

# GAMEROOM

Your Guide to the Ultimate Home Game Room

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**The Video Game Hall of Fame**

High Score Heaven

**Playfield Resurrection**

The Art of recreating art



# CHAOS CENTRAL

*It's nice to be recognized for your achievements, to have others acknowledge your hard work and perseverance.*

It's nice to be recognized for your achievements, to have others acknowledge your hard work and perseverance. No matter what the hobby, everyone enjoys a pat on the back and a hearty "well done."

Most activities have a hall of fame—Pro Football has a hall of fame in Canton, Ohio. Rock and Roll has a hall of fame here in Cleveland. Even Trapshooting has a hall of fame in Vandalia, Ohio (wow, Ohio sure seems to like hall of fames!)

Anyway, as a lifelong fan of video gaming, I'm happy to know that there is now a hall of fame for that activity, as well. Ottumwa, Iowa (yes, not Ohio) is now the proud home of the *International Video Game Hall of Fame* (IVGHOF for short...just don't try to pronounce it!) It celebrates both video gaming's achievements and history: high scores and gaming firsts. This issue celebrates the new hall of fame as it enshrines its first inductees. Congratulations!

Kevin Steele, Editor



**Pinball Innovation: is that it?** Was William's glorious failure in Pinball 2000 the last major leap forward in pinball technology? Is the game doomed to stagnate forever as a mechanical game in a digital age? Check out Rob Craig's thoughts on the *Un-Modern Pin* starting on page 32!

**You spilled your guts...** and I thank you! Yes, I received some *Coin-Op Confessions* this month, and the column returns with this issue. Of course, to keep it going I'll need more, and that's where you come in—submit your game room or confess your coin-op habit and see your face in the pages of GameRoom Magazine! Send your high-resolution photos and story to [info@gameroommag.com](mailto:info@gameroommag.com). You'll earn a GameRoom T-shirt, your story immortalized in print, and my eternal gratitude!

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Rob Craig's

# Tales of the Silverball

## The Un-Modern Pin

With the current “state of the business”, pinball’s future is as bleak as our country’s economy. Many of us publicly and privately discuss our concerns for Stern Pinball and the products they make. We wrestle with our own ideas of how things can be better. Very few of us fully understand the real components against this industry—I dare not say that I am one of them.

However, while everyone can speculate, it makes for a better argument to have some knowledge about what is going on at Stern Pinball, the condition of the market, parallel markets and their current health, manufacturing costs, labor issues, and competitive markets that seek to pry entertainment dollars from potential pinball buyers. There are a lot of people posting things on the internet that indicate that they don’t see the big picture. Much of what is posted can be misleading.

With that fully disclosed, I want you to consider this perspective that is derived from my understanding of the pinball industry, seasoned collector fireside talks, one on one chats with industry folks (both active and “retired”) coupled with current video game research and interviews. You might say that this angle just “hit” me after completing a very long and laborious research paper on the future of video game distribution. To get this point across, I will bounce from here to there. Consider reading this straight through in one setting—you’ve been forewarned.

### A More Customer-Friendly Stern

If you weren’t aware, 9 months ago Dave Peterson of merchant bank and private equity investment firm Hagerty Peterson and Company joined Stern Pinball as financially interested partners. Stern needed cash to

move onward and these entities jumped in. In these past 9 months several things have changed for the better including Stern’s web presence and use of social media (YouTube, Facebook, etc). I view the company as Gary Stern still in the driver’s seat with some very loud passengers influencing driver decisions. Perhaps for the first time, home buyers and collectors can feel that they have a voice by typing letters and posts to Stern. I have heard that the new marketing director reads all feedback. Keep this in mind as you read onward.

### Should Things Have Changed?

A common argument about pinball is that it looks and feels no different today than the machines built in the early 1990’s. Cabinets look the same; playfields still contain ramps, posts, rubber, lamps, switches, and things that pop the ball into other things. We still have a dot matrix display and monaural sound. A side-by-side comparison of a new 2010 Stern Iron Man pinball and freshly cleaned and restored 1997 Williams Circus Voltaire might have newbies guessing at which machine is recent and which one is 13 years old. Pull up a home use only 1999 Williams Revenge From Mars and a group of non-pinballers could surely be fooled into believing the 11 year old machine was the latest thing from the pinball industry (maybe easier if you hide the “2000” on the label).

While Pinball 2000 had flippers, slingshots, drop targets, stationary targets, ramps, and all the other important playfield items that have been around for 25 years, it also had a very fresh display (monitor), stereo sound, and a heavily adapted cabinet. If things would have continued onward at Williams, we might have been into a second

version of the Pinball 2000 system (video, sound, cabinet) by now.

The game entertainment industry has sought to find ways to submerge players into the gaming experience. Technical breakthroughs have brought some very cool video game cabinets our way over the years. 1970’s EM arcade games mounted a gun on the control panel. Black and white bronze era racing games included a gas pedal and a steering wheel. 1980’s video game cabinets were often built and decorated to imitate the gaming environment. Simulating coin-op games put you into the cockpit of a jet or racer. All of this was taking place 25 or more years ago!

As technology breakthroughs occurred in sound, video, and computing power, implementation in video games soon followed. Today we have some amazing technology at our fingertips. For any of you that own an Xbox 360 or PS3 connected to a 5.1 (or better) surround sound system and an HD display, you know how immersive the gaming experience can be without any unique seat or control panel. Sound and video are powerful components in gaming. Pinball cannot draw close parallels to the video game industry on all fronts (both coin-op and home gaming). However, we would be foolish to not comparatively analyze it against pinball history and look for areas where pinball could benefit.

Looking back into the books of pinball history, I can list technical innovations in display and sound technologies in just a few lines. Look at this breakdown of significant things that provided visual and aural feedback to players (Note that the list only contains things that were accepted into production, is not exhaustive and only for the purpose of the context of this article):

- 1975 – Digital numeric display
- 1977 – First electronic sounds  
(no chime unit)
- 1979 – First continuous background sound
- 1979 – First speech sampling
- 1981 – Digital display used on playfield
- 1985 – Digital alphanumeric display  
(alphabet capable)
- 1986 – Full song playback
- 1987 – Stereo sound  
(removed several years later)
- 1991 – Dot Matrix Display (DMD) and video modes
- 1993 – DCS sound for clearer audio and speech, more channels, still mono
- 1999 – CRT monitor used for video overlay, game info, player score, etc.
- 1999 – A return to stereo sound  
(until the death of Pin2K)

Cabinets had some minor changes (wide-body, mini's, head-to-head, etc.) but nothing notable with staying power until the Sega Showcase "head" in 1996.

The big change was with the Pinball 2000 platform. While many fans of pinball would argue that pinball has constantly made great use of modern technology to further the player experience, this list pales in comparison when set against that of the video game industry. However, the Pinball 2000 developers advanced pinball in a profound way, essentially closing a large gap in modernizing the product and its ability to connect with players—ultimately bringing new pinball players into the platform. With only a couple of years to live, Pinball 2000 died one of the saddest deaths in entertainment history. 10 years later the rights to the technology and platform swim in a sea of internationally fragmented ownership confusion.

Meanwhile, Stern Pinball continued to produce pinball very much like it was in 1993 and made enough revenue to stay in business. But how long will this last without moving the Stern Pinball platform into the next generation?

### **Shelf Life without Innovation**

Could the stall in innovation be a bad thing for future purchases by pinball collectors and casual game room buyers? I think it is. With very few exceptions, the cost of a nicely restored 1990's Williams, Data East, or Gottlieb machine is less than a new machine coming off the assembly line. The reliability and restorability of the 10- to 20-year old machines along with similar "fun factors" contained in the latest pinball machines designed today create a monster challenge for Stern Pinball. Anyone considering the pur-

chase of a new pinball machine has to look at what their \$4300 could alternatively buy in the used pinball market. When asked to consult someone who is preparing to buy a new machine, I can't help but remind them that \$4300 could provide them 3 or 4 really nice 90's pinball machines for the same money.

With more pinball collectors and restorers than ever before, Stern's new pinball machines compete harder than ever with the games that you and I occasionally sell. And Stern certainly competes with itself. Most of the home-use-only Stern models in the past 10 years look amazingly fresh and new and likewise play the same way.

The point I'm trying to make here is that today's pinball "format" never makes yesterday's product look outdated. When someone walks through my 80's arcade, they can easily distinguish eras of solid state pinball innovation. By looking at the feedback that the player receives (audio / visual) and the depth

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*A common argument about pinball is that it looks and feels no different today than the machines built in the early 1990's*

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and amount of playfield gadgetry, common people can point out what machines seem to be more advanced and the perception of "more modern" is realized. The machines in that room span about 11 years. When they walk into the "DMD" room, everything becomes fuzzy. While the games in that room span roughly 16 years, the only indication that a game is newer than another is the licensed theme. In terms of shelf life (both new and used), it seems that a dot matrix pinball machine has one that is almost eternal, something not found in too many areas of the entertainment industry. Why? Because those industries technically evolve making everything prior look old school. This is great for collectors and horrible for Stern Pinball's business.

How does this differ in other forms of home game entertainment? Have you ever considered how long the shelf life of a console video game really is? Consider the latest Xbox 360, PS3, Wii and PC titles on the shelves in large department stores. Upon release, titles are given just weeks to carve

out their importance for shelf space. Games literally thrive or die based upon first impression reviews on gaming websites, gaming magazines, and user reviews on YouTube and similar video sites—all within the first week of its public availability. Prices stay high for fast-selling blockbusters or decay quickly for games that don't meet their publicly perceived mark. When titles fall from \$59 to \$29 in a few weeks, the masses have spoken (by not buying) and the retailer is ready to unload their stock.

A modern console / PC game might have cost \$20 million to develop and millions more to market worldwide. It might take over a million units to sell for an average title to make its budget. Now consider how long it takes for the product to look and feel "old." If you casually play console video games, you can see just how far developers have grown on these current console platforms. Step back to the previous generation of systems (Playstation 2, Gamecube, Xbox) and the technical jump covers a canyon of differences. It is true that some massive blockbuster games from the ancient days of the late 1990's find their way into resurgence via an online or "Live" port. But overall, these are still consider casual gaming moments and the graphics and audio on most of the ports remind players of just how far technology has taken them.

There are clearly "cons" to the fast track of video game development. Everything new makes everything else look old. Anything made today better put a new and much cooler spin on all the cool game wizardry released last month while not forgetting the basic mechanics of what makes a game fun to play. Bank on studios releasing additional titles based upon proven successful properties (franchises). Release the game at the proper time, without too much competition but in windows that have full customer attention. Force people to acknowledge your product by bombarding them with marketing streams, touching the customer daily if possible. Fail to perform in any of these categories and you will find your product in the bargain bin in weeks. Miss the mark too many times in succession and you'll be standing in the unemployment line.

### **Needed Pinball Innovations**

Stitching this into the fabric of pinball is difficult. These markets are very different and what might be important to one doesn't particularly apply to the other. Yet there are several things that seem to align or at least point to something we should now be seeing

in pinball. Here is a list of things I think could be developed for pinball as it relates to topics covered in this article. They are heavily influenced by conversations both private and public.

**Color LCD displays** – Full screens displaying animated backglass art, animations, and licensed film material. I could be upright as in the Pinball 2000 iteration. Today it seems ideal to ship graphical content from well-known and supported professional graphics, 3D, and video applications to LCD panels—as opposed to converting them to just 4100 pixels in 4 shades.

**Multichannel Sound**—2.1 (Left, Right, Subwoofer) Stereo with optional 5.1 surround sound. Using modern (and cheap) storage with common compression, you could include all the stereo CD quality sound needed. If using a PC platform, 5.1 techniques and tools used in console gaming from 2001 onward are at the disposal of even independent basement developers. No new tech is needed for development—just adapting it to the pinball platform. Sell the game with \$10 Chinese stereo speakers and sub, but give us an optical or coax audio output. As long as the games were developed with quality sound, speech, and music, I can see home buyers dropping cash on 5.1 surround kits.

**Flipper button feedback**—give us something that takes the Alvin G's Garage Band flipper feedback idea and modernizes it a bit. I think the industry should look at new ways to interact with the ball besides just using flipper buttons. Pinball still contains 2 to 4 buttons (inputs) and nothing for feedback besides the vibrations of hardware popping things in the cabinet. How cool would it be to play Stewie Pinball on Stern's Family Guy with little flipper buttons located somewhere else on the cabinet? What about controls that get our feet involved? Some of us have interfaced Dance Dance Revolution mats and Guitar Hero guitars to pinball flipper inputs. Demolition Man shows us that players are actually willing to use non-traditional controls.

**Updated Cabinets**—If you look at the innards of a modern solid state pinball machine, there's some free space inside the

cabinets. As mentioned earlier, the Sega Showcase heads were a deviation from traditional (and current) trends. If anything, they actually looked “modern”. If you incorporate a PC based architecture, drive an LCD monitor, and incorporate a good 2.1 sound system, you would have a reason to change the head design beyond making it look “modern”.

I can hear reader feedback already. “Rob, do you think Stern has any money to put forward in redesigning a cabinet or changing the electronics system they use?” Some will surely be more direct and demand that I not



push any such radical ideas while they need to be focusing on good playfield designs. Good points that I agree with (mostly). But until private sales dominate the interests of Stern Pinball, innovation to get pinball noticed among operators and eventually the per-game paying public is the never-changing goal. And why should pinball change anyway? Whether we want to see big changes or not, something has to happen in order to keep the industry alive. I often tell people to not offer ideas without suggesting a path to get there. Therefore, I submit this grand idea. Incorporate the best kept secret in technol-

ogy development—use interns! DePaul is in Stern's back yard and has a computer game development and design program. Other local colleges and universities have equally talented technical design programs. With unemployment in the stratosphere, giving students a resume edge through internships is a great benefit to industries. Beyond the academic route are the hundreds of pinball collectors that have demonstrated their technical chops in creating modified pinball machines of various flavors. Imagine what it would be like if this group were able to brainstorm on a project to re-invent pinball audio, video, and cabinet design over a 30 day crunch. What do you think would come out of that?

As I get ready to hop off this pinball soapbox, I want to acknowledge the wonderful work that is still going on in pinball design. Note that there are no hints that pinball playfield design really needs to change. Like almost everyone, I would like to see more gadgetry and more time invested in software. But the design ingredients of fundamental pinball geometry (posts, popbumpers, flippers, slingshots, VUK's, ramps, wireforms, guides, rollover lanes, kickbacks, magnets, spinners) are just perfect. Without them, it would be hard to call a machine a “pinball” machine at all. Wouldn't it be great to offer the fabulous designers we know and love a modernized pinball system to make their new playground?

Got ideas? Let's hear and see them. Draw your pinball cabinets of tomorrow. What would *your* Pinball 2010 cabinet look like? How would you use video instead of static pinball artwork on a translite? What should a 5.1 surround sound kit look like when installed on a pinball machine? How can you make the player experience more “real”? I've created a blog at [www.chasingpinball.com](http://www.chasingpinball.com) for those willing to collaborate and submit ideas. Call it fun, call it serious, call it silly. It's your place to post your ideas and share with the pinball community about this very topic. Only serious parties need apply. You must e-mail me your request for a username and password at [popbumper@gmail.com](mailto:popbumper@gmail.com). But anyone (including our friends at Stern Pinball) can drive by and have a look! **GR**