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Stern's Batman

An interview with Designer George Gomez

Space Invaders

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Stern's Batman: An Interview with Designer George Gomez

Anyone that has been alive and awake in the last three years is familiar with the Christopher Nolan re-invention of Batman on the silver screen. In 2005, Christian Bale bulked up and put on the suit for *Batman Begins*, which ignited the world's interest in Batman. The nominations and awards were quite lengthy. Last year (2008), *The Dark Knight* followed up the blockbuster with at least an equally amount of fanfare. Such a franchise as this seems like a no-brainer to license and package into a pinball machine.

George Gomez is certainly not new to monster licenses. He put together the entry point to one of the best Stern titles to date in *The Lord of the Rings*. He started his first pinball designs with Williams back in 1994 with *Corvette*, then *Johnny Mnemonic*, *NBA Fastbreak*, *Monster Bash*, and the first Pinball 2000 title, *Revenge From Mars*.

For Stern, he's managed to moonlight the inventive process behind *Playboy* (2002), *The Lord of the Rings* (2003), *The Sopranos* (2005), and *Batman* (2008) while handling other game design work. His resume however goes further back into Midway arcade titles like *Satan's Hollow*, *TRON*, and *Spy Hunter*. He's a passionate person to converse with, having a unique perspective and an interesting story to share.

I realize that *Batman* isn't the latest machine on the line at Stern. Time has been against both George and me in getting an interview prepared for this column. But today, I'm happy to share something that was conducted for the purpose of helping the readers of GameRoom get to know George, and his latest design for Stern.

Rob: I know that you have quite a career history in coin-op. Please share a little about how you found employment with Midway, what you were doing for them early on, and how different the landscape of coin-op was then, compared to now.

George: While in my last year of school I was playing a lot of coin-op games in the school arcade. Out of ignorance I felt that they were all very primitive. I had a teacher that told me that I'd be most successful if I designed something that I enjoyed. It occurred to me that the games that I was playing were really lacking. I felt that I could improve everything about them. So I applied at Midway, mostly because they were a local company. At first, my skill set threatened some people. The fact that I could express my ideas visually always won the day. The very first



things that I did were arcade controls, like guns and flight sticks and facias and window dressing for the coin-op cabinets. Eventually after making myself enough of a pain in the ass, they reluctantly started listening to game ideas. Back then I was crazy for video games and I played them all the time. I used to pick the bars that I went to based on what games they had and at work my boss reprimanded me for playing too much during the day. I was told to only play games that were related to what I was working on. You can imagine me rolling my eyes. It helped a lot that I hooked up with a very bright software engineer and an electronics hardware engineer. Between the three of us, we won an internal competition to do *TRON*. This was really our first big success. We actually did *Satan's Hollow* before that, but we only sold like 10,000 games and nobody at Midway paid any attention to us. Developing games back then took just a few guys. *TRON* was an anomaly; because of the schedule we actually had one software engineer per wave (level) in the game. Today video games are huge production efforts requiring at a minimum 50-75 guys. Some publishers dwarf even those numbers with staff's in the hundreds. Look at the credit role in *Grand Theft Auto* if you want an eye opener. Pinball teams remain a manageable size; like video games from the 80's and 90's, all it takes is 6 or 7 guys if they work full time.

Rob: In regards to moving out of coin-op after Midway, did you find passion in designing things not related to video games? What were some of the things you worked on that were interesting?

George: When the business crashed in '84 I went to work at a famous toy design consulting firm; Marvin Glass & Associates. I loved that job. I got to invent whatever I wanted. I worked alone, and the group as a whole was incredibly talented. I worked on a lot of boys toys in the early to mid 80's. Things like Galoob's Crash-N-Bash trucks, Tonka's Splash Darts, stuff in the MASK line, The Rambo line, VOLTRON, etc.

Rob: Knowing many of the pinball designers at Williams and the machines they had designed, was it intimidating as you came in as a pinball designer?

George: Yeah, it was definitely intimidating, but it really helped my confidence that I had worked at the toy firm, because when I went there it was like jumping into a shark pool and having to swim with the sharks. So to me Willy was just a different shark pool with new sharks.



(Note: Due to space limitations and time, we skipped directly to Stern design work)

Rob: How did you manage to kick off your "on-the-side" game design agreement with Gary Stern?

George: Not much of a story. They knew my games, so they just approached me and asked if I would do games. I told them that if there wasn't a schedule that it could work.

Rob: How do you go about the design process without the tools, people, etc. from the traditional design days at Williams?

George: Well I'm pretty self-sufficient, so a lot of the Willy support was a luxury that allowed me more time to focus on design. Meaning that I can screw stuff together and get something working when push comes to shove and I can certainly create detail drawings of parts or physically make my own parts in the shop. If you give me an engineer, all the better because then I only have to do the designer's job. The guys at STERN have also been great at helping out and filling all the holes. It's just that the staff there is spread very thin, so everyone has to do more.

Rob: How restricting is it strictly working with licensed themes now?

George: Well some licenses are tougher than others. Batman was pretty easy; obviously no one working on the movie knew anything about a Scarecrow crane. Some licenses would never allow that. I think it would have been



difficult for me to invent something outside of the fiction of LOTR for example.

Rob: Did Playboy, LOTR, Batman, all get the same amount of in-home design treatment? In other words, is your at-home design environment able to take each title a bit further towards completion before it goes to Stern?

George: My process is pretty much the same. I like to sketch, then move to visualizing things in 3d and then get into AutoCAD, then build whitewoods and refine each WW until its pencil's down.

Rob: So were you already a fan of Batman? Was it the earlier / original Batman, later Batman, comics, movies, etc?

George: Yes, Batman was the only super hero from the DC world that I liked. Something about the fact that he is conflicted and has no powers and has to work with his wits, he has

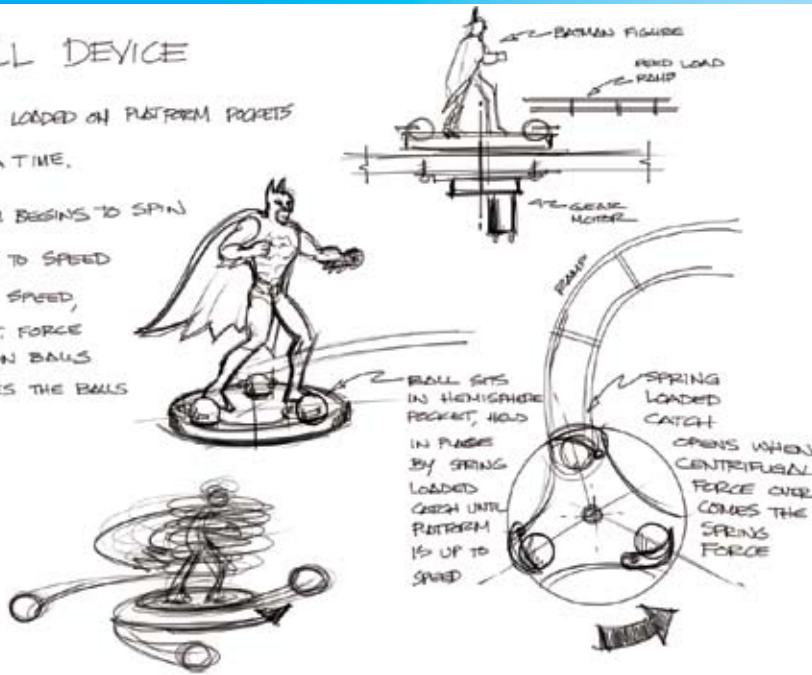
MULTIBALL DEVICE

- BALLS ARE LOADED ON PLATFORM POCKETS ONE AT A TIME.

- PLATFORM BEGINS TO SPIN

- SPINS UP TO SPEED

- ONCE AT SPEED, THE CENT. FORCE ACTING ON BALLS LAUNCHES THE BALLS FREE.



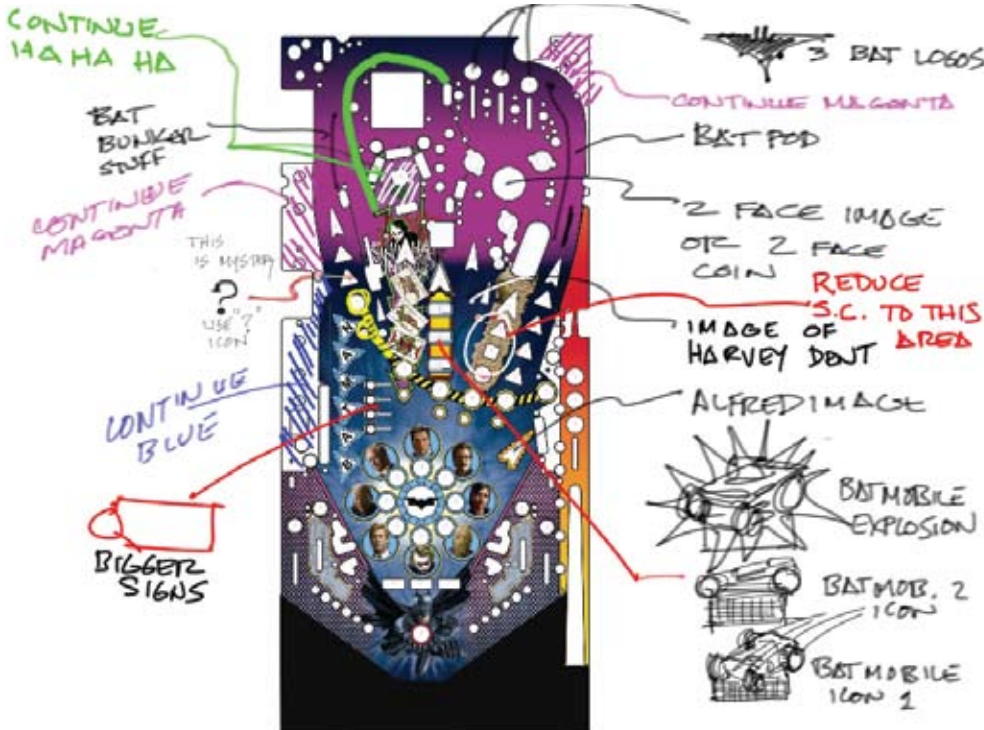
COUNTERWEIGHTED
TETER TETER
BATMAN SLIDE



OR

- USE OVER CENTER SPRING DEVICE AT PIVOT

- BALL TRIGGERS OVER CENTER ACTION



gadgets and he is a bit of a detective, that all struck a chord.

Rob: How much of the The Dark Knight story were you able to get as the game went further in development? Was the studio helpful in supplying storyline changes, or was it a constant struggle like some of the titles in the past?

George: Yes, they were very helpful, with things like a script reading and a solid style guide.

Rob: When you took off with the table layout, did you have something "on the wall" from previous concepts? or was this a fresh layout?

George: Fresh layout except for my standard bottom. It benefited from the fact that after so many games, I am really feeling the freedom that comes from the confidence that only experience can provide. So for example, I was pretty sure that a 6 shot array was something I was going to risk.

Rob: What key Batman toys just "had to be in there"?

George: The crane filled in the missing shot by providing numerous new targets and some that move. I think it's one of my best toys ever.

Rob: How far along was your design when you first showed it to Gary and staff?

George: It was pretty much all there. Very little changed. If you've seen photos of the foam core then you can tell that conceptually it was all there from the start.

Rob: At what point do you get a CNC cut playfield to work off of?

George: As soon as I have an AutoCAD drawing that I'm happy with, which in my case is pretty early on.

Rob: Were the Joker and Scarecrow / Crane toys difficult to develop? How close are they to your original vision?

George: They were pretty much spot on to the original. The crane got some refinement in terms of spring loading the target with a coil spring. Originally this was driven by durability requirements. My original design used a grommet to provide the spring resistance. The idea was to select a durometer that "felt" good when you hit with the ball. The engineer, Mike Redoble, ran some calculations and was afraid of the shock loads that would be transmitted up thru the arm of the

crane, so he pushed for the coil spring. We built it and as soon as I shot it I knew that it was the way to go.

Rob: How involved are you able to be now with the basic rules of the game?

George: I usually draw in broad strokes from the perspective of involving the theme in the rules, for example: let's climb the ranks of the mob, or collect the characters in LOTR, or let's collect Batman's gadgets and have them enhance your performance. So they are very broad definitions that get refined by Lyman or the software engineer as he begins to apply solutions to achieve the goal. Lyman is the guy that really thinks into how the rules interact together. We talk a lot but then when rules actually come up, then we need to really work to make them fun and fun requires tuning all of the elements. How easy is it to get? What is the presentation? We begin to include the lights, sounds, animation, effects, the mechanical elements, etc. My favorite Batman rule is the multiple multi-balls with everything going crazy.

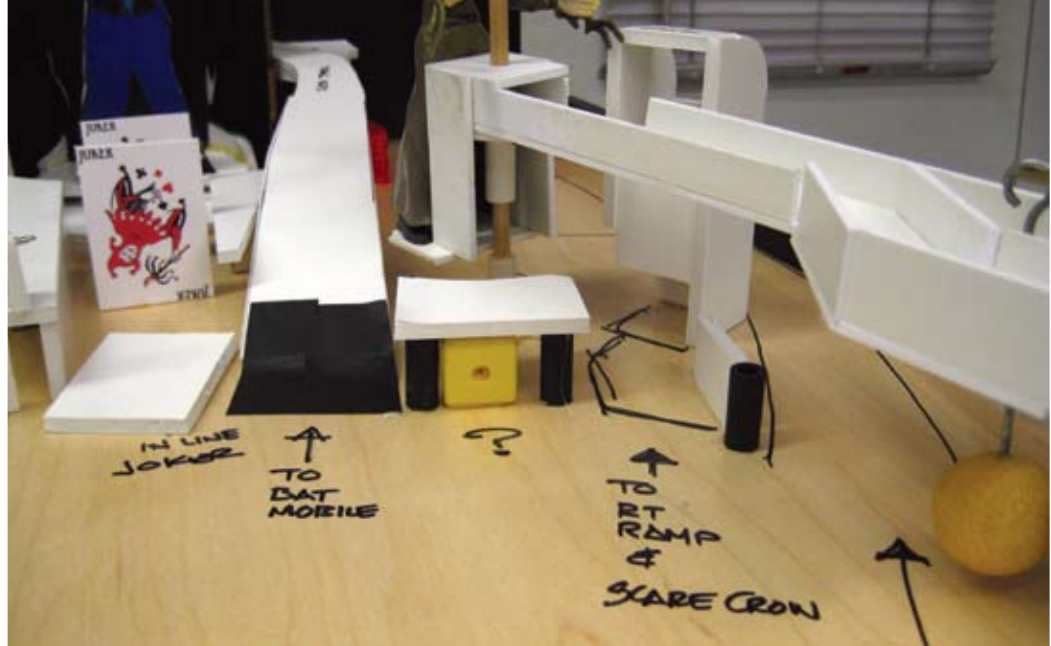
Rob: Your style seems to lend itself favorably to a traditional 2 flipper design. Any reason in particular?

George: Actually my first game, Corvette, was a 3 flipper game, but that third flipper usually occupies a lot of shot real estate because the upper flipper shots take up a lot of room. In addition it's definitely an advanced player skill and today we don't have too many of those, so the last thing that I want to do is make a game unavailable. I like to focus on ball-interactive toys such as the basket in NBA Fastbreak, Dracula, Frankenstein, The Balrog, the Crane. It's a lesson I learned the hard way.

Rob: The far left shot (a half orbit) ends in a kickout hole, reminding me of an updated Firepower lock shot. It's smooth. Was this a blast from the past shot design?

George: It's very much a Steve Ritchie thing that I always liked. I learned it in T2 and I've used it several times, LOTR, Batman, etc.

Rob: Call me an old-schooler, but I sincerely miss seeing real balls locked as opposed to "virtual locked balls". I realize that adding a couple of switches in the shot adds cost to the machine. What else is considered when choosing to have the number of balls locked registered in software, as opposed



to physically holding the balls on the playfield?

George: The big issue is that it limits what you can do with the rules because at times you need to clear the lock in order to satisfy another rule such as starting a different Multiball. I agree. I love seeing the balls stack up and there is something about the opponent stealing locks, but it is tough to do in today's game environment. Also imagine a newbie trying to interpret what is going on. I think it's definitely something that worked in the 80's & 90's but today it's tough.

Rob: The center ramp shot looks a bit more dangerous than it is, at least on the machine I tested. I consider this a well designed shot due to the number of safely returned balls that I had come back to me (as opposed to SDTM). Was this a shot that took a while before it flowed properly?

George: Yeah, but I have to say that it was the guys at STERN that tuned it, because originally I had the opening much smaller and Lyman & Gary complained that it was too hard. Unfortunately I was tied up and the guys inside had to refine it.

Rob: On the artwork – the cabinet artwork package looks fantastic. How much of this was “canned” art work from the studio, and how much was custom for the pinball machine?

George: Well, the side art began life as an image from the style guide. Kevin (O'Connor) blended it with the city backdrop. Some of the backglass images are from the style guide but Kevin repainted it and composed it.

Rob: Who else deserves credit for helping put together Batman?

George: Well obviously my partner Lyman who is as much a part of the design of the game as I am. Ray Tanzer had his fingers in everything; he really managed the engineering effort. Mike Redoble, John Rotharmel, & Rob Blakeman handled all of the mechanical engineering work. John Borg was my designer stand in on the inside. He tuned that center shot and fixed numerous ball traps and helped with percentaging and adjustments. Mark Galvez handled all of the dot matrix work.

Rob: Thanks George for the insight into the design process for Batman. It's a firm design with a fantastic art package. My Batman testing experience was indeed FUN! **GR**



There's more out there on George and Stern's Batman at these locations:

Batman in-depth pinball coverage: <http://pinballnews.com/games/batman/index.html>

Gomez on TRON: <http://peterhirschberg.blogspot.com/2008/04/mini-interview-with-designer-of-tron.html>

Gomez on NBA Ballers (2004) as Lead Designer at Midway Games: <http://interviews.teamxbox.com/xbox/749/NBA-Ballers-George-Gomez-Interview/p1/>

Gomez on NBA Ballers Chosen One (2008) as Executive Producer; Video Interview: <http://www.gametrailers.com/player/32698.html> , <http://www.gametrailers.com/player/32700.html>

Audio interview on George Gomez' game history: http://www.pinrepair.com/topcast/topcast_40.mp3

GameRoom interview with George about William's Monster Bash: Vol. 10, No. 10, October 1998

GameRoom interview with George about Stern's Playboy: Vol. 14, No. 4, April, 2002