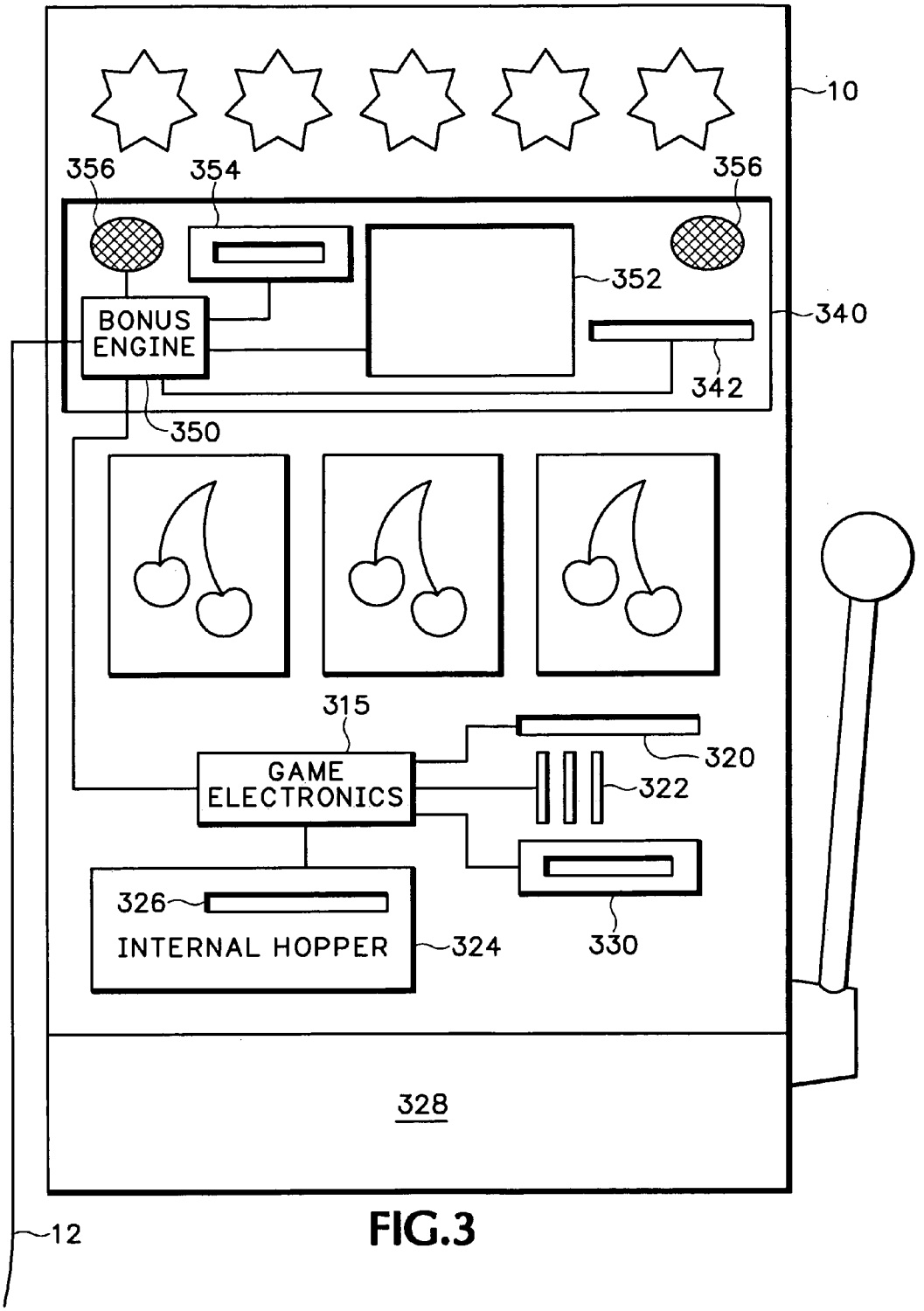

10
356
354
356
352
340
BONUS ENGINE
342
350
315
320
GAME ELECTRONICS
322
326
INTERNAL HOPPER
324
330
328
12

FIG.3

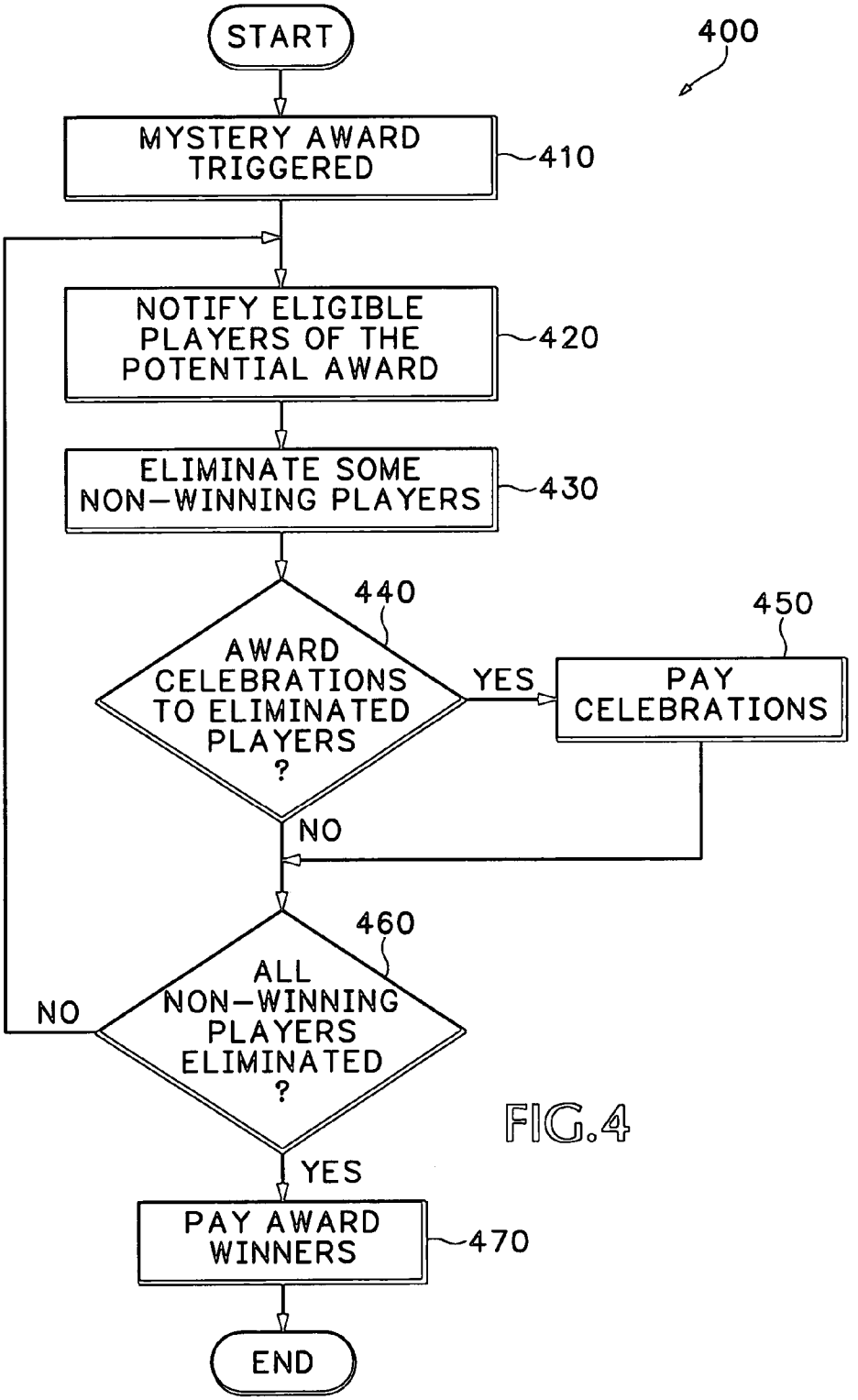

START
400
MYSTERY AWARD TRIGGERED
410
NOTIFY ELIGIBLE PLAYERS OF THE POTENTIAL AWARD
420
ELIMINATE SOME NON-WINNING PLAYERS
430
440
AWARD CELEBRATIONS TO ELIMINATED PLAYERS ?
YES
450
PAY CELEBRATIONS
NO
460
ALL NON-WINNING PLAYERS ELIMINATED ?
NO
YES
PAY AWARD WINNERS
470
END

FIG.4

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR DELIVERING MYSTERY AWARDS

CROSS-REFERENCES TO RELEATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit from U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/600,610 filed Aug. 10, 2004, whose contents are incorporated herein for all purposes.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] 1. Field of the Invention

[0003] This disclosure relates to networks of gaming devices, and, more particularly, to providing systems and methods for delivering awards to a player of a networked gaming device.

[0004] 2. Description of the Prior Art

[0005] Gaming networks are communication networks of interconnected gaming devices. Typically, gaming networks include a collection of gaming devices, or EGMs (Electronic Gaming Machines) that are linked to a central server. As the EGMs are played, players win games, bonuses, and awards. Typically any payment to the player is made to a credit meter on the EGM, but payment can also be made in other ways as is known in the art.

[0006] One problem that exists in modern gaming networks is that prizes or payments can be made "automatically" without the player knowing in advance that a prize will be awarded. In some cases, players can be awarded a prize without even realizing that they have won such a prize. Accordingly, the anticipation of winning the prize is seriously curtailed and reduces both the players enjoyment of the EGM and the chance that the player with continue to play the EGM in the future.

[0007] Embodiments of the invention address these and other deficiencies in the prior art.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0008] The description may be best understood by reading the disclosure with reference to the accompanying drawings.

[0009] **FIGS. 1A and 1B** together are a block diagram showing components of a gaming network according to embodiments of the invention.

[0010] **FIG. 2** is a block diagram showing example components of a secure wireless network operating in conjunction with the gaming network of **FIG. 1**, according to embodiments of the invention.

[0011] **FIG. 3** is an example electronic gaming device including feedback mechanisms for communication with a player.

[0012] **FIG. 4** is a flow diagram illustrating a preferred implementation process according to teachings of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0013] Embodiments of the invention are directed to delivering winnings, bonuses, awards, prizes, comps, or other benefits to players of gaming devices. Delivering the awards using embodiments of the invention creates anticipation and excitement for players, even if they do not ultimately win the main prize. Additionally, celebration or consolation prizes can be awarded or delivered in a manner that promotes excitement and repeat play.

[0014] As mentioned above, embodiments of the invention operate in conjunction with a gaming network. An example modem gaming network is described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,655,961, assigned to the assignee of the present invention, the teachings of which are incorporated herein in their entirety for all purposes. Embodiments of the invention are also operable on a computer gaming network such as that illustrated in **FIGS. 1A and 1B**. In a gaming network **5**, a number of EGMs **10** are organized into groups called banks. Individual banks **20**, **22**, and **24**, can contain almost any number of gaming devices **10**. Additionally, any number of banks is possible in a gaming network **5**.

[0015] Each bank is controlled by a bank controller **30**, which is coupled to each EGM **10** by a communication mechanism **12**. The communication mechanism **12** can be a cable or secure wireless network. The bank controller **30** facilitates data communication between the gaming devices **10** in its associated bank and the other components on the-gaming network **5**. In some embodiments, the bank controller **30** need not be present, and the EGMs **10** communicate directly with the other portions of the gaming network **5**.

[0016] Configuration data for the gaming network **5** is stored in one or more network data repository, such as repositories **61**, **67**, and **69**. In some embodiments, the data repositories **61**, **67**, and **69** are made of battery backed-up non-volatile SRAM (Static Random Access Memory), which provides dual advantages of having extremely fast data input and output, and having a power source that is independent from the network **5** or the gaming devices **10**. The data repositories **61**, **67**, and **69** may also be mirrored, i.e., duplicate copies are made in real-time. This prevents data from being lost if one of the battery sources should fail or other catastrophic event. Data is stored in the data repositories **61**, **67**, and **69** using CRCs (Cyclic Redundancy Checks) and timestamps to ensure the data is valid and non-corrupt.

[0017] Configuration data is created at a configuration workstation **44** and stored in the data repositories **61**, **67**, and **69**. Configuration data includes message data for players as well as for promotions such as bonuses. Player message data is stored in the data repository **61**, where it can be accessed by a player server **60**. Player message data can include welcoming messages, card-in/card-out messages, and special messages about current promotions, for instance. The player server **60** reads the message data from the data repository **61** and sends a properly formatted message back to the bank controllers **30** and EGMs **10**. These player messages may be displayed on a screen **32** for an entire bank, or may be shown on a screen directly mounted to the EGM **10** (not shown).

[0018] Other configuration data created at the configuration workstation **44** and stored in the data repositories **61**, **67**, and **69** includes casino configuration data, such as identification of each EGM **10** on a casino floor. Additional parameters stored in the data repository **67**, **69** are param-

eters used in promotions, such as bonus promotions. These parameters include such items as what EGMs **10** are included in the promotion, how to fund a bonus, i.e., if a bonus is funded by a portion of the coin-in amount of the EGMs **10**, whether a paid bonus is to be taxed or un-taxed, and other parameters.

[**0019**] As players play the EGMs **10** in the gaming network **5**, the EGMs send data from their coin meters, or meter values. One or more bonus server **66** and/or promotion server **68** stores these meter values, or summaries of the meter values, in its associated data repository **67**. The servers **66**, **68** can also operate based on the present and stored meter values to determine an amount of money being wagered on the EGMs in near real-time. The servers **66**, **68** can use the amount of money being wagered to calculate bonus pools that are funded as a percentage of the coin-in of participating EGMs **10**. For instance, the servers **66**, **68** can calculate a present amount of a bonus pool that is funded at one-half of one percent of the coin-in for the participating EGMs **10**. An example of bonuses that can be operated from the bonus server **66** includes LUCKY COIN and progressive bonuses, for example.

[**0020**] Of course, the servers **60**, **66**, and **68** could be embodied in a single device, or in other configurations, and do not have to appear in **FIG. 1 A**, which is only a functional representation. Likewise, the data repositories **61**, **67**, and **69** could be embodied in a single device.

[**0021**] As data is generated by the EGMs **10**, data is passed through communication hardware, such as Ethernet hubs **46**, and a concentrator **48**. Of course, switches or bridges could also be used. The concentrator **48** is also coupled to a translator **50**, which includes a compatibility buffer so that the data from the EGMs **10** can be used by a server cluster **56 (FIG. 1B)**, and other parts of the gaming network **5**.

[**0022**] The server cluster **56 (FIG. 1B)** may, of course, be embodied by more than one physical server box. In practice, including multiple server boxes with dynamic load sharing and backup capabilities of one another ensures the gaming network **5** is nearly always operational.

[**0023**] The server cluster **56** is attached to and manages several databases, such as a slot accounting database **90**, a patron management database **92**, a ticket wizard database **94**, a "Cage Credit and Table Games" (CCTG) database **96**, a player tracking database **98**, and a cashless database **99**. These databases are collectively referred to as the databases **100**. Of course these databases **100** are only exemplary, and more or fewer databases can be part of the gaming network **5**. In some embodiments, particular servers in the server cluster **56** manage a single database. For example, a single server in the server cluster **56** may manage the slot accounting database **90**, while another server manages the patron management database **92**. Such implementation details are well within the expertise of one skilled in the art. However, for ease of illustration, **FIG. 1** shows a single server cluster **56** that is coupled to all of the databases **100**.

[**0024**] In operation, the slot accounting database **90** receives and stores statistical and financial information about the EGMs, such as dates, times, totals, game outcomes, etc. The patron management database **92** stores information regarding identified players, such as how often and which games they play, how often they stay in the casino, their total loyalty points, past awards, preferences, etc. The ticket wizard database **94** stores data about tickets that are issued by the EGMs, such as payouts and cash out tickets, as well as promotional tickets.

[**0025**] The CCTG database **96** stores information about non-EGM **10** data in a casino. That data is typically generated by a client station (not shown) coupled to one of the bank controllers **30**. The client station can be located in a casino cage or at a table game, for instance, and data generated by the client station is forwarded to the CCTG database **96** where it is stored. For example, data such as when and how many chips a customer buys, when a customer creates or pays off markers, when a customer cashes checks, etc. is stored in the CCTG database **96**.

[**0026**] The player tracking database **98** is a subset database of the patron management database **92**, and is used when data retrieval speed is important, such as for real time promotions and bonusing. The cashless database **99** stores information about payment options other than bills, coins, and tokens.

[**0027**] Application clients **80** and **82** couple to the server cluster **56**, and can retrieve data from any or all of the databases **100**. Application programs run on an application client **80**, **82** to provide users information about the gaming network **5** and the casino in which the network is established and to cause functions to operate on the gaming network **5**. An example application client **80** could include, for instance, an accounting server that allows queries and provides reports on financial and statistical information on single or groups of EGMs **10**.

[**0028**] A data interface **88** presents a uniform interface to other applications and servers (not shown), and grants access to retrieve data from the databases **100**. Typically these other clients or servers would not be controlled by the same entity that provides the other components of the gaming network **5**, and therefore the data interface **88** grants only guarded access to the databases **100**. Other components of the gaming network **5** of **FIG. 1** are discussed in detail below.

[**0029**] **FIG. 2** is a block diagram of components of the gaming system according to embodiments of the invention. In **FIG. 2**, a gaming floor **118** is illustrated. The gaming floor includes banks **120** of gaming machines. Several banks **120** are illustrated, although the number of banks on a gaming floor **118** could be as few as one (or simply a single EGM **10** not associated with any bank) or as many as is practical. Illustrated in **FIG. 2** are five banks **120**.

[**0030**] Also shown in **FIGS. 1 and 2** are a number of wireless servers **130**, also referred to as wireless access points (WAPs). The wireless servers **130** transmit and receive RF (Radio Frequency) signals over the gaming floor **118**, thereby communicating with one or more wireless devices **140**. Example wireless servers **130** are those that adhering to IEEE 802.11b, 802.11a, or 802.11g protocols, but any acceptable communication protocol could be used. The wireless servers **130** are connected to each other via wires or wireless links, as is known in the art. The wireless servers **130** and wireless devices **140** illustrated in **FIG. 1** may be implemented as a same set of wireless servers **130** and wireless devices **140**, or may, in fact, be separate

systems, where the wireless devices **140** only communicate with a particular wireless server **130**, and not all such servers, in the game network **5**. The wireless devices **140** both receive and transmit information to the wireless servers **130**, as is known in the art.

[**0031**] The wireless servers **130** are distributed around the gaming floor **118** so as to cover as much of the gaming floor **118** with the RF signals as possible. In some instances, areas of the gaming floor **118** are covered with RF signals from more than one wireless server **130**. In such a case, the wireless devices **140** typically automatically establish communication with the wireless server **130** that is nearest the particular wireless device **140**.

[**0032**] The wireless servers **130** may be separated from the gaming network **5** by a firewall **150**. A firewall is hardware and software operating to protect resources of a network. Specifically, the firewall **150** can be a tunneling firewall that encapsulates and encrypts data packets traveling between the wireless servers **130** and the firewall **150**. An application server **110** can be used in conjunction with the wireless servers **130** on the game floor **118**. Additionally, a switch **160** could be used to partition particular IP (Internet Protocol) or other addresses so the partitioned addresses are only available by the wireless servers **130**, or the wireless devices **140** that couple to the wireless servers **130**. Although illustrated outside of the gaming floor **118**, the firewall **150**, server **110**, and switch **160** could all also be within the gaming floor **118**. Their physical location is unimportant.

[**0033**] With reference back to **FIG. 1**, the application server **115** of **FIG. 2** could be embodied by a Mobile Data Access (MDA) server **108**. The firewall **150** of **FIG. 2** is not present in **FIG. 1** but could, of course, be added between the MDA server **108** and the rest of the gaming network **5**. In **FIG. 1**, the MDA server **108** connects to the gaming network **5** through a communication hub **102**. The communication hub **102**, in turn, is connected to the translator **50** and to an event monitor **104**. The event monitor **104** is also coupled to the server cluster **56**, which was described above.

[**0034**] The communication hub **102** collects data from the floor **118** as "events" when they happen and when they are reported by, for example, an EGM **10**. Events include, for example, doors to the EGMs **10** being opened, jackpots or other large amounts being awarded, etc. The event monitor **104** is connected between the connection hub **102** and the server cluster **56**. In operation, the event monitor **104** combines live data from the communication hub **102** with historical data from one or more of the databases **100**, and generates warnings, indications, and signals for someone monitoring the gaming network **5**. For instance, the event monitor **104** will create a warning if the door to a particular EGM **10** is opened but no employee identification card has been inserted in that EGM **10**.

[**0035**] **FIG. 3** illustrates an example EGM **10**, including communication feedback to a player. The gaming device **10** includes a bill acceptor **320** that accepts and validates bills, tickets or vouchers. Bill validators operate by scanning barcodes or other identifying features on tickets or vouchers, and by examining printing or other security features on paper currency to determine authenticity. Bill validators are well known in the gaming arts.

[**0036**] The gaming device **10** also includes one or more coin slots **322** for accepting coins or tokens. An internal hopper **324** temporarily stores coins or tokens for later payment to the player through a payout bin **328**, if the player chooses to cash out in such a manner. Bills can also be stored in a separate hopper, and dispensed to the player through the bill acceptor **320** or through another bill slot **326** in the hopper **324**, similar to an ATM machine.

[**0037**] A set of game electronics **315** manages the central operations of the gaming device **10**. For example, the game electronics **315** counts the monetary value input into the game **10**, and tracks and stores values for this and other data items. The game electronics **315** also control the game play of the gaming device **10**, such as by accepting user input from various buttons (not shown) to cause credits to be wagered, as well as cause motors to spin the game wheels, speakers to generate sound, and circuits to generate lights or video signals. The game electronics **315** may be a main board that interfaces with various controller boards that control specific functions in the gaming device **10**, or may control the various devices directly.

[**0038**] One of the items controlled by the game electronics **315** is an internal game printer **330**. The game printer **330** can be of any type known in the art, such as impact, inkjet, thermal, laser, and can be a color printer or standard black and white. Even if the game printer **330** is only capable of printing in a single color, cardstock or paper used by the printer could be pre-printed in color.

[**0039**] The game printer **330** is used for "cashing out" machine credits when a player wants to end game play or to move to another machine. A player cashes out by selecting appropriate buttons on the gaming device **10**, and then by indicating if he or she wants to be paid out in cash or in voucher. If the player desires to be cashed out in cash, bills can be ejected through the bill acceptor **320** or bill slot **326** of the internal hopper **324**, or coins or tokens can drop from the hopper **324** into the payout bin **328**. If the player wishes to be cashed out with a voucher or ticket, such a voucher can be printed by the game printer **330**. The voucher can then be taken to a casino attendant to be converted to cash, or could be inserted into the bill acceptor **320** of another gaming device **10**, which validates the voucher and transfers the value to the credit meter of the new game.

[**0040**] In addition to printing tickets related to game and bonus functions, such as a cash out voucher, the game printer **330** can print tickets for player awards as well, as discussed below.

[**0041**] The gaming device **10** also includes game-mounted components of a player tracking system. The components are generally shown affixed to a frame **340**, which is mounted to the gaming device **10**. Although components of the tracking system interact with the gaming device **10**, it is a separate system from the gaming device.

[**0042**] The player tracking system includes a set of electronic inputs and outputs for interfacing with the player. For example, in the gaming device shown in **FIG. 3**, portions of the player tracking system mounted to the frame **340** include a card slot with a card reader **342**, a touch screen display **352**, such as a Liquid Crystal Display (LCD). A detailed description of such a touch screen display **52** is described in US patent application Ser. 10/170,238, "Method and Apparatus for Communicating with a Player of a Networked Gaming Device," and is incorporated herein by reference for

all purposes. As described in the 10/170,238 application, a bonus engine **350** can manage the touch screen display **352**, and card reader **342**, as well as provides bonusing and other functions. Additionally, components elsewhere in the gaming network **5**, such as the promotion server **68** or application clients **80**, **82** (**FIG. 1B**) can generate signals that cause the touch screen **352** to show a message to the player. For instance, the touch screen **352** can be so controlled to inform the player that they have won a special award, while informing other players that such an award has been given.

[**0043**] The EGM **10** can also include a system printer **354** and speakers **356** mounted to the frame **40** of the player tracking system. The system printer **354** and speakers **356** can also be coupled to and managed by the bonus engine **350**. The system printer **354** works in conjunction with the game printer **330** in that the system printer **354** can print the awards, while the game printer **330** can print the traditional game cash out vouchers. The speakers **356** can be made to produce sounds or music by the bonus engine **350**. In other embodiments of the invention, components of the tracking system can be integrated with or controlled by the game electronics **315**, or other components of the gaming network **5**.

[**0044**] Embodiments of the invention use the above-described gaming network, or similar networks, to deliver winnings, promotions, benefits, awards, prizes, bonuses, and/or comps, etc. to a player of one of the EGMs **10**. For brevity, this disclosure refers to "awards," but the term is meant to be defined broadly as any type of benefit delivered to or available to a player.

[**0045**] In one example embodiment, when the network determines to deliver an award, players other than the player who won the award are systematically "eliminated" from winning the award. This builds excitement for the players who remain eligible for the award. For example, **100** players on a casino floor could be divided into equal or non-equal groups and sequentially and/or systematically "eliminated" from eligibility. In this example, the **100** players could be notified that they are eligible to receive an award, such as by notifying them on the EGM **10** or a communication device coupled to the EGM. In one embodiment a display on the EGM **10** could display a notification message and/or speakers at the EGM could indicate to the player that they are eligible for such an award. All of the players eligible for the award could have a similar display. Once the players have been notified of the possibility of such an award, non-winning players could be "eliminated" by showing a non-winning message on the display, and/or sounding a particular audio notification over the speakers. In one example, the network could "eliminate" 10 players every 30 seconds. The non-eliminated players could enjoy the anticipation of winning the award the longer they stayed "in" and were not eliminated. Additionally, celebration prizes could be awarded to players who were eliminated. Even further, the celebration prizes could increase in value the longer the players were eligible for the prizes. For instance, if players made it to the 7^{th} "round" of eligibility, they could receive a celebration prize having a higher value than players eliminated in the first round. Players continue to be eliminated until the player or players who won the ultimate or highest award were notified of their award.

[**0046**] Rules for award eligibility could be based on a number of factors, such as whether the player was identified by a player tracking card, an amount of theoretical or actual win/loss, recency of play, frequency of player's visits to a casino, type of games played on an EGM **10**, demographics, interests, and/or historical behavior, for example. Further, eligibility could be based by specific game type, physical area of a game floor, denomination, etc.

[**0047**] The total population of eligible players could be divided up in any number of ways. Once divided, a pay table, pool value, multiple last bet, and/or a fixed amount could be associated with awarding an award and a celebration award. Award pools can be funded in a number of ways, such as a percentage of coin in, percentage of coin out, a percentage of coins wagered, a percentage of player theoretical win or loss, or a percentage of player actual win or loss, for example. Other mechanisms for funding include a fixed amount, a fixed value amount per unit time, and a fixed amount per group of players or machines.

[**0048**] In some embodiments, the level of the award pool is also the trigger value, such as by delivering the award (or awards) after the award pool has reached a certain value. Other trigger values can include: specific game outcome, sets of game outcomes, consecutive game outcomes, "x" outcomes in "y" tries, outcome sets per unit time, outcomes relative to other players, for example. Player behaviors can also trigger events, such as number of points earned, win/loss per unit time, visit frequency, handle per trip, handle per unit time, and continuous play, for instance. Still other triggers can be random, such as "Lucky Coin,""Lucky Time," and electronic drawings. Such triggers can initiate a promotion, such as, after such a promotion has been triggered, groups of players are notified of their potential win and are eliminated over time until one of the players actually wins.

[**0049**] Informing players of the rules and progress of the above-described awards can be through any mechanism in the gaming network **5**. For instance, sign **32** and sound **34** displays located near banks **20**, **22**, and **24** of the gaming network may inform players of the existence and progress of the award promotions. Additionally, the touch screen **52** of **FIG. 3** could be used to communicate with a player, as could player tracking VFDs as is known in the art. Video displays in the EGMs **10** themselves could also be controlled to notify and inform players.

[**0050**] In other embodiments of the invention, celebration awards can be divided into separate categories. For instance, there may be multiple types (or levels) of celebration categories. Further, there can be different numbers of each level of celebration awards. For example, there may be eight categories of celebration awards, with **100** celebration awards in the first category, and **10** celebration awards in the remaining seven categories. Each category of award could have a different monetary amount, with the first category being a $10 instant credit, the second category a $20 instant credit, and so on. Further, different categories can be different types of award, in different amounts. In such an example, the first category could be a $10 machine credit, the second category a $30 return credit, and the last category a $100 restaurant voucher.

[**0051**] A player could be awarded any of the particular categories based on one or more of a number of factors. For instance, if there were ten categories of celebration awards, a particular player could be awarded one of the ten types at

random. Or, the particular celebration awarded to the player could be based on some data stored in the player history in one of the databases **100** of **FIG. 1B**, or elsewhere on the gaming network **5**. Factors such as playing levels, player club tier level, frequency of visits, etc. could be referenced in determining which category of celebration award to distribute to the particular player. For example, a player who has just signed up in a player club could be awarded the lowest level of celebration award, while the player in the highest level tier receives the highest level category.

[**0052**] In announcing winners, winners can be determined and/or announced by category. As described above, announcements may be made from the sound devices **34** coupled to the bank controllers **30** (**FIG. 1A**), or the speakers **356** at the EGMs **10** themselves (**FIG. 3**). Additionally, visual displays may be shown on signs **32** located at the banks or on the touch screen **352** located on the EGMs **10**. Announcements may include audio, video, or both. In one example, the lowest celebration category winners are announced first, followed by the next highest, etc, until the highest winning value was finally announced at the end of the sequence.

[**0053**] Celebration prizes could be funded in a number of different ways. For example, the celebration prizes could be pre-funded by an even or pro-rata distribution of the pool amongst eligible players. Using this method, the funding pool would accrue as percentage of coin in, coin out, etc. Upon a winning event, i.e., being selected to win a celebration award, the pool would be distributed amongst eligible players according to a predefined algorithm. For a single award value, the accumulated pool could simply be divided evenly amongst all eligible players. When multiple categories of awards are being distributed, such as described above, the award pool could be distributed in a pro-rata share amongst prize categories. Several methods of this division are possible: For example, assume there are three available prize categories, 1×, 3×, and 5×, where the 5× category gets a prize that is 5 times the 1× category, and the 3× category gets a prize 3 times the 1× category. The number of players in each category can be determined at random, determined by historical play information, or can be determined as predefined percentages of the total population of eligible players. For example: 10% of total population could be assigned to the 5× winner category, 80% assigned to the 3× winner category and 10% assigned to the 1× winner category. If not enough funds have been collected to pay all of the awards, actual payment could be delayed until a future time when adequate funds have been collected. Other substitutions could also be made, such as awarding the selected players with a discount on future play, or a complementary item, and not awarding anything from the accumulated pool. Payments could also be paid to cashable or non-cashable personal wagering accounts. This would resolve an issue of making payments in units less then the minimum denomination of the machine being played

[**0054**] In another method to fund awards, a pool can be accrued that has a prize award structure that consists of a single prize value for all, i.e., every selected player is awarded the same amount, or multiple prize levels of differing values can be awarded. The number of players in each award category could be determined at random or from pre-stored historical personal play history. In this funding mechanism, the total award amount that must be paid is compared to an accumulated pool amount. If the award amount exceeds pool amount, then no prizes may be awarded, and the pool can be rolled over into a next award cycle.

[**0055**] **FIG. 4** is an example flow diagram illustrating example system flows incorporating embodiments of the invention. A flow **400** begins at a process **410**, where a mystery award is triggered to be delivered to a player. The award may be triggered when one of the events that was described above occurs, such as a Lucky Coin.

[**0056**] In a process **420**, players are notified of their potential for winning the award, such as by producing a message on the touch screen display **352** of **FIG. 3**. Not all players in a casino or on a game floor need be included as an eligible player.

[**0057**] In a process **430**, some of the eligible players are eliminated from eligibility, i.e., they were not selected to win the major award. However, a process **440** determines if the eliminated players are to be paid a celebration award. If so, the celebration award is paid in the process **450**.

[**0058**] Next, a process **460** determines if all non-winning players have been eliminated and, if not, the flow **400** loops again to notify the eligible players in the process **420**. This may include generating a new communication, such as informing the player that they remain eligible while **20** previously players have been eliminated.

[**0059**] The flow **400** then continues eliminating players, and, if desired, paying them celebration awards in the process **450**. Not all celebration awards need be the same amount, and the awards could increase each time players are eliminated.

[**0060**] Finally, after all of the non-winners have been eliminated, in the process **460**, the winner or winners are notified of their win, and the awards made in process **470**. The awards may be paid directly to the EGM **10** credit meter, produced as a ticket voucher, or paid in any typical manner.

[**0061**] Although examples of machines and processes have been described herein, nothing prevents embodiments of this invention from working with other types of machines and processes. Implementation of the award payments is straightforward in light of the above description. As always, implementation details are left to the system designer. The specific circuits, functions, and procedures used to securely access data from the gaming network may be implemented in any way, with any components, without deviating from the spirit of the invention.

[**0062**] Thus, although particular embodiments have been described, it is not intended that such specific references be considered as limitations upon the scope of this invention, but rather the scope is determined by the following claims and their equivalents.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for delivering an award to a player over a computer gaming network, comprising:

determining an award is to be delivered;

selecting a group of players eligible for the determined award;

notifying the selected group of their eligibility;

eliminating a portion of the group from eligibility;

notifying the eliminated portion of the group that they have been eliminated;

continuing to eliminate portions of the group from eligibility until a group of award winners is selected.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the group of award winners is a single player.

3. The method of claim 1, further comprising awarding a celebration prize to the eliminated portion of the group.

4. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

awarding a first celebration prize to a first eliminated portion of the group; and

awarding a second celebration prize to a second eliminated portion of the group.

5. The method of claim 4 wherein awarding a second celebration prize comprises awarding a different prize than that awarded as a first celebration prize.

6. The method of claim 5 wherein awarding a second celebration prize comprises awarding a different value than that awarded as a first celebration prize.

7. The method of claim 6 wherein awarding a second celebration prize comprises awarding a higher value of prize than that awarded as a first celebration prize.

8. The method of claim 4 wherein awarding a second celebration prize comprises awarding the second celebration prize to more players than were awarded the first celebration prize.

9. A method of claim 1, wherein the step of notifying the selected group and the eliminated portion includes displaying a notification message on a display associated with the gaming machine at which the player of the selected group or eliminated portion is playing indicating whether the player is still selected or eliminated.

10. A method for implementing a promotion within a gaming machine network comprising a plurality of gaming machines and a promotions server coupled to the gaming machines over the network, the method comprising:

allowing play to occur on the plurality of gaming machines;

detecting at the promotions server a trigger condition and transmitting through the network responsive to the detected trigger condition a notification signal to selected gaming machines forming an eligible group;

after transmitting the notification signal, transmitting an elimination signal through the network to a selected number of the eligible group machines and eliminating the selected number from the eligible group;

repeating the step of transmitting the elimination signal for a next selected number of the eligible group machines until only one or more non-eliminated, award winning machines remain from the original eligible group; and

providing an award at the one or more award winning machines.

11. The method of claim 10, each of the plurality of gaming machines including a display, the method including displaying on the display of the selected gaming machines an eligibility message responsive to receipt of the notification signal at the gaming machine.

12. The method of claim 11, further including changing the eligibility indicator on the display to an elimination message responsive to receipt at the gaming machine of the elimination signal.

13. The method of claim 10, further including the step of providing a celebration award to the selected number and next selected number of eligible group machines.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein the celebration award for the selected number of eligible group machines is less that the celebration award for the next selected number of eligible group machines.

15. The method of claim 10, further including the step of selecting gaming machines for the eligible group using a selection criteria, the selection criteria selected from the group consisting of whether the player was identified by a player tracking card, an amount of theoretical or actual win/loss, recency of play, frequency of a player's visits to a casino, type of games played on the gaming machine, demographics, interests, historical behavior, specific game type, physical area of a game floor, and denomination played at the gaming machine.

16. The method of claim 10, wherein the step of detecting the trigger condition includes one or more selected from the group consisting of detecting whether an award pool has reached a certain value, detecting a specific game outcome, detecting sets of game outcomes, detecting consecutive game outcomes, detecting "x" outcomes in "y" tries, detecting outcome sets per unit time, detecting outcomes relative to other players, detecting number of player points earned, detecting win/loss per unit time, detecting visit frequency, detecting handle per trip, detecting handle per unit time, detecting continuous play, detecting "Lucky Coin," and detecting "Lucky Time."

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