

GAMEROOM

Your Guide to the Ultimate Home Game Room

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Building a Dream

Designing and creating your dream game room



Space Flight
Kevin Keinert takes off

Re-Cap a Monitor
We show you how

Slither
A lost arcade classic

Rob Craig's

Tales of the Silverball

FREE PLAY.

It's More Fun to Compete!

Pinball really fits well into a unique gaming category. It allows players to have fun competing against the machine and themselves, trying to post a better score than before. You can still bring in other players to add a different level of competition (man vs. man), while adding a social element to the experience. Bowling, for example, can be somewhat fun while you attempt to solo bowl a perfect game. Golf is probably a better example—a fantastic game that allows a special experience for solo play. Bring in more players and both bowling and golf have a completely different dynamic.

Pinball is one of those recreational activities that really bring satisfaction to the solo player. There's so much to enjoy when it's just you against the machine. More modern machines give you so many things to do that several solo games are required in order to do well against other players. You have shots to learn, modes, and sequences. Many modern solid state players and collectors might have missed the experience of simplistic game rules. I'm talking about simple shots that can be understood right off the game rule card.

This really took away any advantage a player might have that already understood a specific game's elements: combo shots, multi-mode multiball tricks, or fumbling over the ability to play a video mode. I guess what I'm trying to say is, it is entirely possible that some pinball enthusiasts don't know that it really is more fun to compete against other players.

There are some very socially memorable moments I recall from pinball competition. None of them were in the midst of the top players in the world as I am far from that level of play. But on some of those days I was the one to beat, the top player in the pizza



Backglass photographs by Dennis Blankenship

parlor, at least for that lunch hour. So this month's column is about ways to bring on the competition and explore a new way to enjoy the pinball experience.

Simple multiplayer competition

This is surely what the pinball manufacturers were going after when they decided to build multiplayer EM machines. Having the ability to punch in more than one player on a game is a big deal. When players alternate balls, there's a whole new level of play. It's possible to get someone 'cooled off' while they

have to wait for another player to lose a ball. It's also exciting to share the comeback experience, especially when it's you that makes the impossible comeback to take down your opponent. When I was a youngster, during the dawn of solid state pinball, I recall the big boys inviting me in to play a 2 player game with them. I really enjoyed being brought into their game space. It was an opportunity for me to watch and learn, and then try to re-create their skillful flipper work. At that point in my life, it was exciting to learn how to play better. And making friends with the

teenage wizards in the arcade was very cool indeed. In my teens, it was an opportunity to bring friends into an impromptu competition. Having only a couple of machines in the local skating rink meant that a good player could keep their position in front of the machine all night.

Contender after contender would ante up a quarter to try and beat the current player. It didn't matter if there were 40 credits on the machine. It always cost a quarter to play, and the current host of the table would pocket the change as they let fresh meat join the match. Beating the table hog was a big deal. It meant that you now owned the table. You were the new target to take down. It also meant that your name was circulating amongst the sweaty crowd of kids, but only as long as you were winning.

At home, I find many visitors like simple multiplayer competition. Instead of playing solo games, these folks want me to see their skill or learn something by watching me play. And there's always the thrill of pure competition. No one goes into the game wanting to lose. I want to spend time with them as they enjoy playing pinball. There is no better way to do that than by starting a two player game.

Team play – taking them down 2 or more at a time

Team play in pinball is fantastic. There are several ways you can enjoy team competitions. I like it best when 4 people pair up into 2 teams and combine scores at the end of a single 4 player game. You can get all kinds of encouragement, or verbal beatings, depending upon how well (or how badly) you play your part. I've seen friendships pioneered, and marriages on the rocks, all over an amazing 2-on-2 battle. It's also a blast to see people try to perform addition in their head. The newer the machine (bigger scores), the greater the need for a calculator!



Want to test your marriage?
Try playing "flippers" as a team!

"Flippers"

Back in my earlier years, one of the crew would win a free game and none of us kids had any change left to buy in a second credit. So we would play "flippers". This is when one person would play the left flipper button while the other person would play the right flipper button. That's what you did when you had one credit and two kids needing a pinball fix. I once played a tournament with my wife where we were required to play "flippers" on 20 EM machines against several other coupled teams. This method really exposes just how different a player's style is. Slap saves and "digging balls out of the trough" only happen when a "flipper" team gels well. Through it all, my wife and I won the event, and therefore are still married to this day! If you have several people wanting to play pinball and only a few machines, this is a great way to get everyone involved. You can have up to 8 people playing a single 4 player pinball machine.

If you have your own personal pinball arcade ...

All of this team play is great for bringing people into pinball, but there are other ways to ramp up the level of competitive play. If you happen to have several machines on your own property, you have the opportunity to design a full-on tournament. The most traditional tournaments give each player a ranking, and then the opportunity to win round after round until someone is declared the winner of the tournament. Each round can be a 1-on-1 game played as a two player match, or you can turn the players loose to have their own solo games. Once players have completed their match on a specific machine, a winner is declared and the next round is determined. This goes onward, round after round until you have two left. The final match is always a thrill. If you get an audience around them, you often see the jitters overwhelm their skill, even when they're only playing for kudos and a handshake. There are single and double elimination bracket templates and standalone bracket freeware readily available on the Internet (see links at the end of the article). I find that these individual matches work best when I'm hosting more advanced players. And the best part is that you can create a whole tournament around any of the competition methods I mentioned above (teams, flippers, etc).

Survival of the Fittest is something that pinball tournament junkie Steve Rothschild and I dreamed up one day. It was a wicked idea really and has its brutal intention on seeing just how long people can remain competitive. Survival is a tournament where all players work to post the highest score they



can on every running machine, by playing them all twice. This might seem simple if you own 3 or 4 machines and have 3 or 4 people over at your place. Ramp that up to 40 machines in two separate buildings and 20 people and you have a 6 to 10 hour non-stop pinball circus of competition.

The way to play Survival is really simple. Each player receives a scorecard that they will be entrusted to record their scores accurately and clearly. On the card is each machine that is available for play. Two places to enter a score exist. The players are set free to play any available machine on the list and post the best possible score. Each player wants to win points based upon where they place overall on each specific machine. For each machine, we award 5 points for the top score, 3 points for second, and 1 point for third. We add up the points earned by each player when everyone is finished and declare a winner.

The real fun factor is that no participant has any knowledge of where they stand until all players have completed a specific machine. Adding even more chaos is the fact that each machine can be played twice, but need not be played one after the other. For example, if I thought I had a killer score on Lord of the Rings, I might hold off on playing my second game on LOTR until I learn about everyone else's results. This could be 6 hours later, well after I've cooled off from the experience.

What unfolds is quite interesting. Lots of eavesdropping on scorecards, intermingling and hush discussion on scores that were seen on specific games by specific players, premature celebrations yielding post tournament pinball ego crushing, and plenty of heckling among the best of friends.

As the tournament moves beyond the 5th hour of non-stop play, some players get locked into a pin-zen state, while others head for the snack and soda table to get re-jacked for their final leg of the marathon. As competitors begin to declare, "I'm *FINALLY* done", some keyboard-savvy volunteer starts to enter the scores of the earliest finishers.

The playing crowd thins a bit as the long players continue onward. Eventually people huddle around the glowing screen of a laptop to see if some active players even need that second game to fight for placement and points.

It's amazing to see people concede due to fatigue, and others who have finished still seek out machines that killed them "when it counted" so they can get revenge. In the end, we share the top players on each machine, and count off the points that have been earned. The top players are congratulated,



and trophies are passed around, and weary eyed players begin to resemble children who have stayed up well beyond their bedtime, with near senseless ramblings about their best games of the day or become philosophical about the best designer, sound package, or art work in pinball. Exhausting and rewarding, it's a true survival of the fittest experience.

Crazy competitions

Just to make things even more absurd, I've dreamed up (and borrowed) other quick competitions. Here are a few that you might consider trying.

- *Blind man pinball* – Cover the flipper and slingshot areas of the playfield with opaque construction paper, or similar material. Let the players take a peek at the flipper layout, then drop the material and see if they are the real Tommy.
- *Flipper flip flop* – Let the right hand become the left, and the left become the right. Quite literally, cross your arms and operate each flipper with the opposite hand. This quickly becomes fatiguing, and can be difficult (or impossible) on wide body machines with short armed people.
- *One hand man* – Pick a hand to hit the flipper buttons with, put the other hand in your pocket. The player has to use that single hand to operate both flipper buttons.
- *The screaming coach* – This is a 2 player team competition where the person

handling the flippers is blindfolded and a coach watches the playfield and barks "Left FLIP", "Right FLIP" commands.

- *Mirror pinball* – this is one that Gene Cunningham promoted at this Illinois Pinball show. The playfield is reflected off of a propped mirror. The player sits below the playfield surface and has to view the mirror to see the ball. I've never tried this method, but it sounds interesting.

"Wanna play doubles?"

Looking back to the start of this topic, I'm amazed at just how much content I was able to come up with. Who would have thought that there are so many ways to play this wonderful game? I realize that there are more ideas out there that I've never heard of. If you have a fun spin on pinball competition, please drop me a line at popbumper@gmail.com and share it with me. And if you see me at your pizza parlor, please ask me to join you at the pinball machine for a friendly game of "doubles". It really is more fun to compete! **GR**

ON THE WEB

Free Tournament Bracket Builder by Steven Garbett: <http://tournament-bracketbuilder.uuuq.com/>
Official IFPA rules: http://www.ifpabinball.com/?page_id=189
Official PAPA13 rules: <http://www.papa.org/papa12/rules.php>