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(54) Entertainment machines.

(57) A coin-operated entertainment machine system has one or more coin-operated game-playing machines (1, 2) such as fruit machines, and a separate coin-mechanism (16) which is connected to the machine or machines through a control link (13, 14). The coin-mechanism (16) may be in a separately housed, stand-alone structure (15). When used with two or more machine (1, 2), there may be a common coin mechanism (16) and the arrangement may be such that each machine (1, 2) is operable to the exclusion of the (or each) other machine (1, 2).

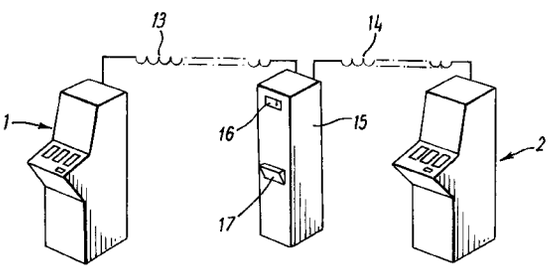

FIG.4

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This invention relates to coin-operated entertainment machines. As used herein the term coin is intended to cover coins, tokens, bank notes and any other means of credit or monetary value such as credit cards, charge cards and the like.

In the case of coin-operated entertainment machines which are of the AWP (amusement with prizes) or gaming kind, such as fruit machines, there may be a limit imposed on the number of such machines which are permitted to be available for use at the same time at the same site. For public house premises the limit may be say two or three machines.

As a consequence of this it is usual for the range of games which can be played at a particular site to be restricted and this is problematical in so far as it reduces player interest. To compensate for this it is customary practice for machines to be changed frequently, say every few months, but this is inconvenient and expensive and wastefully gives rise to surplus machines which may still be in good operative condition. In any case, frequent machine changing does not avoid the overall restriction on game variety in the period between machine changes. Not only does this restriction reduce player interest but also it limits the ability to make available a range of games of different levels of complexity to cater for players of different levels of experience.

One object of the present invention is to facilitate the changing of machines and to provide means to facilitate increase in the range of coin-operated entertainment machines available for playing at a site whilst permitting retention of an overall limitation on simultaneous availability of machines of a particular kind.

According to one aspect of the invention therefore there is provided a coin-operated entertainment machine system comprising at least one housed game-playing machine having player-operable controls and a game-display device, and an actuating device having a coin-mechanism, characterised in that the actuating device is separately housed from the (or each) housed game-playing machine and is connected thereto via at least one control link to permit playing of the machine under the control of the coin-mechanism.

The separately housed actuating device facilitates efficient, convenient and inexpensive machine manufacture and installation in that a machine can be replaced with a new machine without always requiring replacement of the coin-mechanism and associated parts; the separate structure can be retained, if desired on the same site, for use with successive machines. In so far as the structure is retained in this way it is feasible and economic to use a durable, rugged structure fabricated from strong materials and secure locks providing enhanced security, and correspondingly the machines separate from the structure may not require to be specially durable. Also, separation of the coin-mechanism and associated parts from the machines gives further possibilities for aesthetic design of the machine housings as seen by the player.

The machine system may be utilised in the context of a single machine or with multiple simultaneously operable machines, or with multiple mutually exclusively operable machines.

In the last mentioned respect most preferably there are two or more coin-operated entertainment machines and each machine is operable to the exclusion of the (or each) other machine.

With this preferred arrangement two or more machines are made available for playing, but only one of the machines can be played at a time. Thus, an increased range of machine games can be made available without increasing the overall number of machines simultaneously available for playing.

A range of different machines for playing different games which may involve different levels of complexity or skill and/or which may involve different game features or themes can be made available at the same site. This can considerably enhance variety and hence player interest. Also it can be possible more readily to cater for the requirements of both experienced and inexperienced players. In accordance with this it may be possible to defer introduction of new machines or, at least, there is the possibility of minimising wastage of replaced machines in so far as they can be retained for use alongside new machines, thereby appealing to as large a spectrum of players as possible and optimising potential machine income.

The control connection may be linked to start controls, such as press-buttons, of the machines whereby when the start control of one machine is operated a disabling or blocking procedure is initiated to prevent playing of the (or each) other machine. Alternatively, a selector control may be provided so that the player has to operate the control to select one of the machines before that machine can be played.

The control connection may comprise a cable or radiation link or any other suitable link.

The machines may be of any suitable kind. Preferably, the machines are of the kind having a visible games-display, player-operable controls (such as press-buttons, touch screen or the like) and an award system which responds to a detected game win to produce an award indication and preferably to initiate or make available an award pay out.

It is visualised that the invention will find particular application in the context of selection machines of the kind with which a combination of symbols is selected preferably on a random or pseudo-random basis and a win indication is given in the event that the selected combination is of a predetermined winning nature. Such selection machine may be of the fruit machine kind with which the symbols are displayed on the peripheries of rotatable reels, or a video display simulating rotatable reels. It is however to be un-

derstood that the invention is not intended to be restricted to such machines and any other suitable kind of coin-operated entertainment machine may be used.

Each machine may be operatively self contained, apart from the control connection, in that it contains everything necessary for playing without utilising separate mechanisms or controls.

Each machine may also be physically separate, and if desired, spaced from, the (or each) other machine.

Alternatively, if desired the machines may be physically united or connected and/or they may utilise common parts or controls. In the latter respect, most conveniently, a common coin-mechanism may be used whereby the machines are collectively actuated ready to be selected for playing by insertion of a coin or coins (or equivalent credit or monetary value) into the mechanism.

In one embodiment two or more machines are housed separately with a link therebetween and a common coin-mechanism provided on one of the machines, the latter machine providing the said separate structure for the coin-mechanism for the other machine (or machines).

In an alternative embodiment it is possible to use a separately housed structure for the actuating device which is linked to the machine or machines via a cable or other connection. This arrangement is particularly advantageous, especially if there are other associated common parts also in the structure such as any or all of a coin-storage device, or cash box, a payout mechanism, metering facilities, a coin credit monitoring or display device, a win display device, data capture facilities.

The separate actuating device may be housed in an upstanding column or in any other suitable housing. The housing may be free standing or wall mounted or built in or of any other suitable format.

In addition to the coin mechanism, and any associated coin-handling or credit or win monitoring or display devices, the separate actuating device may contain any other suitable part of the (or each) machine to avoid replacement of such part whenever a machine is changed and/or to minimise duplication in the case where there are multiple machines and such part can be used in common by all machines. Thus, the actuating device may incorporate parts such as a power supply, a central control system, and the (or each) machine may be reduced in content to the game display device and the player-operable controls with the minimum of other components.

According to a second aspect of the present invention there is provided a coin-operated entertainment machine system comprising two or more coin-operated entertainment machines characterised in that the machines are housed separately with a control link therebetween and a common coin-mechanism provided on one of the machines, whereby each machine is operable to the exclusion of the (or each) other machine.

According to a third aspect of the present invention there is provided a coin-operated entertainment machine system comprising two or more coin-operated entertainment machines characterised in that the machines are housed separately and are linked by control links to a separate structure which is provided with a common coin mechanism for the machines.

According to a fourth aspect of the present invention there is provided a coin-operated entertainment machine system comprising at least one housed coin-operated entertainment machine and an actuating device having a coin mechanism, characterised in that the actuating device is housed in a structure which is physically separate from the (or each) machine and is connected thereto via at least one control link to permit playing of the machine under the control of the coin-mechanism, and the separate structure is also provided with one or more of a coin-storage device or cash box, a pay-out mechanism, metering facilities, a coin credit monitoring or display device, a win display device, data capture facilities.

With the machine system of any of the aspects of the invention, preferably the housed actuating device also incorporates a facility for effecting monetary value transactions separate from game-playing on presentation of monetary value thereto.

The monetary value may be presented in the form of a monetary value data carrier, or an element of monetary value.

In the case of a data-carrier this may be a credit card or cash card or debit card of the conventional magnetic-stripe kind. Other data-carriers such as 'smart cards', integrated circuit chip devices and the like may also be used.

The actuating device may incorporate a card reader, inductive loop or other contact or proximity device for reading and/or writing to the data-carrier.

In the case of an element of monetary value this may be a coin, token, bank note or the like, and the actuating device may incorporate a coin-mechanism, note reader or the like.

The data-carrier reader and/or the coin-mechanism, note reader or the like may be the same as or separate to the reader or mechanism or the like used in connection with the initiation of game playing.

The financial transaction may be a change transaction e.g. dispensing coins for bank notes. Alternatively or additionally the transaction may be a cash withdrawal made against a bank account or the like, in which case there may be an on-line link to a central banking computer system for verification and/or accounting purposes.

Monetary value dispensed may be dispensed through an outlet which is the same as that used for

dispensing game-playing winnings. Also, monetary value dispensed may be obtained from the supply of monetary value obtained from coins (or the like) inserted for game-playing purposes.

Other financial transactions involving dispense of monetary value, goods or services may also be utilised in accordance with the invention.

The invention will now be described further by way of example only and with reference to the accompanying drawings, Figs. 1-4 which are diagrammatic perspective views showing machine assemblies in accordance with four different embodiments of the invention.

Referring to Fig. 1, this shows an assembly of two fruit machines 1, 2 in a common floor-standing housing 3.

Each machine 1, 2 has a set of say three or four rotatable reels having symbols (such as fruit) around their peripheries and visible through a window in a printed glass panel 4 at the front of the upper part of the housing 3. Beneath each set of reels there is a respective set of player operable control buttons 5 by means of which a game can be started and other usual functions such as 'Hold', 'Nudge', 'Gamble', 'Pay Out' can be initiated. There is also a slot 6 leading to a coin mechanism within the housing, a pay-out mechanism also within the housing leading to an outlet slot 7, and display devices including back-illuminated portions of the panel 4 and digital displays which indicate e.g. coins credited, games available for play, and wins attained.

It will be noted that there is only one coin slot 6 (and coin mechanism) , and also only one outlet slot 7 (and pay-out mechanism), for both machines. The above mentioned digital displays may also be common to the two machines.

When coins are inserted through the slot 6 into the coin mechanism their value is determined and when this value reaches that required for the playing of one or more games this is indicated on the digital displays in the usual manner and both machines 1, 2 are actuated ready for playing by means of a respective control system for each machine, such control systems being connected to the common coin mechanism so as to be controlled thereby. The two start buttons 8, 9 both flash. The two control systems are interconnected, or indeed may be integrated so that the same system is used for both machines, whereby only one machine can be set in play at a time. That is, the player presses one of the start buttons 8, 9 and this acts to operate the respective machine whilst at the same time disabling or blocking operation of the other machine.

When the game has been played, any payout can be obtained through the payout slot 7. Another game can now be played by inserting more coins, or by consuming existing credit if this is available, and again the player can press either start button 8, 9 to select whichever machine 1, 2 is to be played.

The two machines 1, 2 may be arranged for the playing of the games which differ in games features or theme to offer playing variety. Alternatively or additionally the games may differ in complexity and/or skill to cater for players of different levels of experience or playing familiarity.

The two machines may be wholly unrelated from a playing point of view or if desired they may be related so that for example there is the possibility of transferring winnings or features (e.g. numbers of 'holds' or 'nudges') from one machine to the other, or there may be a common feature which can be utilised by both machines e.g. a common jackpot.

In all cases, only one machine can be played at a time.

The arrangement of Fig. 2 is similar to that of Fig. 1 except that the two machines 1, 2 are in physically separate housings 10, 11 with a cable link 12 between the two control systems. Only one housed machine 2 has the coin and payout slots 6, 7. The other machine may be a standard machine with blanked off slots 6, 7.

The arrangement of Fig. 3 is similar to that of Fig. 2 except that both machines 1, 2 have an operational coin slot 6, 6a and payout slot 7, 7a. There is a cable link 12, which is a data communications link, between the machines which establishes a protocol such that on disconnection of the link 12 only a predetermined one of the machines will be operable as a stand-alone machine. When the link 12 is connected either, but not both, of the machines can be operated by insertion of coins into the coin mechanism of the respective machine. When one of the connected machines is operative the other is disabled or blocked. This arrangement can be obtained by conversion of two stand-alone standard machines by addition of the link 12 connected to interfaces of the two machines together with appropriate software modification of the machine operating systems. It is of course also possible to use specially constructed or adapted machines.

With the arrangement of Fig. 4, two machines 1, 2 which are both devoid of coin and payout slots and mechanisms are linked by cables 13, 14 to a common column-shaped floor-standing housed actuating device 15 which contains a coin slot 16, a payout slot 17 with associated coin and payout mechanisms for use in connection with both machines. The column 15 may also have digital displays which indicate credit and winnings etc.

With the embodiments of Figs. 1-3 a secure cash box has to be provided in the (or the pertaining) machine housing. With the embodiment of Fig. 4, the cash box is provided in the column 15. This means that the column 15 can be constructed very strongly to give good security, and the machines 1, 2 do not have to be specially strong or durable. The machines

1, 2 can be changed and disposed of frequently whilst the more expensively constructed column is retained.

The column 15 may contain other devices common to the two machines 1, 2 such as machine-monitoring devices or meters used to store operational information and which may be connectable on-line to a remote central computer or which may be capable of interrogation with a portable plug-in data reader, as part of a data capture system. It is even possible to provide at least part of the machine control systems in the column common to both machines.

The cable link 13, 14 between the column 15 and the machines 1, 2 may be a simple serial link. The column 15 may have multiple standardised ports and interfaces for interconnection to different machines and for other data transfer or other purposes. In practice provision may be made for connection to up to four machines with a protocol to allow only one machine to be played at a time. However provision may be made for connection to more machines as desired.

The column may be of a standardised nature for use with different kinds of machines at different kinds of sites. Alternatively a column specifically designed for particular kinds of machines and/or site requirements may be used.

Although the drawing only shows the coin slot 16 and payout slot 17 other devices such as digital displays, a payout button etc. may be provided.

The cash box within the column may be accessed through a front opening door provided with a secure locking system and an alarm device. A sensor may be provided on the base of the column to trigger the alarm if an unauthorised attempt is made to move the unit.

If desired a facility may be provided to allow an authorised person to withdraw specific amounts of cash from the column, eliminating the requirement for regular collection. If required a printer may be made available in the column to provide a receipt and audit trail.

Additionally or alternatively to the coin slot there may be a bank note acceptor and/or card reader.

It is of course to be understood that the invention is not intended to be restricted to the details of the above embodiment which are described by way of example only. Thus, for example, although the drawings all show two assembled machines, any number of machines may be assembled as desired.

With the above described embodiments, when one machine is in play the (or each) other machine is disabled or blocked. It is to be understood that this means that it is disabled or blocked with regard to its operation as a machine of the same kind as that which is in play (in the case of the embodiments - an AWP or gaming fruit machine). If desired the disabled or blocked machine may be operational for interim use as a different kind of machine.

Claims

1. A coin-operated entertainment machine system comprising at least one housed game-playing machine (1,2) having player-operable controls (5) and a game-display device, and an actuating device having a coin-mechanism (6 or 16), characterised in that the actuating device is separately housed from the (or each) housed game-playing machine and is connected thereto via at least one control link (12, or 13, 14) to permit playing of the machine under the control of the coin-mechanism.

2. A system according to claim 1 characterised in that there are two or more coin-operated entertainment machines (1, 2) and each machine is operable to the exclusion of the (or each) other machine.

3. A system according to claim 2 characterised in that the control connection (12, 13, 14) is linked to start controls (8, 9) of the machines whereby when the start control of one machine is operated a disabling or blocking procedure is initiated to prevent playing of the (or each) other machine.

4. A system according to any one of claims 1 to 3 characterised in that the (or each) machine (1, 2) is a selection machine of the kind with which a combination of symbols is selected on a random or pseudo random basis and a win indication is given in the event that the selected combination is of a predetermined winning nature.

5. A system according to claim 4 characterised in that each selection machine (1, 2) is of the fruit machine kind having symbols displayed on the peripheries of rotatable reels or on a video display simulating rotatable reels.

6. A system according to any one of claims 1 to 5 characterised in that there are two or more machines (1, 2) which are housed separately with a link (12) therebetween and a common coin mechanism (6) provided on one of the machines.

7. A system according to any one of claims 1 to 5 characterised in that the actuating device is housed in a structure which is physically separate from the (or each) machine.

8. A system according to claim 7 characterised in that the separate structure is also provided with one or more of a coin-storage device or cash box, a pay-out mechanism, metering facilities, a coin credit monitoring or display device, a win display device, data capture facilities.

9. A system according to claim 7 or 8 characterised in that there are two or more machines (1, 2) and the separately housed actuating device (15) has a common coin mechanism (16) therefor.

10. A coin-operated entertainment machine system comprising two or more coin-operated entertainment machines (1, 2) characterised in that the machines are housed separately with a control link (12) therebetween and a common coin-mechanism (6) provided on one of the machines, whereby each machine is operable to the exclusion of the (or each) other machine.

11. A coin-operated entertainment machine system comprising two or more coin-operated entertainment machines (1, 2) characterised in that the machines are housed separately and are linked by control links (13, 14) to a separate structure (15) which is provided with a common coin mechanism (16) for the machines.

12. A coin-operated entertainment machine system comprising at least one housed coin-operated entertainment machine (1, 2) and an actuating device having a coin mechanism (16), characterised in that the actuating device is housed in a structure (15) which is physically separate from the (or each) machine (1, 2) and is connected thereto via at least one control link (13, 14) to permit playing of the machine under the control of the coin-mechanism (16), and the separate structure is also provided with one or more of a coin-storage device or cash box, a pay-out mechanism, metering facilities, a coin credit monitoring or display device, a win display device, data capture facilities.

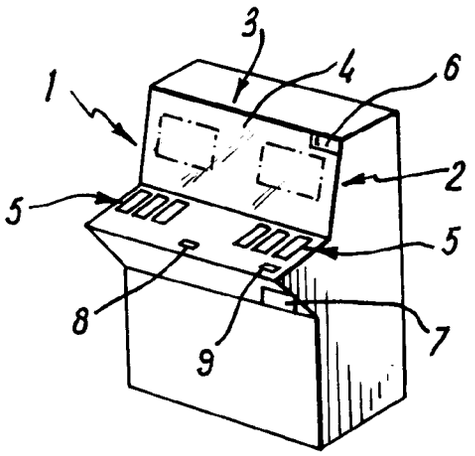
13. A system according to claim 7 to 9 or 12 characterised in that the separate structure (15) comprises an upstanding column.

14. A system according to any one of claims 1 to 13 characterised in that the housed actuating device also incorporates a facility for effecting monetary value transactions separate from game-playing on presentation of monetary value thereto.

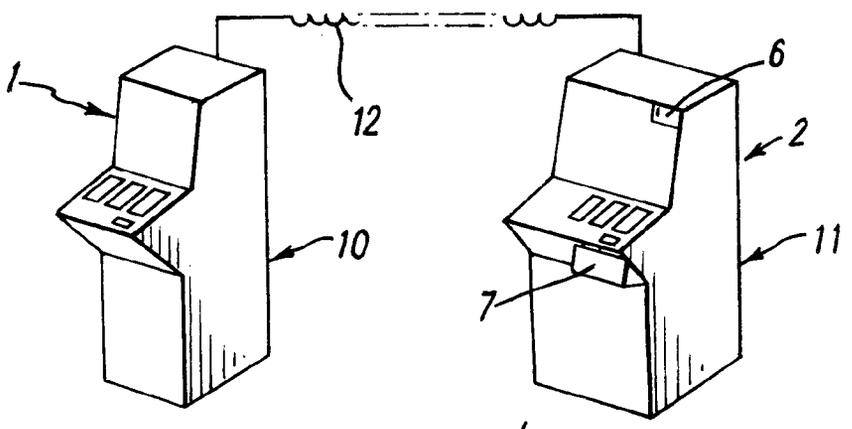
15. A system according to claim 14 characterised in that the monetary value is arranged to be presented in the form of a monetary value data carrier and the actuating device incorporates a contact or proximity device for reading and/or writing to the data carrier.

16. A system according to claim 14 characterised in that the financial transaction is a change transaction.

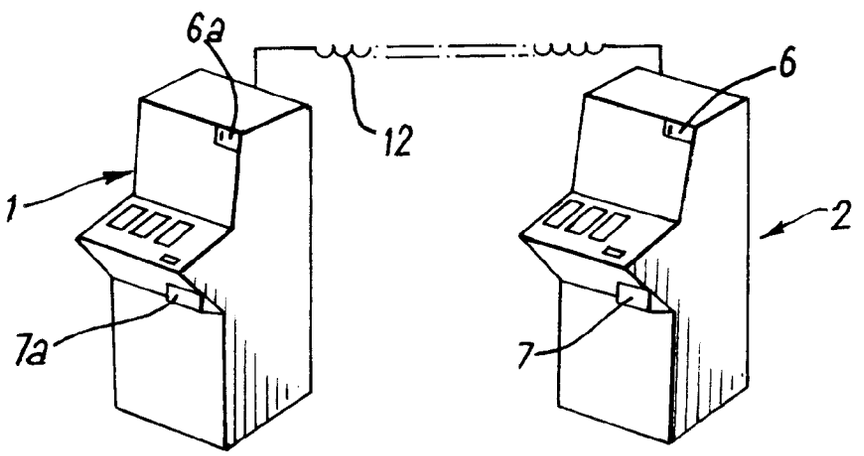
17. A system according to claim 15 characterised in that the financial transaction is a cash withdrawal made against a bank account.



ФИГ.1



ФИГ.2



ФИГ.3

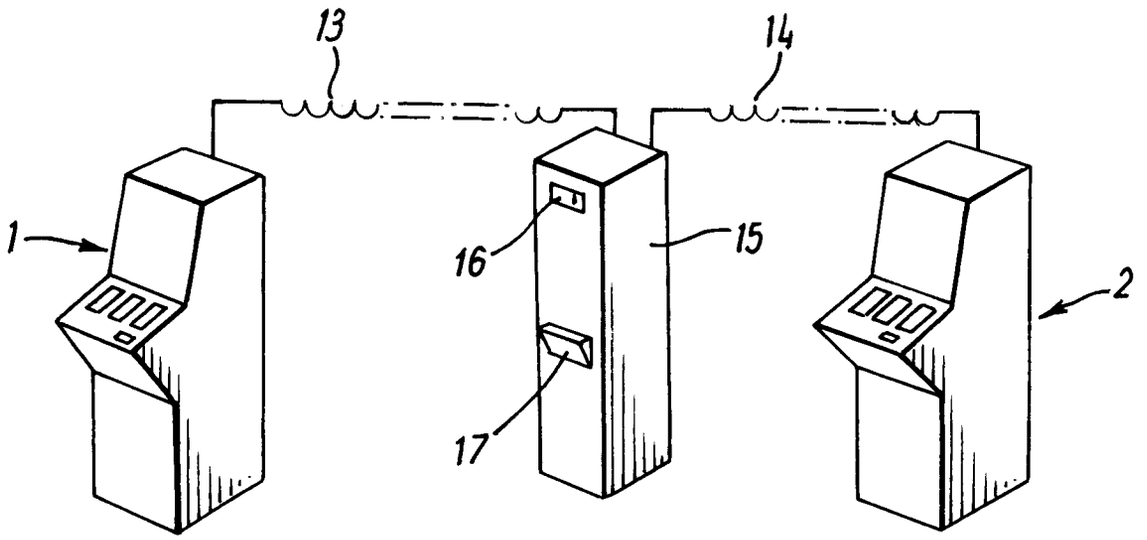


FIG.4