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Rob Craig's

Tales of the Silverball

Theme Collecting

Isn't it interesting how we tend to group things together? Throughout life, I've collected things, and later decided to put them into thematic groups, going further to seek and collect similar items. Why do you suppose we find similarities in things and try to put them into groups? Maybe it has something to do with the scope of some of the collectibles out there. Take music as an example. How difficult and expensive would it be to collect a copy of every vinyl 45 that was ever made? Maybe we can't digest ever obtaining that much of something, and so feel compelled to sub-divide it into categories and groups that make sense to us, and give us maximum pleasure.

In my toddler days, my collecting nature probably started with something easily attainable, like rocks. But later took on a financial vein with my parents when I turned to Hot Wheels cars and sports cards. At this point, I realized that I couldn't have everything. They couldn't afford it, I couldn't afford it. That caused me to break it down a bit. It was no longer 'any' Hot Wheels car, it was a sports car with a huge engine and chrome wheels. With sports cards, I drilled down to Topps Football cards only. I've collected music by genre, artist, and format; video games by genre and even by platform (I blew a ton of money away on my Dreamcast game collection). And outside of pinball, I find myself planting this same crazy idea in the minds of my kids. As the genetic code confirms, they too have started collecting things.

With pinball, the same theory of why we collect in sub-groups might be true for a lot of us. Pinball machines are expensive—very expensive. Exploring the differences in pinball is a large part, if not the primary

purpose for adding machines to your collection. Finding these on the cheap is the hard part. Going after older or broken machines might be your starting point. There are many themes to discover in EM and early solid pinball so no need to think that it takes a lot of cash to reach the pinnacle of your pinball discovery. Once you find that particular type of machine that you like enough to build a collection around, the sickness of pinball addiction will begin. And what is the result of it all? An awesome sight when you line up your growing pinball machine collection, especially when you pan across and see the overlapping similarities. I've found it difficult to decide upon how my machines will be organized. If they weren't so darn heavy, I would change my lineup every month!

At first glance, it might appear that pinball only offers a few thematic opportunities. But as you read on, the themes are almost endless and go much further beyond electro-mechanical and solid state.

Some of my EM collector friends find themselves on the hunt for machines that fit an EM specific criteria. For example, wedge-head Gottlieb's are very popular (Egg Head, Gigi, Ice Revue, many more). As if there weren't enough of those to seek, the head collecting grows further with some when they add the Chicago Coin wedge heads (Kicker for example) in their quest. Then there is the reverse wedge-head variety made by Williams in the 60's (Vagabond, Big Deal, more). There are some that only collect single player machines, while others collect add-a-ball varieties (those machines built for parts of the world that considered free credits as gambling winnings). One of the most popular add-a-ball types to collect are Gottlieb single-player machines, which also

happen to be wedge-heads! You could even go after the Bally 'convertibles', machines built to be easily converted from credit winners to add-a-ball players. Going further back are wood-rail's—pinball machines with wooden side rails instead of steel (ex: Queen of Diamonds). One of the more odd theme ideas that a dear EM collector friend admits as being wide open is the early 60's Williams machines that featured 'dining table' legs (BoBo, Jungle, Magic Clock).

In my earlier days of pinball collecting, I started to focus on late 70's and early 80's solid state pinball. This is what I spent the most time playing as a kid. It was affordable and a natural start to the collecting madness. But within a year, I started looking at Gottlieb System 80 machines with strong interest. Here we have an example of collecting by electronic board system. Back then, I discovered that people were collecting large numbers of these machines, even going as far as trying to obtain every System 80 title that was built (over 50 machines!). Of course, you could drill down even further and collect just System 80 variations like the original board set (13 machines), System 80A (20 machines), or System 80B machines (about 20 machines). The other manufacturers have a similar, if not larger fan base. There are those who love Williams machines from System 3 to System 7, and Bally solid state fans who gobble up any of the '-17' and '-35' machines of which there are many. This of course is just a small sample. There are many other board sets by these and other companies that could be grouped together.

Many collectors don't find allegiance with a single manufacturer. In theme collecting, I've found collectors that have groups of solid-state machines that all contain speech,



Rob Craig's Super Pins

mostly the vintage flavor when the technology was new and had a limited vocabulary (Gorgar, Xenon, Black Hole). Another approach is the showcase of multi-level machines (Black Knight, Haunted House, Vector, more). I've found my collection leaning heavily towards widebody machines at one point (over 70 of them).

There are many more ways to single out machines; like those with no popbumpers (Swords of Fury, Judge Dredd, No Fear, more), those with zipper flippers (Nip-It, Fireball, Medusa, about 20 more!), or those with mechanical animation in the backglass (Heat Wave, Central Park, Bad Cats, Catacomb, Title Fight, and over 100 more!). You can get even more obscure by focusing on machines that had magnets (Black Knight, Twilight Zone, Guns N' Roses, Last Action Hero, more), machines with a launch button

and no shooter (Revenge from Mars, Judge Dredd, others), or machines with a gun instead of a shooter or button (Terminator 2, Last Action Hero, Indiana Jones, others). Dare I leave out the movie-themed collector? Ramping up in the 80's, the industry began to supply a large assortment of licensed movie themes, which continues to grow larger each year.

Probably one of the more common themes in pinball collecting is the collection that celebrates the designs of a specific person. This can be a staggering number of machines in the case of designs by Steve Kordek, Harry Williams, Wayne Neyens, and others that designed over 100 machines. Indeed, some people have the real estate and stamina to go after such a collection. There are designer themed collections that are a little easier to obtain such as John Trudeau designs (Spirit,

Chicago Cubs Triple Play, Creature from the Black Lagoon, over 30 more), Barry Oursler designs (Pinbot, Fire!, Dirty Harry, over 30 more), or John Popaduk designs (World Cup Soccer, Theatre of Magic, Tales of the Arabian Nights, 2 more). Or you could go after ex-Williams active designers and keep up with their latest creations as they come off the Stern manufacturing line. These would include Pat Lawlor (latest design – Family Guy), Steve Ritchie (latest design – Spiderman), or Dennis Nordman (latest design – Wheel of Fortune).

For those that find themselves attracted to specific pinball art styles, you might consider collecting around your favorite artist. There are literally hundreds of machines that have featured pinball art from George Molentin, Roy Parker, and Gordon Morison. An easier quest for art collecting might be that of mod-

ern artists like Paul Faris, Tony Ramunni, Doug Watson, and John Youssi who have a history between 25 and 30 unique titles each.

There are high-end collections, where machines have to be unique in a certain way to earn a place in the collection. Rare machines with low production numbers are hard to get, and make the collection all that more amazing to view and difficult to build upon. There are also prototype collections, machines that were 'test samples' of earlier concepts. Often times, owners of these machines will have a production machine of the same name right next to their prototypes to show the clear and distinct differences between the two. You have to be wealthy, lucky, or maybe a combination of both to gain a collection of machines of this caliber.

There's almost no end to the unique ways to group machines. Most collectors I know (myself included) target several of these groups and pick some of their favorites of each. Then when the opportunity arises, they start lining them up into some crazy order again. After a few years, they find new ways to incorporate different machines in a whole new lineup.

I can't end this column without acknowledging that there are pinball collections that have little thematic flow. For example, I



knew a collector that once had a lineup of seemingly random machines. A Data East Hook, Gottlieb Charlie's Angels, Alvin G's Mystery Castle, Bally Motordome, Gottlieb Cue Ball Wizard, Bally Captain Fantastic, and a Gottlieb EM wood rail (title has left me). For the owner, it was a nice spread of machines from different eras of pinball, the beginning of his collection. So theme collecting isn't something we all do in the beginning, but it can make your pinball discovery experience a lot more fun. And so it did with him as well. Many were sold, many more were bought, and the row of machines today is amazingly lined up first by the size and

style of the backbox, then by manufacturer, and then by year. It's an attractive, organized display of pinball history!

If you have an interesting themed collection 'all lined up,' take a snapshot and send me a picture with your name, city, and state. Maybe I'll bribe Kevin to dedicate some space for the most amazing pictures in an upcoming issue of GameRoom Magazine and you'll be famous for a month! (Also, take advantage of the Advanced Search features of www.ipdb.org to find more interesting pinball commonalities!)

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