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Rob Craig's

# Tales of the Silverball

FREE PLAY.

## CSI – Investigating a Surprise Pinball Hit

Few pinball fans are left unaware of the hardship that has inflicted their favorite pastime's future. Stern Pinball has made adjustments in the recent past to keep the fresh titles coming, and the line running. This winter, *CSI* hit the assembly line. It has been a surprise success in a downward spiraling economy. The theme is based upon the original mega-hit television hit *CSI – Crime Scene Investigation*. The show began its success story in 2000, and was into its 8th season when the development of *CSI* Pinball began. The license is a worldwide hit, while often being criticized as being overly violent, containing inappropriate sexual themes, and having non-realistic depictions of police investigation work. It's currently in syndication, and has a "sweet spot" audience in the 25 to 34 demographic. That's a perfect age group for pinball attraction.

When looking into the early beginnings of *CSI* as a pinball machine, it really requires an investigation of its own. As you might have read from the Internet Pinball Database ([www.ipdb.org](http://www.ipdb.org)), Pat Lawlor is cited as the game's designer. Additionally, the Stern Pinball website and press releases for the game have tacked on PLD (Pat Lawlor Design) as the group who brought us the game. Even the backglass includes the PLD logo. But digging through the crime scene photos and other evidence reveals that a second force was heavily involved.

I'm not one to present juicy stories and promote the elaborate construction of falsity. So here are a couple of interesting factoids that help set the scene. In discussing pinball with Pat Lawlor last year, I learned that the playfield for *CSI* had been delivered to Stern sometime in the early parts of 2008... and that ends the entire PLD story on the game, as Pat has opted out on any further information for print. PLD shifted their business focus into redemption games immediately afterwards. What we do know is that that initial playfield included a few things that are significantly different (4th popbumper, underplayfield trough, no centrifuge) as compared to the modified version by John Borg that went into production.

Another noteworthy event is the "Writer's Strike" which caused quite a shakeup in the economy of Hollywood television. Starting in November 2007 and continuing into February 2008, *CSI* was one of many popular shows affected. Their season was shortened from the usual 24 episodes to 11 pre-strike written episodes, and 6 more coming after the strike. It caused a bit of a scheduling issue for pinball releases, causing an almost year-long delay before it made the production line. It could have been worse. In the case of the Fox hit "24", that show was sidelined for an entire year.

That's where this special "*Tales of the Silverball*" story takes off. John Borg, recent mad scientist behind the summer pinball hit *Indiana Jones*, spent a lot of time with PLD's delivered *CSI* whitewood. The playfield was given a complete evaluation by the crew, decisions for modifications made, a completely reconstructed whitewood, and a resulting sample machine put in test locations. What you will find in this discussion with John Borg is the result of my investigation into the making of *CSI*.



**Note:** Time at Stern is at a premium. Instead discussing a full playfield walk-through with John, I'm going to leave that job to other resources online. Please look at the links at the end of this article for more general playfield information.

**Rob:** When did you first see the CSI whitewood from PLD?

**John:** I can't remember the exact date that I saw it. Pat brought it in at one time and took it back to tweak it a bit. He returned with it the second time a couple months later. I date stamp my drawing files. The start of my CSI files date around August 11. I believe the whitewood game was at Stern for a while before I actually started on it. I was finished with Indy Jones and helping with the Batman project before starting CSI.

**Rob:** Was it immediately conveyed that you would be responsible for completing the game?

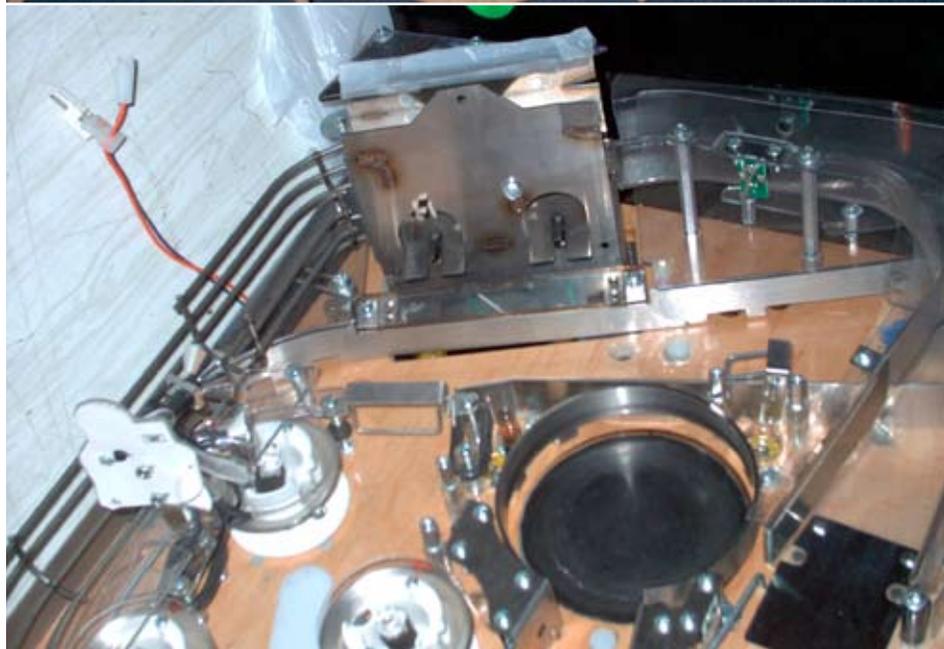
**John:** When it arrived I thought that Pat Lawlor and John Krutch would be working with the mechanical engineers here to produce the game. Pat and I both worked here at different times. I was never able to get the chance to actually work with Pat and John but we will see what happens in the future. I have really enjoyed some of the William's classics Pat and John worked on.

**Rob:** What time frame were you given to get this game into something that could be produced on the line?

**John:** It had to be finished as soon as possible. Parts with long lead times were released followed by short lead time parts. Everything had to be here on time, tested and working before production started.

**Rob:** Did you have CAD files for the whitewood or did you re-draw the next whitewood from step 1?

**John:** I started the layout from scratch. I have my own layering system where I can turn things on and off. With this, I arrive at plates for the spotting press, drawings for the manual, ramps, rails and other parts more easily. Everyone has their own style and system for game layout. It was easiest for me to put it in a language I could understand (so to speak). Mike Redoble (mechanical engineer) had the flat rail part layouts. He had also started on the wire ramp coming from the skull. John and Pat had developed a sample of the skull framework. Rob Blakeman (mechanical engineer) made revisions and determined the sculpting area of the skull so it could be modeled. With a





blank board and those items that was my starting point. I added the up-kicker and wire ramp that feed the left return lane. I was able to take some things off the bottom and put more on the top of the game. Keith Johnson (programmer) had the idea to add a spinning disc and it became the centrifuge. Lonnie Ropp (programmer) had been planning rules so we were able to plan the lit inserts arrangement. Anthony Zuiker helped us with the evidence icons in the middle of the playfield. We put our ideas together and then we talked to John Youssi to finalize the plan. John Youssi is great to work with and has produced all of the artwork for PLD games produced at Stern. The giant magnifying glass John added over the clues was a great finishing touch.

**Rob:** Was it (the PLD whitewood) in a plug and play state that you could actually shoot?

**John:** The game came with wired flippers so we could shoot the geometry, but no software was developed.

**Rob:** Considering the timeframe of the project (about 10 weeks?), that's an impressive amount of work with a small staff. Were these unusually long late nights and working weekends? You must work well under pressure.

**John:** I can remember a lot of nights prior to the production of CSI that I was here after midnight. Lonnie and Lyman and Mark Galvez (dot matrix artist) really put in a lot of late nights. After a 60-70 hour workweek, Myself, Ray Tanzer and Wally Welch (BOM) came in at about 7am on a Saturday to go over the BOM (bill of materials) and worked until we were blue in the face. I was running back

and forth from the BOM to revising three whitewood samples and making butyrate shapes (plastics) to complete them. We all put in some late nights and a lot of Saturday's. We are all pretty good under pressure. Reminds me of times from back in the Data East / Sega days. That first whitewood would come in and I would want to stay up all night building it. Get some flippers powered up and start shooting it.

**Rob:** Was the skull ball lock mechanism from PLD the same one that we see in the production machine?

**John:** The Skull mech is the same game plan as was designed by PLD. The skull mech was suggested by Anthony Zuiker, the creator of the CSI television show. Robb Blakemann went over it with a fine tooth comb, planned the skull face, and added the plastics to keep the balls in place while locked.

**Rob:** At what point did the popbumper get cut out of the design, and the centrifuge (Spinning disc chamber) get added?

**John:** The spinning disc was placed shortly after I started working on the game. We tried to plan everything that was going in early on.

**Rob:** As for the art package, was PLD already working with John Youssi on the art, or did that start after your playfield changes were pretty much complete?

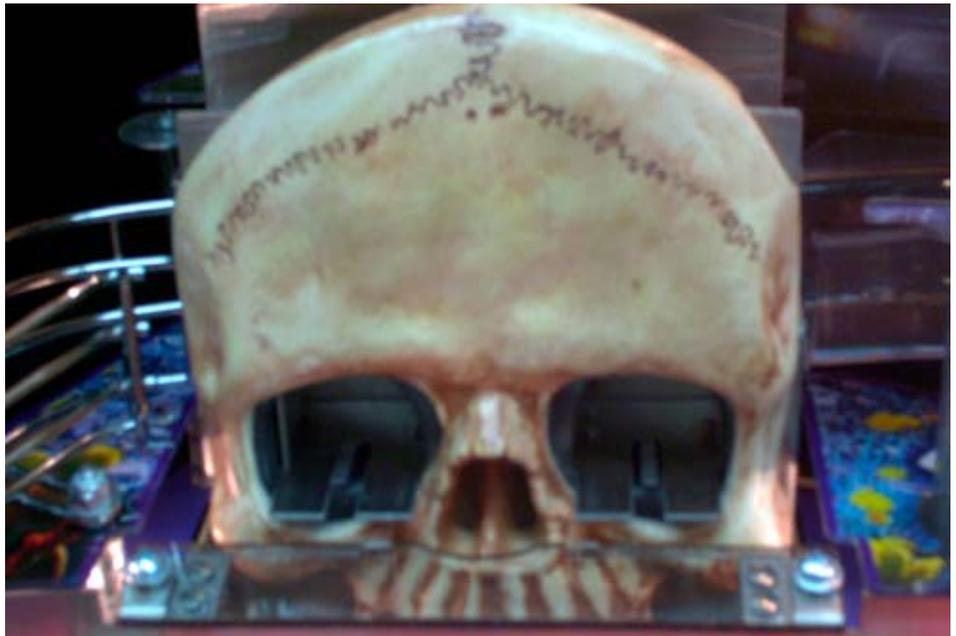
**John:** We started the art after the playfield was determined. The cabinet and backglass were in the works earlier. I don't recall when it was started or who was involved in planning the content. I worked on the playfield art with John Youssi and Lonnie Ropp.

**Rob:** The monster bullet on the lower left is the ballistics scoop. What's the story behind the BAB?

**John:** We were talking about the bullet and decided to make it light up. John illustrated the color scheme. We were going to finish the back with engraving or stamping to identify the bullet type. I said "What kind of bullet is it?" John Youssi said, "It looks like a 50 caliber machine gun round or something". I said "It's one Bad Ass Bullet." That's where B.A.B came from.

**Rob:** The shooter rod has a dusted fingerprint painted on it. Very cool and thematic! Who's idea was that?

**John:** The fingerprint on the shooter rod was the brainstorm of Anthony Zuiker. Anthony is a pinball enthusiast and a great player too.



He voiced many suggestions in conversation with Pat. Before the artwork was finished I remember Anthony making sure the evidence icons were accurate and appropriate

**Rob:** Having come off Indiana Jones, and then tweaking Batman and CSI, how different is the pace from fleshing out your own creation to finishing up someone else's original design? Are both equally fulfilling?

**John:** I didn't do too much work on Batman, just cleaning up a few things. George Gomez at the helm, Mike Redoble, John Rotharmel, Robb Blakeman and Allen Polowinczak (mechanical group) did the work. Working on your own creation from scratch is the best and most rewarding of course. Working on someone else's project in this industry is a lot of fun too. I have been helping the guys next to me since I started in this industry in the late 80's. I was the mechanical engineer on Tim Seckel's Hook game while I was designing Data East *Star Wars*. I helped Paul Leslie with *Batman Forever* while I was working on *Guns 'n Roses* or *Twister*. Anything to get to the church on time.

**Rob:** CSI has turned out to be a surprise hit, at least with the collector community and operator sales. What about CSI's gameplay is magnetic and different from your perspective.

**John:** Multiball is my favorite thing to achieve in a pinball game. CSI has three different devices to shoot that start Multiball. The PLD skull is really cool and starting multiball is relatively easy for any player. The centrifuge is fun because the ball stays in there and spins when you flip or when switches are being made. The

spinning ball inside increases your jackpot while its in there. The microscope is eye candy with its multi colored lenses. Microscope multiball is the third on the list yet another wave of great fun.

**Rob:** Is there anyone that we've missed on the team that should be mentioned? Music & sound techs perhaps?

**John:** Sheridan Oursler designs all of our game cables. He is now producing the BOM (bill of materials) too due to our reduced staff. He is amazing and a jack of all trades. Pat Powers (Service), Dorothy Brown (Part sales), Sheridan and myself are providing info and producing drawings for the game manuals now. Marc Schoenberg handles licensing issues and watches over art and its production. Marc is also in charge of the engineering prototype shortlist now. Everyone here is wearing a couple extra hats these days.

**Rob:** Your final thoughts?

**John:** Pinball is rolling right along. I'm happy to say our current game and future product look great.

**Rob:** John, we appreciate the enthusiastic attention you and the team are putting forth to keep pinball alive. It's a tough economic time for everyone. I'm glad pinball is rolling right along! **GR**

**On the Web:**

See a thorough report of CSI's playfield layout & rules at <http://www.pinballnews.com/games/csi/index.html>

Stern's Official CSI webpage including downloadable shot-map and brochure <http://www.sternpinball.com/CSI.shtml>