

Wizards, Loners and
Amiable Sports

Pinball Fever

By Tom Buckley
New York Times

New York

MOSTLY, OF course, it's kids who pop in and out of Playland, the amusement arcade on Times Square between 42nd and 43rd streets. They tend to be black and Hispanic kids these days, drawn from Brooklyn and Harlem and the Bronx by the dazzle of the Great White Way. They sit with their girl friends in the take-your-own-picture machines, try to outdraw a grim sheriff. When they miss, the rigid figure says, "Yuh missed me, yuh sidewinder," in a hollow, metallic voice. "Why-n't you try ag'in?" and suggests they try again, for another quarter. The kids play Skeetball and pokerino, and if they win, they are rewarded with trinkets less valuable than those for which the Dutch bought Manhattan Island.

Since September, though, many older, more respectable fellows have been strolling into Playland. Not skulking, the way such people do when they are sidling into the peep show or the porn movie that stand on either side of it, or when they loiter on the sidewalk, trying to buy marijuana from the storklike black youth who can say, "Colombian gold" in a carrying whisper without moving his lips, or making eye contact with the lurking catamites. They walk right in, as though they didn't have a single wicked thought in their heads.

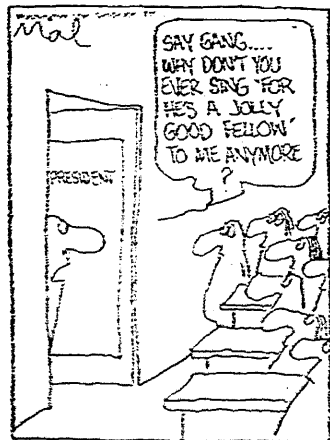
And they don't. They're going into Playland to play pinball for a while, going to clear their minds, forget their cares, sharpen their concentration, improve their timing, tighten up wrist, arm, shoulder and stomach muscles, prove to themselves there's something they can do right, and then go back to their offices or shops, resume their job-hunting or just face the world again.

YOU WOULD suppose, with so many benefits conferred for a dollar or two, that there would be long lines of people waiting to play Playland's ten pinball machines. But it has been only in the last six months, after a prohibition stretching back to 1942, that consenting New Yorkers could legally play pinball in public, and it's taking a while to catch on. Long after you could blow the rent money at an off-track betting shop, lose as much as you wanted in the state lottery and enrich the operators of bingo games and Las Vegas Nites, you still couldn't play pinball in the city on the grounds, which happens to be specious, that it is a form of gambling.

The ban was finally lifted last July after a year-long campaign led by City Councilman Eugene Mastropieri of Queens. Mastropieri was smart enough not to appeal to reason or simple justice. He argued that the hard-up city could pick up a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year in pinball licensing fees. That was the up-front reason. Another was that Mastropieri is a closet pinball freak. Still another may be that he numbers among his constituents at least a few people who sell, operate and service the machines.

WITH PINBALL legal here and almost everywhere else in the country, and highly popular in Western Europe and Japan, the Pinball Age may finally have dawned. The game is stepping out of the shadows of faintly, or not so faintly, disreputable arcades, and of organized crime.

At least three books now in preparation will describe pinball as a great American art form and as a test of judgment and skill, seasoned with a bit of luck. Games are being sold in increasing numbers — a new one



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Photos by Gary Fong

Williams' only regret is the day he invented the 'tilt'

costs about \$1000 — to people who want them for their homes. Smaller models are being advertised on television.

Conglomerates with "leisure time" interests are moving into pinball, acquiring established companies or starting their own. Only last month, Columbia Pictures Industries bought D. Gottlieb & Co., one of the largest manufacturers of pinball machines, for \$50 million. Williams Electronics, another industry leader, has been owned for several years by Gulf & Western Industries.

WITH EVENTS running their way, the Amusement and Music operators of America were understandably in high spirits when they held their annual convention in Chicago in November.

Chicago was the logical place for the convention. Ever since the late 1920s, when the old parlor bagatelle games were transformed into spring-powered penny-in-the-slot pinballs and placed in candy stores and diners, the city has been the center of the industry. Pinballs are now manufactured in Florida and California, Spain and Japan, but the big three, Gottlieb, Williams and Bally, have their factories there, as does Chicago Coin, which is a distant fourth.

Their estimated annual production of 50,000 games probably accounts for 90 per cent or more of the worldwide total. But it was only in December that Chicago, the last big-city holdout in the country, legalized pinball.

DURING THE city council hearings on legislation, opponents asserted that a pinball machine could take in as much as \$1000 a week. If the public couldn't be protected from the temptation of pinball, they argued, then the city at least ought to set its licensing fees proportionately high.

"That's absurd," said Roger Sharpe, who has spent most of the past year researching and writing a book on pinball. He has also become an expert player. When the forces of legalization wanted to demonstrate that pinball was a game of skill, they brought two machines into the city council chamber. After members of that august body had fecklessly fooled with the games, Sharpe proved the point by racking up enormous scores.

"A popular machine in a good location might bring in \$100 a week maximum, but the average is probably closer to \$50," he said. "The operator and the owner of a location

split the take and the operator provides the service."

FOR ME, one of the great attractions of the convention was the chance to play brand-new machines, with every game a free one. Sharpe and I played several competitively, and our delicate flipping and sophisticated cabinet-nudging soon gathered a crowd.

Among the spectators was Harry Williams, one of the great names of pinball. From 1929 when he founded the company until 1960, when he sold out for enough money to guarantee him luxurious retirement in Palm Springs, he owned Williams Electronics. Past 70 now, but still sharp and spry, he keeps up his contacts in the industry and does consultant and design work.

"Harry invented the 'tilt' mechanism, the knockout hole, and made the machine 'talk' with bells and gongs," Sharpe said.

"Tilt" is the word that lights up on the backglass when the player has nudged too energetically. There is no appeal. The machine goes dead until the ball drops through the runout slot at the bottom of the playfield.

"Sometimes I rue the day I did it,"

Williams said. "The tilt has made us a lot of enemies. I don't like negatives. I like pluses. Like the bell, I invented the bell by accident. One day I realized that pinballs were quiet. I don't like that, I said to myself."

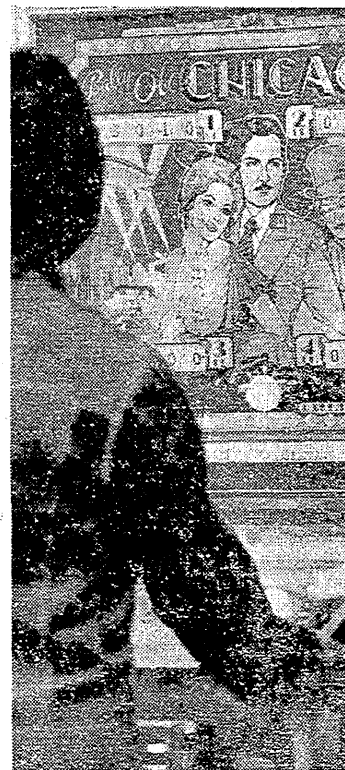
Williams walked us over to a machine he had helped to design for Sonic, a Spanish manufacturer that is trying to crack the U.S. market.

"It's got several tricky little 'Harry features,'" he said, referring to himself. "That gold and silver bonus, for one thing. And you'll notice there aren't any dead spots. There's action all over the playfield."

PINBALL DESIGN, he went on, is a matter of experience, intuition and trial and error. Bumpers, rails, kick-out holes, slots, gates, swinging targets and so on are arranged and rearranged and test-played thousands of times by experts and amateurs.

The major companies design about ten new games a year, but the big news at the convention was inside the pinball cabinet. It was the long-awaited introduction of machines in which solid-state electronic components have replaced the electro-mechanical relays, switches and transformers that have been pretty much standard since the game went from

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manual to electrical operation in the early 1930's.

Aside from a digital readout for the score, most of them seemed conventional enough, but Sega, a Japanese firm, was showing a game called "Rodeo" that looked, acted and sounded as though it did indeed herald a new era.

The polyurethane playfield glowed unnaturally, the bumpers were made of ribbed white plastic, there were pop-up targets and complex scoring systems. The accumulation of points was accompanied by an electronic symphony that might have been written by Stockhausen. (Another model plays "Yankee Doodle Dandy" every time you deposit a quarter.)

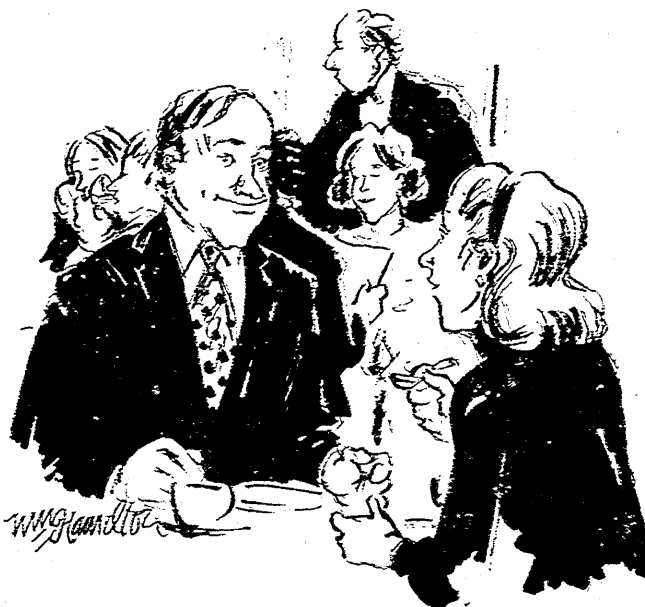
EVER SINCE William Saroyan put one of them on stage on "The Time of Your Life," pinball addicts have been regarded as dreamy, weird, alienated, bearing secret wounds that cause them to prefer the brilliant cartoon colors of the playfield universe to the real world.

This hyper-romantic vision was brought up to date a couple of years ago in "Tommy," the film based on the "rock opera" recording by The Who. The title figure, blind and deaf, becomes a pinball wizard by using his supersensitive fingertips to tune in to the electrical fields and vibrations.

I haven't encountered any wizards at Playland. The adverse effects of those long years of prohibition will not be made up overnight. On the other hand, I saw many loners bending over their favorite machines with the intensity of Tibetan monks spinning their prayer wheels.

Even among those who play competitively — most machines nowadays can keep track of the scores of one to four players, shooting in rotation — I found a level of sportsmanship and amiability that would ornament an Ivy League campus. Indeed, I'm certain that the rascal who stole my Italian suede overcoat while I was concentrating on "Space Mission," a game I will master one of these days, was not a pinball player.

The Now Society



David, have you been doing something funny with your consciousness?