

visible reel symbols such that the visible reel symbols expand into the blank areas of blank or ghost reel stops.

[0010] In many embodiments, this involves configuring virtual reels and/or reel symbols for an electronic or processor-based gaming machine that simulates the play of traditional mechanical reel-based machines. In other embodiments, this involves configuring actual mechanical reels for use in a mechanical or electromechanical gaming machine. In either type of embodiment, the presentation of visible reel symbols is made such that at least a portion of these visible reel symbols are expanded into the blank areas of reel stops that are blanks or ghosts.

[0011] In various embodiments of the present invention, a processor-based gaming machine adapted for accepting a wager, playing a game based on the wager and granting a payout based on the result of the game is provided. Such a gaming machine can include an exterior housing arranged to contain various internal gaming machine components therein, a master gaming controller in communication with various internal gaming machine components and adapted to execute or control one or more aspects of the wager based game, a display device in communication with the master gaming controller and adapted to present a plurality of simulated rotating reels, and a simulated reel configurator in communication with the master gaming controller, the display device, or both. The plurality of simulated rotating reels can have a set of reel stops, including a first subset of reel stops comprising visible reel symbols and a second subset of reel stops comprising blanks. The simulated reel configurator can facilitate the display of the simulated rotating reels upon the display device, and can also be adapted to configure at least one of the simulated rotating reels such that one or more visible reel symbols within the first subset of reel stops are expanded into one or more adjacent reel stops, which may have other visible reel symbols or which may comprise ghost or blank reel stops. In the event that such adjacent reel stops are ghosts, then the sized or resized visible reel symbols are expanded into blank regions within one or more of the second subset of reel stops adjacent thereto, such that the amount of blank area within the second subset of reel stops is reduced thereby.

[0012] In various embodiments, a gaming reel adapted for use in a wager-based gaming machine is provided. Such a gaming reel can include a display region distributed about an outer circumference of the reel, a full set of reel stops arranged about the display region, a plurality of visible reel symbols corresponding to a first subset of reel stops selected from the full set of reel stops, and a plurality of ghosts comprising blank regions corresponding to a second subset of reel stops selected from the full set of reel stops. Each of the visible reel stops and each of the ghosts can correspond to a single reel stop. Preferably, one or more of the visible reel symbols within the first subset of reel stops are expanded into one or more blank regions within one or more ghosts situated adjacent thereto, thereby reducing the amount of blank area within the second subset of reel stops. Such a gaming reel can comprise a physical reel adapted for used in a mechanical or electromechanical gaming machine, or alternatively can comprise a virtual reel adapted for use on a display screen in a processor-based gaming machine.

[0013] In various embodiments, a wager-based gaming machine comprising an exterior housing, a display region adapted to present a plurality of mechanical or simulated rotating reels and a plurality of gaming reels adapted to be

rotated about an axis is provided. Such gaming reels can include those recited above having visible reel symbols that are expanded into one or more blank regions of adjacent blank reel stops. Such gaming machines can be mechanical, electromechanical or processor-based gaming machines adapted to display virtual or simulated rotating reels.

[0014] In various embodiments, a wager-based gaming system having a plurality of processor-based gaming machines is provided. Such gaming machines can include those recited above having virtual or simulated reels with visible reel symbols that are expanded into one or more blank regions of adjacent blank reel stops. The wager-based gaming system can also include a remote host in communication with each of the processor-based gaming machines, with the remote host being adapted to download reel symbols, virtual reel strips, or both to the networked gaming machines. The wager-based gaming system can also include at least one simulated reel configurator in communication with the remote host, the gaming machines or both, with the simulated reel configurator being adapted to facilitate the display of simulated rotating reels and is also adapted to configure at least one of the simulated rotating reels such that one or more visible reel symbols are expanded into one or more blank regions of adjacent blank reel stops. A simulated reel configurator can be located at the remote host, within one or more of the gaming machines, or both.

[0015] Further features and items may also be found in any of the foregoing embodiments, and it will be readily appreciated that various combinations of the following features and items may be used. For example, some or all reel stops on a given reel can comprise an identical amount of space. In some embodiments, configuration of a gaming reel can include resizing said one or more of the visible reel symbols to a size that is larger than its original size. Such resizing can involve stretching an existing reel symbol in a direction that extends the stretched reel symbol into one or both reel stops adjacent to the reel stop containing the stretched reel symbol. Such resizing can also involve resulting reel symbols that are larger than the size of their respective reel stops. The gaming reel configurator can be located within a master gaming controller, elsewhere within the gaming machine, or at a location remote from the gaming machine. In some embodiments, the blank areas of substantially all of the subset of reel stops comprising blanks or ghosts are reduced in size via the expansion of one or more visible reel symbols. Such blank areas can be reduced in size by a set amount, such as about fifty percent. In some embodiments, a simulated reel configurator can be adapted to reconfigure a preset virtual reel strip having preset dimensions for each reel stop, visible reel symbol and blank.

[0016] In various embodiments involving a gaming machine, the gaming machine can also include a storage device in communication with the simulated reel configurator, with the storage device being adapted to store files with respect to resized or expanded reel symbols. Various gaming machine embodiments can also include a network interface coupling the gaming machine to various remotely located networked components, with such a network interface facilitating the downloading of reel symbols, virtual reel strips or both to the gaming machine. In such embodiments including a gaming machine with a network interface, the simulated reel configurator can be further adapted to reconfigure a downloaded reel symbol such that the downloaded and reconfigured reel symbol expands into one or more blank regions of an adjacent reel stop.