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(54) A prize awarding system for gaming machines

(57) A prize awarding system allows for higher prizes on the results of a series of linked gaming machines than can be achieved on the play of an individual machine. A primary fund (represented by a solid line) builds up steadily until, after n_1 games, a major prize is won. This is awarded to the player and the primary fund reverts to its base level, only to build up again as further games are played. After a total of n_2 games, it reaches a permitted maximum, at which point the proportion of the stake money previously allocated to the primary fund is directed to the reserve fund (represented by a broken line), which builds up in a similar manner as further games are played. If another major win is achieved after a total of n_3 games, then the player is awarded a maximum prize. This exhausts the primary fund down to its base level, but there is an instant transfer from the reserve fund to the primary fund, which therefore starts to build up again from well above its base level. When it reaches maximum again, the reserve fund starts to be replenished.

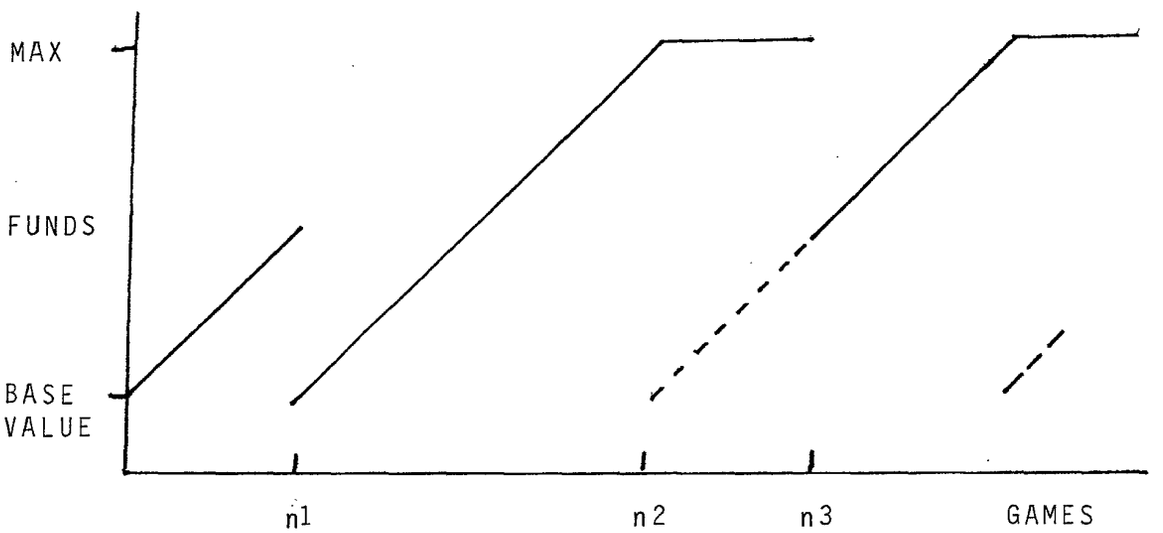

FIGURE 1

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Description

[0001] This invention concerns a prize awarding system for skill with prizes (SWP), amusement with prizes (AWP), club and gaming machines.

[0002] SWP games usually have an award structure that, at the start of each game, shows the cash prize payable for achieving set performance targets. There have been recent developments where a number of SWP's adjacent to one another have been electronically linked together such that the top award is a variable amount that increments in relation to the combined "cash in" of the linked machines. A jackpot prize replaces the individual machine top prize (currently £40 on £1 play machines). It is not uncommon for the jackpot to be as high as £2000. This value is beyond the payout capability of one machine and requires interaction with an attendant at the site (a process referred to as "attendant paid jackpot"). This is a derivative of the "linked progressive jackpots" that have become commonplace on Casino machines in Nevada for example.

[0003] Traditional video games are "amusement only" and have tended to be single player - man against machines. They have ranged from tennis to driving games to "shoot 'em up's" to golf. The majority of these games have included some measure of the players' relative performance and the "ego trip" of allowing the players who achieve the top 10 high scores to enter their details in a "hall of fame". A further development of this concept has been the electronic collection of "high scores" from a number of machines and the payment of a cash prize for the highest score achieved during a set period. This practice is commonly referred to as "tournament play". Traditional tournament play is active for a fixed time period - days, weeks - and awards the jackpot prize(s) to the player(s) who have achieved the highest score(s) during the period. There are player disincentives with this system, the main ones being,

a) winners are not known until the end of the period,
b) it is possible for more than one player to achieve the same score, resulting in a shared prize, and
c) prizes are not awarded and distributed until the end of the period.

[0004] According to the present invention there is provided a prize awarding system for a plurality of SWP, AWP, club or gaming machines on any of which an exceptional performance can generate a major prize beyond the normal capacity of an individual machine to pay out, each machine having a two-way transmission link to a server adapted:

a) to register each game played on all of the linked machines,
b) to recognise the achievement of a major win on any such machine, and
c) to determine a jackpot prize for that win related to the total number of games played on all of the linked machines since the previous major win.

[0005] At least the machine on which a major prize has been won will display that prize, but generally all the machines will ideally show continuously what major prize is available. There is then instant recognition/communication of success to a player.

[0006] The jackpot prize will normally be funded from a proportion of the payments into all the linked machines that enable them to be played. The prize fund may accumulate indefinitely with each game played, in which case the sky is the limit as long as no major win is achieved. Preferably though the jackpot prize will be confined to a maximum and, when that maximum has been achieved, contributions that would previously have been paid into the jackpot prize fund (hereafter the primary fund) are assigned to a reserve fund. In this case, after a jackpot prize is won, at least part of the reserve fund will be transferred to the primary fund. When a major win occurs, if the reserve fund has not reached the maximum value imposed on the primary fund, the whole reserve fund may be transferred to the primary fund. But if the reserve fund has reached the primary's maximum, no more than that is transferred, and the balance remains in the reserve fund. However, instead of waiting until the primary fund is full, contributions to the reserve fund may be made earlier, and indeed both funds may start to build up together. If the primary fund attains its maximum, then it can be arranged that the reserve fund receives more at each game play while the primary fund remains static.

[0007] Alternatively, there could be a delay while primary fund contributions are built up to a certain level before there was anything assigned to the reserve fund. The build up can be comparatively rapid in relation to the subsequent rate of increase, when both funds are accumulating.

[0008] In all these cases, the increments may be the same to both funds whenever a game is played. But preferably they will be different, with the reserve fund building up more slowly than the primary one.

[0009] Also in all these cases, the primary fund will preferably have a set base value. This should be at least equal to (but it may be greater than) the award that would be made if the machine was stand-alone and not part of a linked group subscribing to the primary fund. In other words, the player will have a higher reward than for a stand-alone machine than if he does achieve a major win. This would not apply to amusement only video games as referred to above unless they were part of a tournament.

[0010] In a further development there can be different primary funds maintained at different levels or incremented at different rates. Typically, there may be three, designated gold, silver and bronze. Selection will be left to be made by the player, in which case it can be arranged that if the lowest award available (the bronze) is

taken, other primary funds (the gold and silver) remain untouched while the fund from which the player takes his award is exhausted back to its base level. If the next lowest award (the silver) is taken instead, the associated fund, and the lowest one (the bronze), are both reduced to base levels, while the other primary fund(s) (the gold) remain untouched, and so on until taking the highest available award (the gold) returns all the primary funds to their base levels.

[0011] Thus, while it may be tempting for the player to take the biggest prize on offer, it means that if he carries on playing there may not be any jackpot prize available for the next game. It may be some time and many games before the primary funds build up to an enticing level. In other words, taking a lower prize means that a bigger one is still immediately available should luck or skill strike twice in quick succession.

[0012] For a better understanding of the invention, reference will now be made, by way of example, to the accompanying drawings in which the figures are diagrams illustrating the relationship between prize funds and games in various embodiments of the invention.

[0013] In these figures, the solid lines represent a primary fund and the broken lines represent a reserve fund.

[0014] In Figure 1, the primary fund builds up steadily until after n_1 games, a major prize is won. This is awarded to the player as described below, and the primary fund reverts to its base level, only to build up again as further games are played. After a total of n_2 games, it reaches a permitted maximum, at which point the proportion of the stake money previously allocated to the primary fund is directed to the reserve fund, which builds up in a similar manner as further games are played.

[0015] Supposing another major win is achieved after a total of n_3 games, then the player is awarded a maximum prize. This exhausts the primary fund, or at least takes it down to its base level. But there is instant transfer from the reserve fund to the primary fund, which therefore starts to build up again from well above its base level. When it reaches maximum again, the reserve fund starts to be replenished.

Figure 2 illustrates in a similar way possible behaviour of three different primary funds labelled gold, silver and bronze as outlined above.

[0016] When the first major win occurs after n_1 games, the player takes the balance of the bronze fund above its base level. The gold and silver funds are not depleted.

[0017] At the next major win after n_2 games, the player takes the balance of the silver and bronze funds above their base levels, the gold fund remaining untouched.

[0018] At the third major win the player takes the maximum prize available bringing all three funds down to their base levels.

[0019] The availability of these funds may be linked to the nature of the game played. For example, each machine might offer easy, intermediate and hard challenges, and the player taking on the easy one could only have a reward from the bronze fund. If he took on the intermediate challenge he could choose between the silver and bronze funds, while if he tackled the hard challenge he could choose between all three funds. The machines might further require the player to progress through certain easy and then intermediate challenges before taking on the hard ones.

[0020] In Figure 3, both funds build up simultaneously, the reserve one more slowly than the primary one. If there is a major win after n_1 games, then what is available in the primary fund is awarded to the player, while the reserve fund replenishes the primary fund and starts that off again at a point above base level. Further play causes the primary fund to build up at its original rate while the reserve fund starts again at its slower rate.

[0021] When the primary fund reaches its allotted maximum after a total of n_2 games, all further contributions are assigned to the reserve fund, which therefore increases at a substantially greater rate. It may go beyond the maximum of the primary fund, as shown. Should there then be another major win, after a total of n_3 games, the player receives the maximum prize while the primary fund stays unaltered by virtue of transfer from the extra full reserve fund. That of course is correspondingly reduced, but it will start to build up again as further games are played.

In Figure 4, the primary fund has a head start over the reserve fund and builds up quickly to a certain 'break point' level at n_1 games. After that, part of the allocation is made to the reserve fund and so both funds accumulate at a slower rate. Supposing there is a major win after n_2 games, then the player receives what is available from the primary fund, which resumes at the level achieved by the reserve fund. If this is below the break point, then the primary fund increases at its original rate until it reaches the break point, when contributions are shared between the funds. Eventually, the primary fund reaches a maximum, and remains level, whereupon the reserve fund will increase at a greater rate.

[0022] With regard to the communication between the server and machines, known techniques can be used. There could be fixed lines or dedicated wires, telephone or ISDN lines, radio communication or a mobile system such as GPRS. There will be suitable verification/authorisation procedures.

[0023] When a major win is achieved, this will be recognised by the server, which will determine the prize to be awarded from the status of the primary fund. This of course will not be delivered immediately in cash form to the player, who will have to interact with the machine being played so that can capture personal identification details and issue a secure prize PIN. This will be transmitted to the server. To claim the prize, the player will complete and submit a prize winner verification form, available on site, with their name address and PIN to enable a prize cheque to be delivered by post a few days later.

[0024] The server meanwhile informs all the machines of the new prize levels, and they reset their displays.0

Claims

1. A prize awarding system for a plurality of SWP, AWP, club or gaming machines on any of which an exceptional performance can generate a major prize beyond the normal capacity of an individual machine to pay out, each machine having a two-way transmission link to a server adapted:

   a) to register each game played on all of the linked machines,
   b) to recognise the achievement of a major win on any such machine, and
   c) to determine a jackpot prize for that win related to the total number of games played on all of the linked machines since the previous major win.

2. A system according to claim 1, wherein the jackpot prize is funded from a proportion of the payments into all the linked machines which enable them to be played.

3. A system according to claim 1 or claim 2, wherein the jackpot prize fund accumulates indefinitely with each game played.

4. A system according to claim 1 or claim 2, wherein the jackpot prize fund accumulates to a maximum.

5. A system according to claim 4, wherein once said maximum has been achieved, contributions that would previously have been paid into the jackpot prize fund (hereafter the primary fund) are assigned to a reserve fund.

6. A system according to claim 5, wherein, after a jackpot prize is won, at least part of the reserve fund is transferred to the primary fund.

7. A system according to claim 5 or claim 6, wherein, when a major win occurs, if the reserve fund has not reached the maximum value imposed on the primary fund, the whole reserve fund is transferred to the primary fund.

8. A system according to claim 5 or claim 6, wherein, if the reserve fund has reached the primary's maximum, no more than that is transferred, and the balance remains in the reserve fund.

9. A system according to any one of claims 5 to 8, wherein, instead of waiting until the primary fund is full, contributions to the reserve fund are made earlier

10. A system according to claim 9, wherein both funds start to build up together.

11. A system according to claim 10, wherein, if the primary fund attains its maximum, then it is arranged that the reserve fund receives more at each game play while the primary fund remains static.

12. A system according to claim 9, wherein there is a delay while primary fund contributions are built up to a certain level before anything is assigned to the reserve fund

13. A system according to any one of claims 10 to 12, wherein the increments are the same to both funds whenever a game is played.

14. A system according to any one of claims 10 to 12, wherein the increments are different, with the reserve fund building up more slowly than the primary one.

15. A system according to any one of claims 4 to 14, wherein the primary fund has a set base value.

16. A system according to claim 15, wherein the set base value is at least equal to (but may be greater than) the award that would be made if the machine was stand-alone and not part of a linked group subscribing to the primary fund.

17. A system according to any one of claims 4 to 16, wherein there are different primary funds maintained at different levels or incremented at different rates.

18. A system according to claim 17, wherein it is arranged that if the lowest award available is taken, higher primary funds remain untouched, while the fund from which the player takes his award is exhausted back to its base level, whilst, if the next lowest award is taken instead, the associated fund, and the lowest award fund, are both reduced to base levels, while the other primary fund(s) remain untouched, and so on until taking the highest available award returns all the primary funds to their base levels.

19. A prize awarding system for a plurality of SWP, AWP, club or gaming machines substantially as herein described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

20. Any novel combination of features of a prize awarding system for a plurality of SWP, AWP, club or gam-

ing machines as described herein and/or as illustrated in the accompanying drawings.

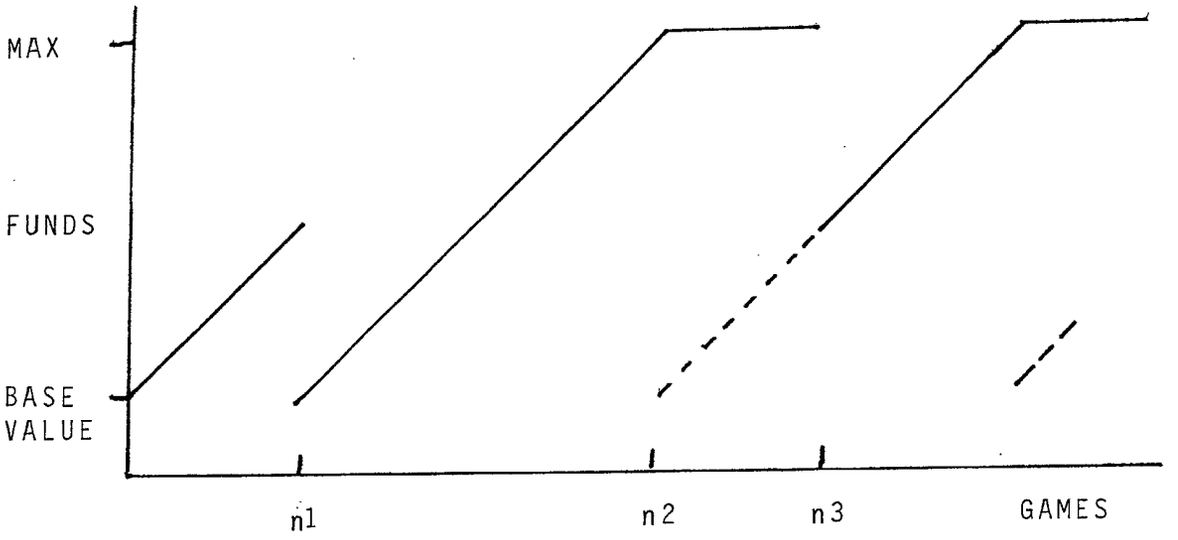

FIGURE 1

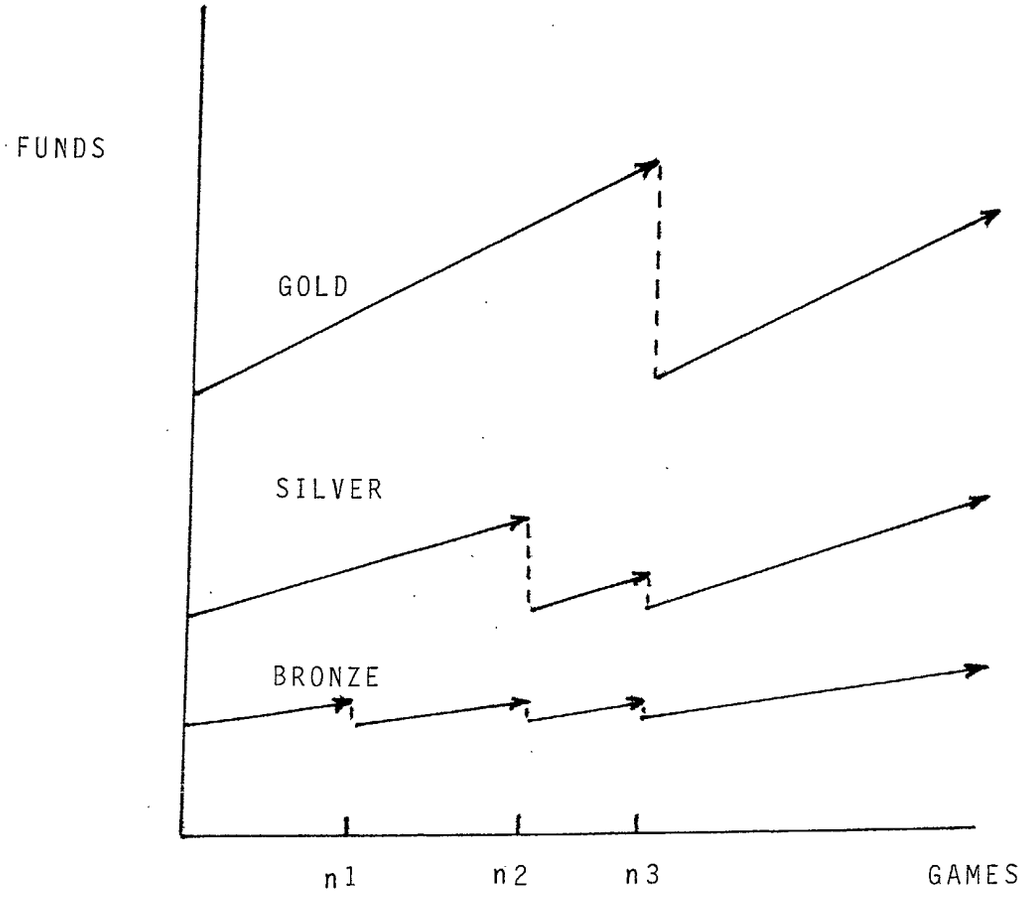

FIGURE 2

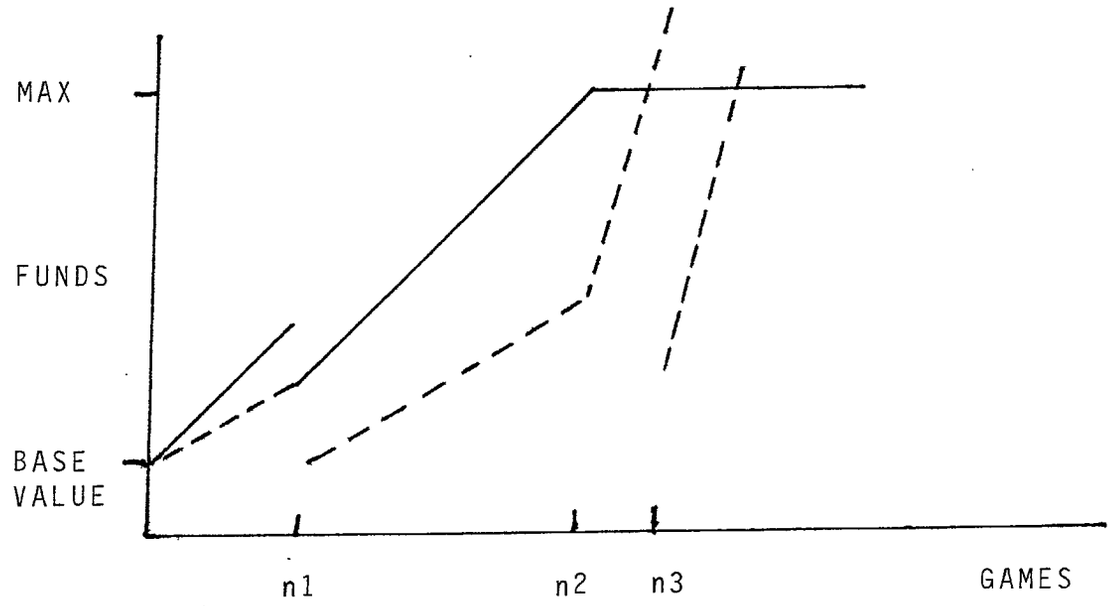

FIGURE 3

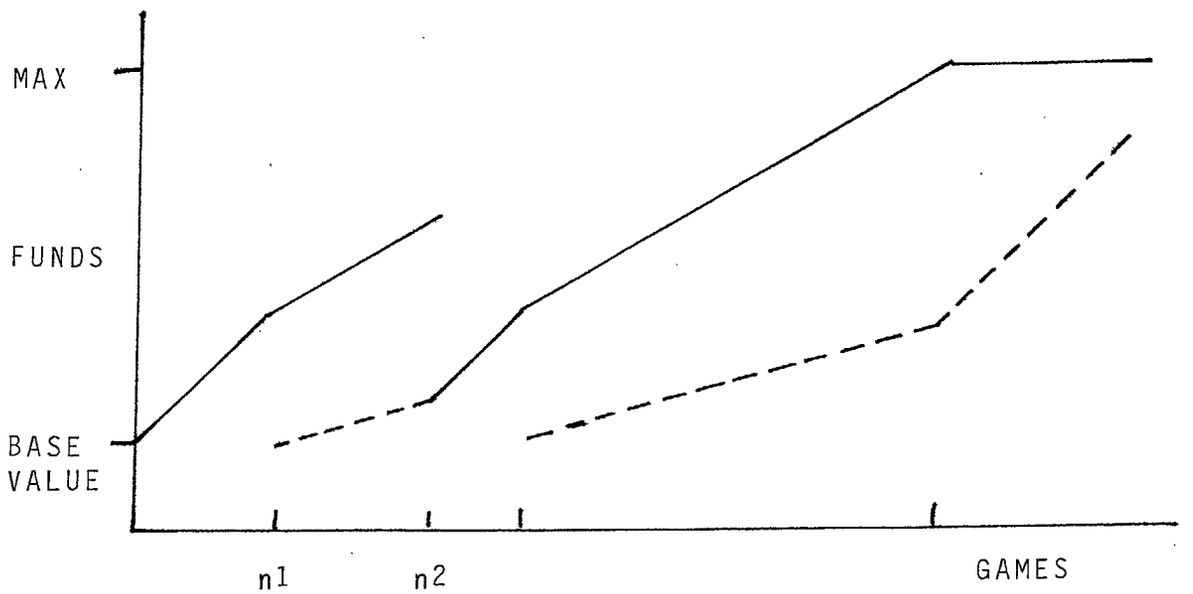

FIGURE 4