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Friday, May 30, 1986 Volume 15, No. 35

CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

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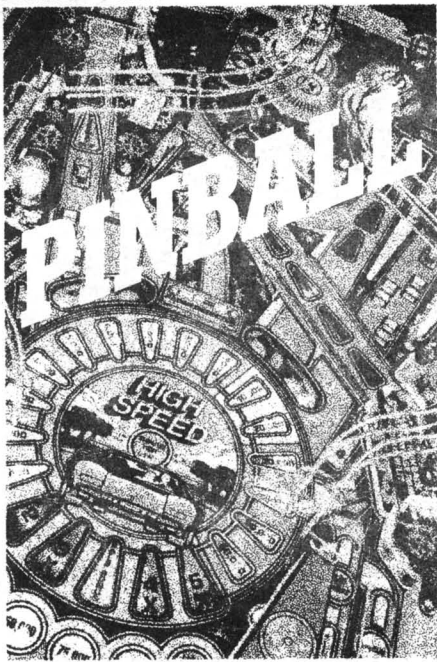


Steve Ritchie

Photographs by Paul L. Merideth

Chicago's Pinball Business Bounces Back

...By...
 Janice Perrone •§• Early one morning a few years ago, when Steve Ritchie was cruising past tomato fields on California's Interstate 5, he decided to see just how fast his new Porsche 928 could go. His speedometer only went up to 85, but the cops who finally caught him gave him the answer: 146 MPH. •§• He was charged with reckless driving and got a restricted driver's license for 90 days, a \$250 fine—
 CONTINUED ON PAGE 30



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and what may turn out to be his best idea yet for a new pinball game.

Ritchie, 36, has been designing pinball games for ten years. His creations are some of the industry's most famous and commercially successful games, including Superman, Flash, Stellar Wars, Firepower, and Black Knight. The most recent addition to the list is High Speed, which made its debut earlier this year.

For most of his career, Ritchie has turned out the games that entertain the world's pinball wizards from a cramped office at Williams Electronics on Chicago's northwest side. Pinball is an industry born and raised in Chicago. In 1985 Williams manufactured an estimated 70 percent of America's pinball machines. The remaining 30 percent was split by three other Chicago-area companies—Premier Technology in Bensenville, Bally Midway in Franklin Park, and Game Plan in Addison.

Today the industry is enjoying a revival after several years of lost favor in the hearts of teenage boys and college students, traditionally the game's best customers. Between 1981 and '84 they spent most of their time, energy, and quarters shooting down aliens and gobbling up monsters on video games, leaving pinball machines to collecting dust instead of coins.

Pinball managed to stave off the swing toward video games for about five years. The same silicon chips that spawned video games in the early 70s changed pinballs from electro-mechanical machines with 70 pounds of wires, levers, motors, and gears to microprocessor-controlled units capable of better special effects and more elaborate rules of play. Although, initially, teenagers were excited about video games, they soon got bored hitting blips back and forth on black and white screens. The mid and late 70s were a boom time for pinball, and video games were no more than also-rans in the arcades.

Then, in 1978, Space Invaders landed and everyone—teenagers, businessmen, women, children, and grandparents—lined up to shoot laser bullets at columns of marching aliens. The video boom was on, and it was bigger than anything the coin-operated amusement industry had ever seen.

A lot of industry insiders thought the new craze signaled the end for pinball. Says one, bluntly, "We thought pinball was dead. From the point of view of a pinball manufacturer, the player is not the customer, the operator is. And the operator found that video games made more money than pinball and required no maintenance. A pinball, which has a lot of moving parts that can malfunction, needs a lot of maintenance. Suddenly there was a better deal on the



High Speed pinball machines being assembled at Williams Electronics

block for the operator. Video was getting a lot of attention in the media, and the players wanted this new experience, too."

So pinball manufacturers got into the video game business. Big. They invested millions of dollars and diverted their best creative resources away from pinball for the best shot at competing with the video game kings, the Japanese. The Japanese firm Taito started the avalanche of hit video games with Space Invaders. The U.S. shot back in 1979 with Asteroids and in 1980 with another space shoot-'em-up, Defender. The Japanese then

countered immediately with a little number called Pac-Man.

The battle went back and forth with less famous games, but by 1984 it was clear to everybody on both sides of the Pacific that the Japanese had won the video game war.

"The Japanese have cheaper labor and technology than we do," says Ritchie, from his second floor office at the Williams plant. "They can hire armies of programmers who are going to yield more games than the five guys over here who cost the same money. They get their computer chips much cheaper, so they can put more in a



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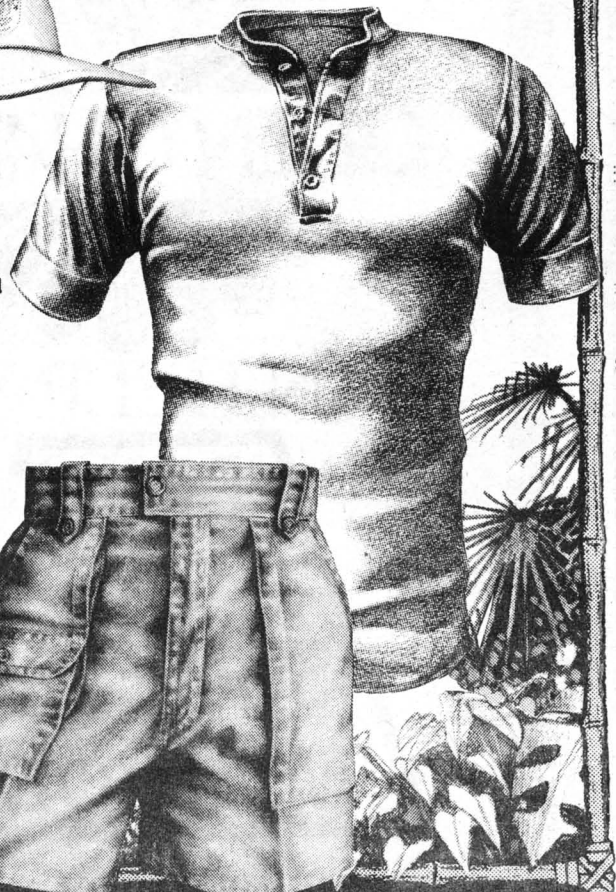
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game. They can have more powerful graphics and still make their games profitable."

The war was not lost, Ritchie notes, over who had more original ideas for video games. "In fact, except for a few unique games like Pac-Man and Defender, hardly anybody had original ideas. The question was, 'Who can rework this shit the cheapest?'" And the answer was, the Japanese.

The local manufacturers lost the war and pretty nearly their shirts, too. Some closed, some consolidated, and all of them just about gave up on the video market.

The survivors fell back on their bread and butter. The key design people at Williams went back to work on pinball games, and they came up with winners. Teenagers all over the globe started pumping their yen, pence, pesetas, kroner, and quarters into Chicago-made pinball machines again. According to the industry magazine *PlayMeter*, Americans alone played more than \$340 million worth of pinball from August 1984 through July 1985, up from \$296 million for the same period a year earlier. "And there's no question," says *PlayMeter* editor George Sigler, "that pinball has continued its comeback since last July, and that its rate of comeback has even accelerated."

Arcade operators, who pay about \$2,000 for a pinball machine, have found them lucrative again. The average weekly take for a pinball rose 37 percent, from \$38 in 1983 to \$52 last year. But the games at the upper end of the scale can mean a lot of very fast profits. Space Shuttle, a game designed by Williams's Barry Oursler, made as much as \$350 a week per machine in its first ten weeks alone. It won the Amusement and Music Operators Association award for the most-played pinball in 1985. High Speed, an early favorite to win the honor this year, grossed as much as \$450 a week per machine in its first ten weeks.

Meanwhile, in the last few years, the popularity of video games has plummeted. Maybe the novelty wore off. Maybe players got tired of those rehashed ideas. After a high of \$140 a week in 1981, their average weekly gross was down 50 percent, to \$70 in 1983. But, still, that's almost twice what pinballs earned that year. By last year, however, the gap had closed to only \$5, with a video earning an average of only \$57 a week to pinballs' \$52.

According to *PlayMeter's* state of the industry survey, video is only about 2 to 1 stronger than pinball

right now, based on how many games an operator buys. Three years ago, that ratio was 15 to 1.

This drop in video popularity has shrunk the coin-operated amusement game market considerably. Arcades have closed. People aren't lined up to play anymore. In 1982, operators bought 600,000 new machines; by 1985, that number was down to 230,000. The number of places you could play a coin-operated amusement game also dropped during that period, from 400,000 to 290,000. Operators still in business are aiding pinballs' resurgence because they now want to diversify their offerings. "During the video boom," says Sigler, "their reasoning was, 'Why bother with other games when video is so hot?' Now that video is not so hot, they're putting out other equipment, like pinball machines."

This turnaround has certainly improved the local manufacturers' financial picture. Based to a large extent on the sale of Space Shuttle and other pinballs, Williams's amusement game division turned red ink into black in 1985 (the firm also runs hotels and casinos). Revenues jumped to \$12.5 million in the quarter ending December 31, 1985, compared to less than \$2 million for the same quarter a year earlier. High Speed sales, which far exceeded the company's expectations, were a major contributor to the \$32,069,000 in revenues the company reported for the quarter ending March 31, 1986. Based on orders received through May 23, Williams anticipates total High Speed sales will approach 17,000, making it their largest production run in six years.

The tilt is back toward pinball. Chicago has been the pinball capital of the world since the game evolved from bagatelle, a French parlor game popular at the court of Louis XIV. Bagatelle's playfield was a felt-covered board that looked like a pool table, and a player propelled the balls into numbered holes on the board with a cue stick. To make the shots more difficult, the holes were protected by semicircles of long nails, or pins. Eventually, people started calling the game pinball.

The American version, developed in the late 1800s, evolved into a game much smaller than bagatelle with a glass top protecting the playfield and a plunger propelling the balls. None of these early games were very profitable, and they weren't manufactured on a very large scale.

But commercial production started

continued on page 32

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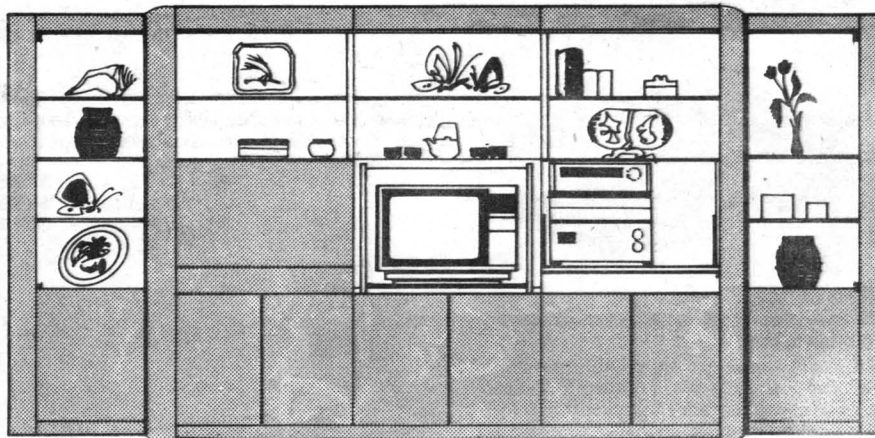
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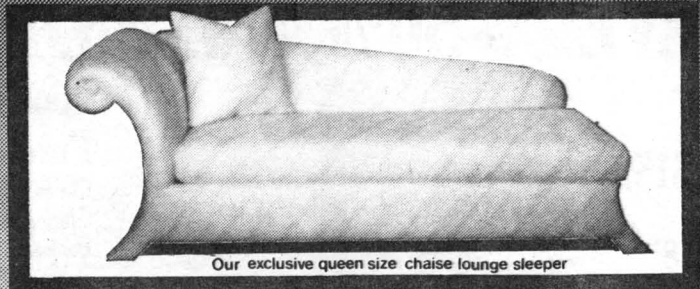
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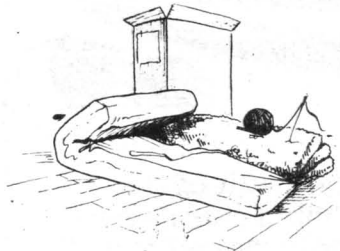
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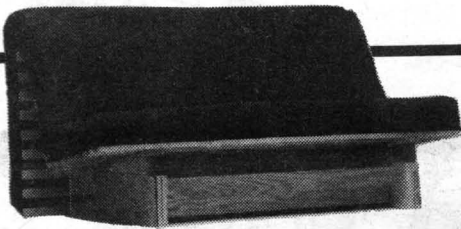
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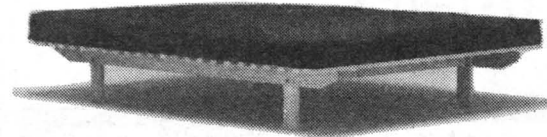
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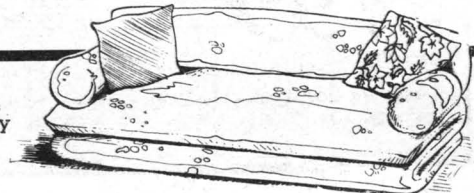
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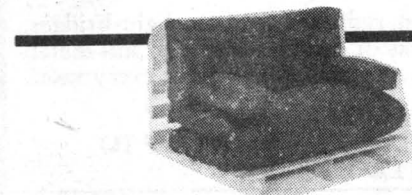
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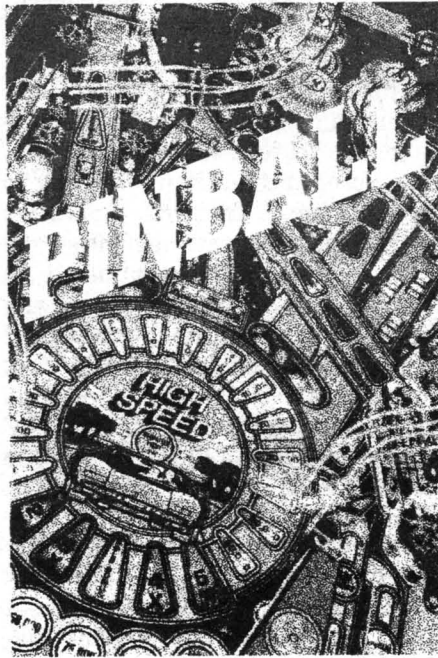


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continued from page 31

to explode in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Coin-operated amusement games, the kind that tested your grip, told your fortune, and showed you moving pictures, had become so popular in penny arcades and boardwalks that they were popping up on lunchette counters and in candy stores and taverns. A few clever businessmen in the coin-operated machine business, which was centered in Chicago, decided the time was ripe for a bagatelle-type game. They were right. They made a killing.

These early pioneers included four men who founded the pinball companies that, in some form, still exist in Chicago today. David Gottlieb, who founded D. Gottlieb & Company (now Premier Technology), produced the first commercially successful pinball, Baffle Ball, in Chicago in 1931. On the other side of town, Ray Moloney was distributing Baffle Ball and couldn't get enough of the games to satisfy his customers. So he invented a game of his own. Ballyhoo was a hit, and the Bally Manufacturing Corporation was born.

Meanwhile, out in California, Harry Williams was producing some of the most innovative pinball games in the industry. He invented the tilt mechanism and found ways to get more action into the game. In 1933 he added the magic of electricity to pinballs, which made it possible for lights on the playfield to flash and bells to ring. Eventually he moved his operation to Chicago and founded the Williams Manufacturing Company.

Game Plan was born in the 1970s, but several of the company's founders came from a pinball firm called Chicago Dynamics, also known as Chicago

Coin, which was founded in the early 30s by another pinball pioneer, Sam Gensburg.

It wasn't an accident that the explosion in pinball manufacturing coincided with the Depression. People who found themselves unemployed were only too happy to get five balls' worth of diversion from their troubles for only a penny.

While other businesses were shutting down, the pinball industry boomed.

But trouble was brewing. That's trouble my friends. Right here in Windy City. With a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for Pinball.

Like pool, pinball acquired an unsavory reputation.

In 1933 the manufacturers started introducing games that rewarded high scores with cash or tokens that could be redeemed for cash, in effect, making them gambling devices. It was a terrible public relations move. In the public mind, the pinball industry was linked to gambling rackets, and it was widely denounced as a corrupting influence on teenagers. In the 30s and 40s, cities and towns across the country passed laws to regulate pinball. In 1936, Chicago, the game's birthplace, banned it.

"The ban in Chicago wasn't lifted until January of 1977," says Ritchie. "It was really the flipper, invented in 1947, that made people see a modern pinball as a game of skill, for amusement, not a game of chance. But it took people in Chicago 30 years to believe that. A skilled player can control the ball 50 to 60 percent of the time, and I have to take that into consideration when I start planning a new pinball."

On the first floor of the Williams Electronics plant, rows and rows of pinball machines, hot off the assembly line, are flashing their lights, dropping their drop targets, pinging, bonging, and whooshing all alone in the dark. They're exercising their parts overnight to make sure all the kinks are out. It's the final step in pinball production before the machines are inspected and shipped to waiting arcade operators and bar owners. Upstairs, Steve Ritchie is at work on the first steps.

His small office is cluttered with computer terminals, early High Speed models, motorcycle magazines, playfield designs, artwork from his favorite pinballs, and equipment for his sound studio. A sign on the door reads: "Steve Ritchie—Savior to industries. Overseer of the cosmos."

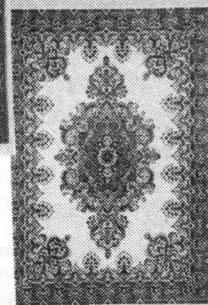
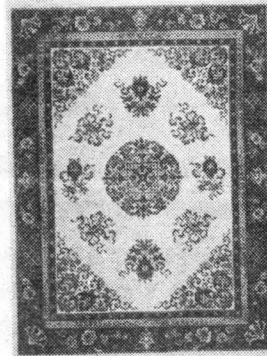
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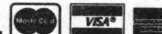


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Ritchie became everything except humble completely by accident. Deciding against college, he was a professional musician in the San Francisco area in 1972, "playing guitar in a band and not making any money." Two years and three bands later, he decided to look for a "real" job.

Near his house in Los Gatos, California, a new company had just hung up its sign. Atari was a small firm then; it had just 60 employees. But a lot of them, Ritchie noticed, were pretty girls. One day he went in and asked for a job.

"I started as an electro-mechanical technician assembling video games," he recalls. "The pay was pretty lousy, but I got to work with games, and they had rock and roll music blasting through the factory."

After a year and a brief stint in the engineering department, Ritchie hit the jackpot—he was asked to help start up a new Atari division—for pinballs. Both of his first two games were hits and, when Williams offered to double his salary, he moved out to Chicago in 1977.

Ritchie was a pinball master long before he sketched his first playfield. In the Ritchie family, Wednesday night was bowling night, and while mom and dad were knocking down pins, son Steven was flipping a silver ball around on the bowling alley's pinball machines.

Even then he showed an inclination for invention. By the time he finished grammar school, he had designed a burglar alarm for his school desk (powered by rubber bands); a bomb that blew a ten-foot hole in the ground (he filled a 55-gallon steel drum with calcium carbide); and a parachute for the back of his bicycle (he'd race down

a hill and pop open the chute about 50 yards before the traffic intersection). In sixth grade his class was asked to decide what they thought everyone would be when they grew up. Their choice for Ritchie was prophetic: mad scientist in a toy factory.

It takes about a year to transform a new pinball from a glimmer in Ritchie's eye to a quarter-eating machine in an arcade. As the playfield designer, he devises the game's theme, playfield gadgets, and rules of play, but usually everyone on the team contributes ideas. Mechanical engineers at Williams bring the playfield gadgets to life. Artists are on staff to draw the machine's backglass, playfield, and cabinets. Sound people create the audio system. And computer wizards develop the special effects and design the program that makes everything work the way it's supposed to. The process starts with an idea for a theme.

"For a pinball to be successful, it has to have a theme that attracts young people, like cars or rock music or space," Ritchie says. "But it's also real important to come up with new ideas, unseen, original things to do with the ball to make the game irresistible—and addictive."

Ritchie has come up with lots of those ideas. On Black Knight he introduced a magnet that saves the ball from draining and a bilevel playfield where you shoot balls up a ramp. On Firepower he figured out a way for a player to control the location of the unlit target light he had to hit. On High Speed he devised switchable ramps where the ball can go one of three ways and a kicker that loops the ball through wire rails suspended over the playfield.

He also tries to create unusual playfield gadgets and new special effects

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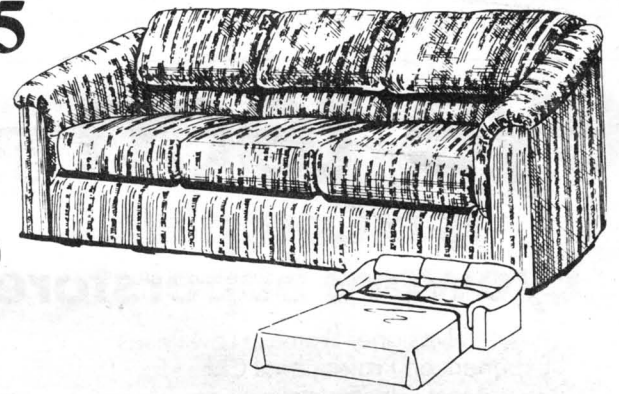
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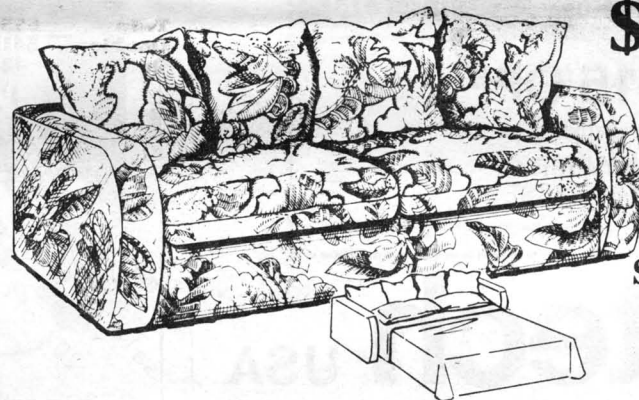
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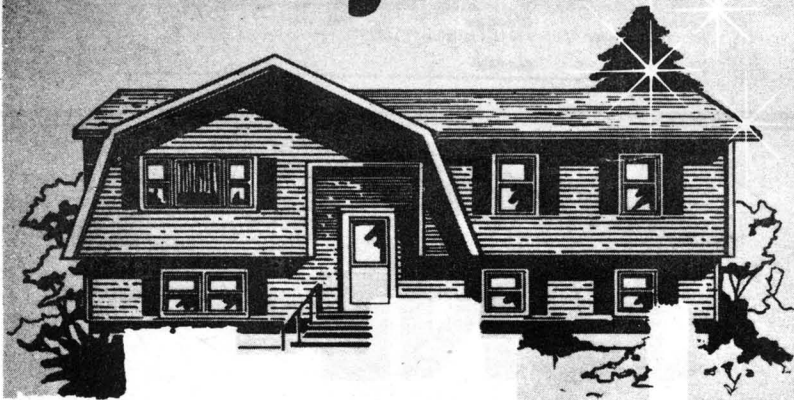
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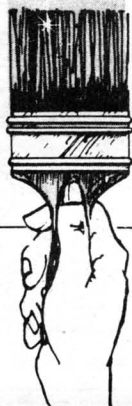


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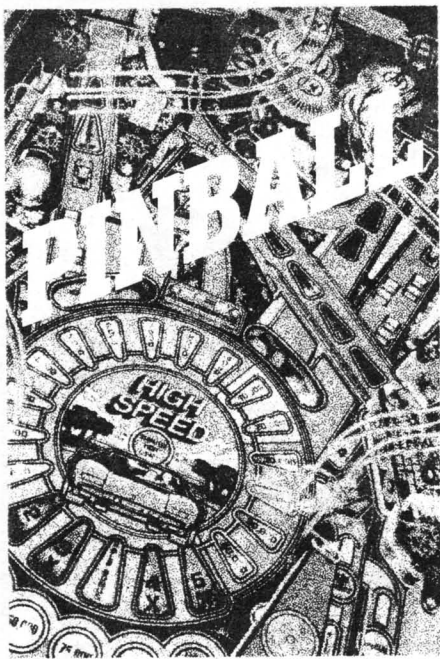


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(brighter lights, better sounds) for each new game. But he's quick to point out that a game with lots of flash and no substance won't keep a player's interest long.

"A pinball won't last without interesting rules of play, a well-defined object of the game, and good kinetics [how the ball moves around the playfield]," he says. "You've got to give players something to go for and a way to measure their progress."

In addition, he says the rules, spec-

ial effects, artwork, and sound system should all be coordinated with the theme.

According to industry reviewers, High Speed has all of these. Everything about the game reflects the fast-driving/police chase theme. Some of the ball movements and special effects are original. The object of the game is clear: hit three green, three yellow, then three red targets that look like traffic lights. Then shoot the ball up a ramp onto a raised platform (a challenging task), and you run the red light, set off a siren, a police light atop the cabinet, and listen to the cops put out an APB on you. While you're being chased, the machine gives you a "light show." Make the ramp shot again, and you lose the cops in the dust; you go into "multiball"—three balls flood the playfield simultaneously, and you have a chance to win the jackpot of so many extra points you'll probably win a free game. All you have to do is make that ramp shot again.

Clearly, the ramp shot is the key to the game. Ritchie steps up to a High Speed prototype to demonstrate it.

"Right there," he says, pointing to a flipper on the upper right-hand side of the playfield. "If you flip that flipper at just the right time when the ball is passing by, you'll send it up the ramp. But the flipper is almost vertical and the ball, moving with gravity,

runs straight along it. So it's a tricky shot."

Ritchie spends a lot of time thinking about challenging shots like that for a game. They have to be hard enough so that players with a lot of skill won't be bored. They're a game's most loyal customers, and a game that's too easy for them won't be any fun. Not to mention that it won't be very profitable for the operator.

"If the average playing time is more than two and a half minutes per player, consistently, the game won't take in enough quarters to satisfy the operator," Ritchie notes. "But if you make it too hard and players feel like it's a lost cause, they'll walk away. Optimally, you want a player to feel like the high score that wins a free game is always within reach."

That element of pinball design probably hasn't changed since the Depression-era games. But few other similarities exist between the electro-mechanical games of yesteryear and today's slick, microprocessor-controlled games.

The computer chips that control pinball machines today give Ritchie a wide array of sophisticated special effects to choose from. For instance, playfield targets can have time limits by which a player must make the shot. The machine can sense which way a ball is going, and bestow special effects

based on where it travels. Machines now have a memory, so they can keep track of complex rules even when three or four players are taking turns.

Pinball machines promise to become more reliable soon, thanks to a revolutionary computer program invented for High Speed. The program allows the game to tell an operator, in an alphanumeric display, if a switch is broken. It also reprograms the play to bypass the broken switch until the operator can fix it. This program should make a machine's down time drop dramatically. And it should close the gap between how much maintenance pinballs and videos require, making arcade operators even happier with the new generations of pinballs.

But it may be the sound system on pinball machines that's changed the most in the last ten years. The old electro-mechanical games only offered bells for sounds. They had a 10-point ding, a 100-point dang, a 1,000-point dong, and a 10,000-point gong. Now the games have realistic sound effects. Push the start button on High Speed and an ignition turns over. Pause before pulling back the plunger and the engine idles. Run the red light and police sirens blare and cops yell for you to pull over. Make the shot that leaves them in the dust and they radio in the news: "Suspect got away."

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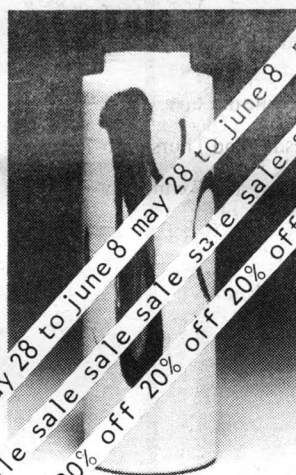
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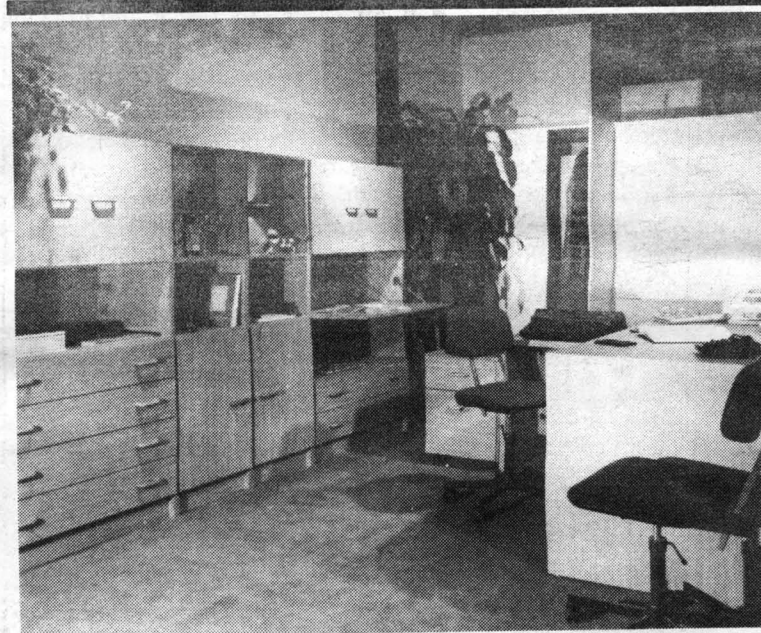


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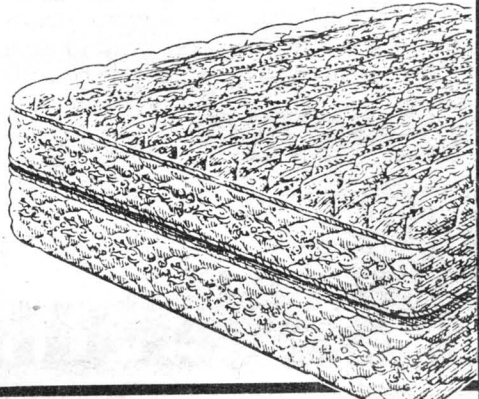
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Speed, even have high-fidelity, original rock and roll music as one of their hottest features. Premier Technology pioneered the effect in the fall with the game Rock. Since he's also a musician and songwriter, Ritchie wrote a score for High Speed and incorporated it into the action.

"The music plays a little at the beginning and end of a game, but the best and longest sequence is a reward for achievement," he explains, "like if you trigger multiball or do well enough to win the jackpot."

And that points out one real turn-off in pinball games that Ritchie acknowledges—if you are a pinball novice, you probably won't do well enough to see the game's best special effects.

The music sequence notwithstanding, Ritchie tried to address that problem on High Speed. And for a good reason—he wants to expand the market to include more adults, females, and others who generally wouldn't get up and try pinball. Toward that end, he designed High Speed so that it encourages new players.

"The shots you have to make to get an extra ball are easier on High Speed than on any game I ever did," he says. "We give away a light show for pretty easy shots. This costs the operator

nothing, costs Williams nothing, and gives the player a little more for his money. And you automatically light one of the stoplights when you pull back on the plunger, so even if you're really awful, with three balls for 25 cents, you're guaranteed to at least get all three green lights lit and the effects that go along with them."

Even before High Speed came out there were some indications that pinballs were attracting a more diverse audience. Manhattan's top-of-the-line pinball parlor, the Broadway Arcade, started pinball leagues last year that aren't just for wizards, but also for parents and kids, women, and coed teams.

They've been so popular that they've expanded from 12 players on 6 teams to 100 players on 50 teams. Arcade owner Steve Epstein is working on exporting the league idea to some arcades in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He hopes to have them running this summer, culminating in a tristate-area pinball tournament. In Epstein's grand scheme of things, the Chicago area is the next logical place to get the leagues going.

He also notes that new players are attracted to High Speed in particular. "It makes their eyes light up," he says. "They've never seen anything like it.

But really, everybody loves the game. The way the ball moves around, the lights; this one's got everything."

"I knew High Speed would be a hit when we were designing it," Ritchie says, smiling. "Does that sound conceited? Well, it's not like we weren't worried at all. You always wonder 'Will the player be bored? Is it too easy? Too hard? Will he be satisfied?' And most important, 'Will he want to put the second quarter in?'"

* * *

The day after Thanksgiving, under cover of darkness, I am waiting on a city street. The Firebird pulls up, and we're off on a secret mission to give High Speed a test run. It's the first time anybody outside of Williams will play, or even see, High Speed; and it's Ritchie's first chance to get the answers to those questions. It's eight weeks before the game is officially unveiled.

Pinball manufacturers always test a new game in an arcade before the production run starts. Unsuspecting kids out for a night's fun don't usually notice the two guys in the corner watching them and taking notes. But how the players respond to a game determines how the designers fine-tune, or in pinball parlance, "tweak" it.

"Don't say where this arcade is located or even what direction we're going. Our competition shouldn't know where we test our games," says my companion, Ritchie's codesigner on High Speed, a 28-year-old computer wizard who goes by the name of Fred.

"That's P-h-r-e-d," he notes, as we reach the city limits.

Two hours and a new area code zone away, Phred and I walk into an arcade with 38 video games and 7 pinballs, all lined up next to each other competing for tokens. (At this arcade they're four for a dollar. Some operators give as many as ten.)

The arcade doesn't fit my expectations. No stale cigarette smoke hangs in the air. It's spacious, clean, and quiet. We've arrived at dinner hour, and there are only about five people here.


High Speed is in the middle of the row of pinballs. But it looks different from the others; it's the only one with an accoutrement on top—the police light that flashes when you run the red light. High Speed stands out for another reason.

It's the only pinball being played.

A heavyset young woman in jeans is standing at the machine, playing her

continued on page 36

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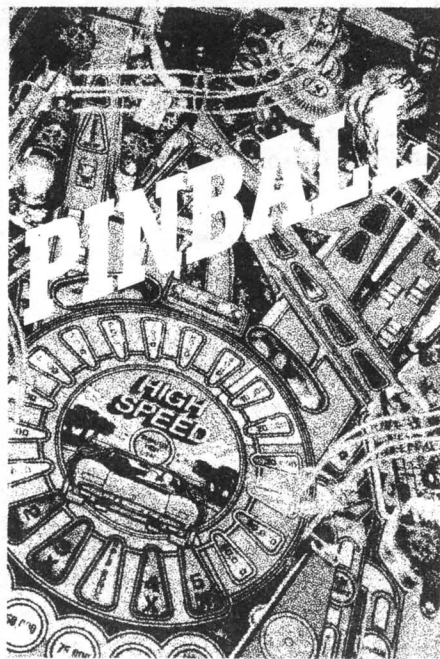


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continued from page 35

last ball. Before we're even settled in the corner, she's walking away. None of the other four patrons takes her place.

"This is the time you want to see people playing your game," Phred notes. "This is what gives you high, as opposed to just average, earnings. When the arcade gets crowded, and there are 40 people playing 40 games, all the machines make money. The earnings will be different based on what's getting played in the off hours."

Since High Speed isn't being played, Phred takes the opportunity to adjust it. He's already improved the game since it was brought to the arcade six hours earlier; he says the new computer chips he brought with him will make the music choreography better.

"The music breaks the game into phases," he says, popping open the backglass and exposing a tangle of colored wires. "It needs to play just a little longer to make the phases more distinct. Probably most people won't notice, but to the three guys who do, it'll be cool."

While he has the machine open, he checks the readout inside to see what the play has been like so far.

"The game's been played 187 times; 88 of those times the player got as far as running the red light," he says. "That's about 50 percent, which is just what we want. If everybody did that well, the playing time would be too high. As long as people play it and like it, the lower the play time the better."

We retreat to our corner. Ritchie, who arrived a few minutes before us, has picked out a spot on the other side of the room.

A young man in his 20s walks up to the machine. He looks at the instructions for a moment, then slides a token into the slot. It takes only a few

minutes for him to lose his three balls.

"Now the thing we want to see," Phred says, "is does he put another token in? Does he want to try again?"

The player's hand slides into his pocket. He pauses.

"Don't walk away," Phred mutters.

He walks away.

"Well, it's still early," Phred says.

A few moments later, the same guy comes back. He pauses in front of High Speed again, and puts another token into the machine.

Ritchie flashes a thumbs up sign to Phred.

"I hope he does better this time," Phred says. "We want some people to do really well, to show everybody else the best stuff in the game, which up till now, nobody here has seen."

Ritchie comes over to talk to Phred. He's thinking exactly the same thing. "We need to do something with the police light," he says. "We've got this cool new toy and most of the time it just sits there. Let's make it an effect that everybody gets to see, maybe when they put the token in. Make it kind of a reward for deciding to play. That way we'll have this flashing red light going off all the time, and everybody else in the place will notice it. And it'll look great in the dark."

He turns to me. "Most arcades and bars aren't too well lit," Ritchie explains, "and we gear a lot of what we

do based on the game being played in the dark."

Phred agrees about the light, and makes a note to change the computer program.

Meanwhile, back at the machine, our friend has done much better this time. His score was a half a million points, which Phred describes as "respectable."

"A good score would have been a million. If he had gotten 1,400,000, he would have gotten a free game. That's intentionally high. The free play should be around 1,200,000 points, but we don't want to give away too many free games when we're testing a machine. We want to see if people are willing to put quarters in it."

Our friend is pausing in front of the machine again. Phred, Ritchie, and I are all poised, watching, waiting to see if he puts in his third token. No. He's gone again.

But the arcade is filling up now. The machines are screaming, singing, and talking to each other; and people are noticing the new game on the block.

A teenager in a varsity jacket approaches the machine. He plays for about eight minutes and does OK. He gets all three green, then the yellow, then the red lights. But he can't make the ramp shot; can't run the red light. The players next door, noticing the

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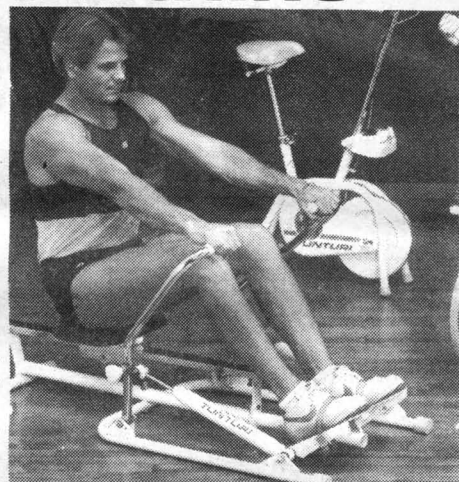
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lights and the music, put a token on High Speed's glass. In pinball lingo, that means "the next game is mine."

But the teenager is not ready to give up yet. The varsity jacket comes off. It's time to get down to business. Bending over the machine, he concentrates harder. It's his last ball. Success! He gets the ramp shot. The guys next door are watching him now, feet tapping to the drumbeat. He gets up to 1,100,000 points before he drains and picks up the varsity jacket to leave.

"Great game," Phred says. "And did you see how those guys were really getting into the music? But the get-away sound is terrible." He makes a note to look into it.

The group next door (three guys in sneakers and sweat suits) takes over. The first player drops a token in the coin slot, an engine turns over. He smiles. He looks over the playfield; the engine idles. His friends laugh. He's ready now. He pulls back on the plunger; one green light stops flashing. He keeps the ball in play for a few seconds and hits the right target. A second green light stops flashing. Then the ball drains. So does the next one. Quickly. And the next.

None of them do very well, but they're all laughing at the tricks Ritchie and Phred have packed into the game, and they play for a long time. The noise level in the arcade has progressed to a din, and there are about 25 people there. Most are teenage boys, but a few are couples out on a Friday night date. Everybody's young, and everybody's white.

A new player walks up to High Speed. "That's not a new player," says Phred, correcting my notes. "That's the same guy who played two games earlier and kept walking away."

He's pausing in front of the machine again. He slides a token into the slot for a third time. Phred and Ritchie are smiling.

When our friend finishes his third game, he leaves the arcade, and a guy with a mustache, who looks a little older than the others, steps up. It only takes him a few minutes to get all the lights lit. He makes the ramp shot and multiball starts. Everybody's looking at the police light flashing. He seems to like the rock and roll music, but he's really concentrating. And doing great. This is not his first time at High Speed's flippers.

"This guy's killing the game," Phred says. "But that's OK because now everyone sees the best effects."

Soon a few of his buddies join him at the machine. One of them takes over. While the wizard is waiting for his next turn, I ask him how he liked High Speed.

"It's a good game," he says, "but not as good as Comet" (a pinball Williams produced last year).

"Why's that?" I ask.

"Because I can win more free games

on Comet. Everybody likes a game they can play all night for only one quarter."

By 11 PM, the arcade is quiet again. Phred and Ritchie compare notes, and I walk over to High Speed. I can't remember the last time I played a game of pinball. Have I ever played a game of pinball? Well, High Speed is supposed to be entertaining for neophytes. Adults. Females. Sounds like I fit the bill.

I step up to the machine.

It doesn't look too hard. I pull back on the plunger, and a silver sphere whirls onto the playfield. It whizzes right by the flipper on the upper right side. I push the buttons too late to hit it. Meanwhile, it travels down toward the drain area and I push the buttons again, sending the ball up to the spotlight target area. I must have hit something because a green light stops flashing. A car honks. A drumbeat keeps me company. The ball, however, deserts me.

My score, displayed for all to see, is a whopping 18,240 points. I don't want to know how Phred would describe that.

On my second ball, I vow to be ready when it's time to hit that key shot. The ball swirls onto the playfield, passing the upper flipper. I jab at the buttons. I hit it, but the ball doesn't go up the ramp. It bounces around on the playfield for a few seconds, batted between bumpers. Lights are flashing. This is fun. But the ball rolls toward the drain area on the far left side. It's doomed again. But no! It's saved. A little gadget on the left side kicks the ball back up the playfield. It takes a few seconds more before I lose it.

My score is up to 40,410 points, and I have lit all three green lights and one of the yellow. Pulling the plunger back will light the second yellow, so I have one ball to hit the third yellow and all three red lights.

The machine is waiting for me. It's playing the heavy drumbeat, spurring me on to glory. OK. I pull back on the plunger, hard, and my last ball hurls toward that upper flipper. I punch the buttons, but the ball went too fast. I keep it rolling around the playfield, but I can't seem to hit a target light. Three flips of the flipper later, the ball rolls straight down the center of the board, and it's gone.

The machine calculates my score: 54,960 points. It plays some rock music for me as a consolation prize.

There must be a better way to do this. I ask Ritchie for some advice.

"Don't panic when the ball starts rolling down," he says, "and never flip both flippers at the same time. That's the biggest mistake new players make. You open up the drain area at the bottom that way. You just need some patience. And a little practice."

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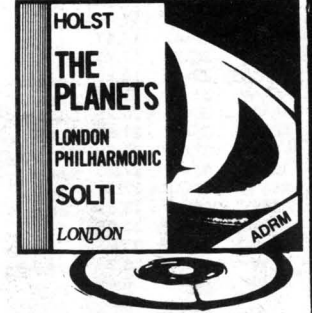


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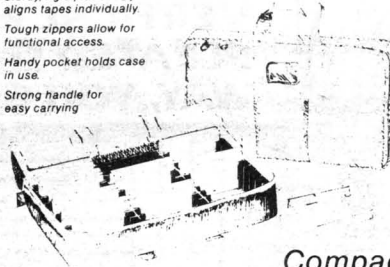
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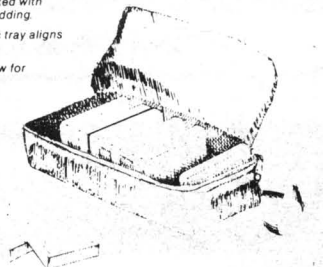
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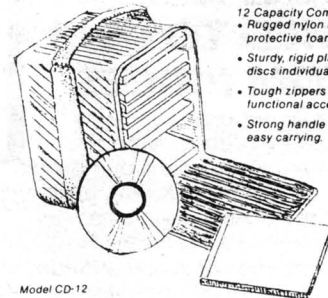
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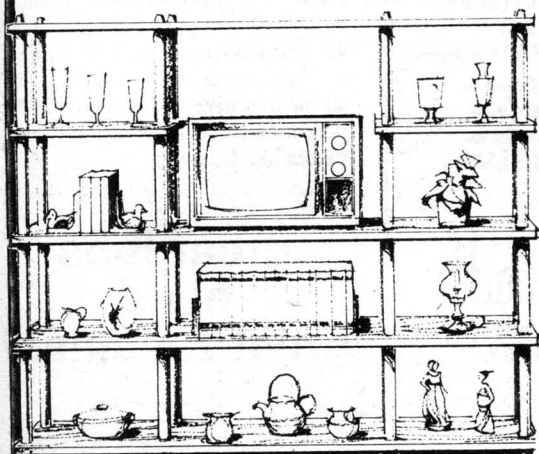
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