

[0033] As is described more fully below, the present invention provides multi-symbol display segments to allow multiple payout opportunities for each payline. However, the invention is equally applicable in connection with secondary modes, such as bonus modes of play. As is known in the art, bonus events are used in gaming activities such as slot games, which provides an alternative mode of play that is intended to attract and captivate players of such slot games. Generally, a bonus game or event on a slot machine is typically an additional gaming reel or machine, or a random selection device, that is enabled by a bonus qualifying signal from an underlying or primary gaming activity. Generally, a predetermined prize-winning combination of symbols in an underlying or primary slot game may result in the player being awarded one or more bonus games. Often the bonus event has a much higher probability of winning, thereby instilling a great interest by players in being awarded bonus events. There are various secondary or "bonus" events known in the art. Thus, while an exemplary embodiment of the present invention is described in connection with a standard or primary mode of play, the present invention is equally applicable in secondary or bonus modes of play.

[0034] FIG. 1 is a block diagram illustrating one embodiment of a gaming activity utilizing multi-symbol display segments in accordance with the invention. The gaming activity is displayed to a gaming participant as a slot game grid 100 in this illustrated embodiment. Different slot games may exhibit a variety of different reel characteristics and display formats. For example, some slot games include a conventional three-reel configuration traditionally used in mechanical-reel slot machines. In a three-reel configuration, three reels each having an associated reel strip of symbols rotate vertically as viewed by the participant. The reels stop at random locations, thereby presenting the participant with one, two, or three paylines of potentially winning symbol combinations, depending on the amount wagered by the participant. In more recent times, this traditional reel display format has changed significantly, largely due to the ability to present electronic reels on a display screen. This has resulted in a variety of different reel formats, including greater quantities of vertically rotating electronic reels, greater numbers of paylines, and paylines that are vertical, diagonal, as well as the traditional horizontal paylines. The present invention is applicable with any reel configuration, including video, mechanical, LCD display, etc. Therefore, the slot game grid 100 of FIG. 1 is shown as having an indeterminate number of rows and columns, which can accordingly represent an indeterminate number of reels, paylines, and the like.

[0035] The slot game grid 100 of FIG. 1 includes a number of rows, which may correspond to different horizontal paylines. For example, a first row 102 corresponds to horizontal payline-1, row 104 corresponds to horizontal payline-2. Further desired rows are represented by the nth row illustrated as row 106 which corresponds to horizontal payline-n. Each row includes one or more display segments or cells. For example, the first row 102 includes display segments 108, 110, 112, through some predetermined number of display segments represented by display segment 114. Similarly, a second row includes display segments 118, 120, 122, through 124. Depending on the number of display segments, rows, paylines, etc. that are desired, additional rows through the final row are provided, where the final row

106 includes display segments 128, 130, 132, through 134. Thus, FIG. 1 represents a generic slot game grid having any number or combination of display segments.

[0036] In accordance with the present invention, each display segment, such as display segment 108 in row 102, includes a plurality of display subsegments. The number of subsegments may be any desired number, including one for some display segments. In the illustrated embodiment of FIG. 1, each display segment includes four display subsegments. For example, display segment 108 includes display subsegments 108a, 108b, 108c, and 108d. Each display subsegment may present a symbol in connection with the gaming activity. For example, after slot game "reels" are spun, symbols associated with predetermined reel strips are presented in each of the display subsegments 108a, 108b, 108c, 108d. This holds true for each of the display segments associated with the slot game grid 100. The symbols may be any predetermined symbols, including a null symbol which appears to the participant as a "blank" symbol.

[0037] Four display subsegments are provided for each of the display segments in the illustrated slot game grid 100, but as will become apparent to those skilled in the art, any number of display subsegments may be used in connection with each display segment. For example, each display segment (e.g., 108, 110, 112, etc.) may have two, three, four, five, etc. display subsegments associated therewith. In accordance with another embodiment of the invention, the display segments do not necessarily need to have the same number of display subsegments. For example, display segment 108 may have four display subsegments, while display segment 110 may have only one display subsegment and display segment 118 may have six or eight display subsegments. The principles of the present invention apply regardless of the particular number of display subsegments employed.

[0038] A slot game according to the invention provides an effective increase in the number of paylines by allowing overlapping paylines due to the increased number of symbols associated with each display segment. For example, each of the resulting symbols displayed in the display subsegments 108a, 108b, 108c, 108d of display segment 108 may be used in formulating a result for payline-1. In a more particular example, the symbol presented in display subsegment 108a is effectively considered "the" symbol associated with display segment 108 in determining a first potential winning result. If display subsegment 108a displays a cherry symbol, then each of the display subsegments associated with display segment 110 is analyzed to determine whether a cherry symbol is associated with any of display segment's 110 subsegments. Subsequent display segments along the payline are analogously analyzed to determine whether a predetermined number of successive display segments include a cherry symbol. For example, a payout may be awarded for three cherry symbols when occurring in three successive display segments, regardless of which of the particular display subsegments that the cherry symbols are presented. A more particular example is provided below in connection with payline-2.

[0039] Payline-2 includes some number of display segments, shown as display segments 118, 120, 122, 124. For purposes of this example, assume that these are the only four display segments in this particular row (i.e., the slot game