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Summary

Pinball and the settings in which it is played are perceived by the public as having an aura of deviance. The perception derives in part from behavior observed in pinball parlors, but goes beyond the reality of the pinball setting. Public labeling of pinball, with its taint of illegitimacy, molds the etiquette of pinball and acts to repel or attract potential players. Recent efforts by industry to improve the image of pinball aim to dispel negative attitudes toward pinball, thereby widening the social acceptance and use of pinball in public settings.

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THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF PINBALL:
THE MAKING OF A SETTING AND ITS ETIQUETTE

by

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ABSTRACT

Pinball is a coin-operated electric game developed and refined for public playing in the 1930's and 1940's. It pits the player against the machine. In exchange for a coin, skill and chance, it rewards the player with a direct response in lights, noise, motion and, if predetermined high scores are reached, with additional games.

The playing of pinball in its usual public setting appears to be no more of an expressive social act than many other transactions with vending machines. Yet the activity of public pinball play has been colored by strong negative and positive connotations by participants and by non-participants. These connotations are far out of proportion to the apparent cost, rewards and dangers of this game.

An aura of deviance surrounds pinball and the settings in which it is played. The aura is derived only in part from what can be observed there. Pinball has been labeled as gambling and not play. Its participants have been cast as loiterers "up to no good." Its attractions for youth have been viewed as unsavory.

The aura of deviance and its consequent labeling effect upon those who frequent pinball settings provides a special appeal for some players (especially young, single males) and a special disincentive for participation for others (especially females).

The taint of illegitimacy surrounding pinball also molds the etiquette of pinball. This is especially evident in the players' tolerance for the flaunting of rules which in other circumstances might be necessarily obeyed to preserve the separate reality of the game and a "spirit of play."

An experiment suggests that there is little or no peer pressure against cheating. In fact, within the context of the game and its setting, "cheating" does not seem to exist for regular players.

Conversely, pinball play has been intellectualized in ways not necessary for games which society accepts as legitimate sports or, at least "mirthful" play.

The interplay of the public conduct associated with pinball and its aura formed largely by the perception of non-participants preserves the setting as an exclusive province for regular players and watchers and allows for its etiquette.

There is currently a strenuous corporate effort to improve pinball's public face. The author suggests that players who may be driven from art deco pinball emporiums will find havens in traditional pinball settings. These traditional pinball parlors will be arranged by operators who view pinball as no more than a profit-making venture. They harbor no illusions about the conduct that players desire to perpetuate as they address the machines and one another.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF PINBALL

The pinball machine is a unique American amusement device. Its notable features are a sloping play board and electric circuitry which tabulates scores accumulating when a steel ball sets off various circuits as it bounds between posts, holes and triggers, aided by rubber bumpers.

The critical feature which transforms this machine (for players) from a game of luck to a game of skill is one or more pairs of flippers, small button-activated levers which bat or flip the ball back up the play board.

The machine rewards the player with points, extra balls, flashing lights, moving characters, noise and, ultimately, with free games. Free games are won through skill, although a single game may be won by chance merely by matching the last two figures of the score to a number which appears randomly on the score-glass when the game is completed.

Eye-hand coordination is one feature of pinball play. Yet this is not the only kind of interaction between the player and the machine.

Theoretically, the player is supposed to concentrate upon the flippers and allow the force of gravity and the random trajectory of the ball to do the rest. Yet all players attempt to translate body movement into the machines as torque to change the direction or speed of the ball.¹ Only a stranger to the game fails to add this dimension to his game.

Each machine has one or more built-in circuit breakers that

penalize the player who jars the machine with his body. To be caught by the machine is to "tilt" it.

Both the manufacturer and location operator can adjust the machine to make it difficult or easy to beat. Along with the general arrangement of the playfield by the manufacturer are the alignment of the flippers and the manner in which the machine is placed in position on the floor - all of these figure into the player's equation of the machine as conservative or liberal. Players expect that an operator will allow enough "give" in a machine for some body-work along with flipper play. They are angry when a machine is arranged in place (intentionally or out of ignorance) so that it allows for little or no torque. Such machines are said to tilt too easily.

THE CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF GAMES:

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

To assess pinball play as a publicly played game, one must consider "play" in a more general societal context.

Many recreative activities for adults and for children are performed in public with little or no social disapprobation.

An adult male, respected in his professional context, may leave his office, don a uniform and play softball on a field set aside for that purpose. When he leaves the field, turns in his uniform for a business suit and returns to the office, there is little or no carry-over stigmatization by non-participants. None is expected. Each activity is treated as appropriate in its own context. He is viewed as having taken "time out" (McAndrew and

Edgerton, 1969) from the pursuits which define his role and self-image in society. No other explanation for his dalliance is requested by his family, friends or associates.

Huizinga defined play as voluntary, superfluous activity. It involves stepping into a sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own (1955:8). As structured play, games are world-building activities (Goffman, 1961:27). As a second world, involving a second self, the logic and rewards of games can be found in the context of a second system of rules which have little or no relationship to the player's present and legitimized role in society.²

Huizinga notes:

A game is time bound . . . [I]t has no contact with any reality outside itself, and its performance is its own end. Further, it is sustained by the consciousness of being pleasurable, even mirthful, relaxation from the strains of ordinary life (1955:203).

This separation of recreative games from "real life" and from the "real self" is accomplished because non-players and players honor special interpretative obligations, obligations which are separate and distinct for each group.

Non-players are obliged to disassociate the player from the down-to-business person with whom they deal in other spheres of public activity. Play is play; work is work. If this tolerance is not forthcoming, players must cease to play, rationalize their participation, or conceal it (e.g., become "closet" players).

Players, in turn, are obliged to play the game in places

and times appropriate and, most importantly, to treat the rules of the game seriously. To cheat would be to destroy the reality or generating power of the game (Goffman, 1961:67). Cheating would also blur the distinction between the rewards and purposes of play and the rewards and purposes of the "real world," that portion of the world shared by players and non-players.

An observation of pinball play in urban settings and an analysis of public commentary on pinball suggest that neither players nor non-players are prepared to live up to these obligations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I observed two public settings where pinball is regularly played. One is located in the corner of recreation facilities in a large university student union. Bowling alleys fill the rest of the room. The other setting was situated along one wall of an amusement arcade on a pier in a nearby beach community.

Along with 20 observation periods of from one to four hours over a six-month period, I interviewed players and observers (both interested and disinterested).

THE SETTINGS

The physical arrangement of each setting was similar. The management of the student union and the arcade operators had each set aside one stretch of wall for a series of 12 to 16 different machines, each set side-by-side, with no standing room in between.

Players faced their machines. Watchers or waiters stood behind players or to their left or right shoulders in order to observe play without touching the player or the machine in play.

Both sites were noisy (even if we acknowledge that one person's noise is another person's music). Along with the bells and clatter added to the machines by their manufacturers, rock music and bowling activity added to the din in the student union. In the arcade, music and very loud noise from shooting and driving games which crowded the remainder of the room filled the air with sound.

The spatial allocations in both places allowed for little other than pinball playing or watching, both on one's feet, or for moving along the bank of machines and players to look for a machine that was vacant.³

Although tobacco smoking was observed, there was little or no eating or drinking or use of intoxicants.

PARTICIPANTS

As might be expected, most participants in the student union appeared to be undergraduates. Occasional groups of high school students were observed. Female players were in the distinct minority, comprising no more than one or two percent of every hundred players. A more general mixture of male and female students used the other facilities in the room and on the same floor of the building.

Japanese-Americans and foreign students appeared to be disproportionately overly represented, especially among serious⁴ players.

Engineering students and science majors seemed numerous within this segment of the players.

On the pier the same under-representation of females was observed. Here, however, Anglo males from subteenagers with skate boards to men in their mid-forties far outnumbered Chicanos, Blacks and other ethnic minorities who frequented other attractions in the room and on the pier in general.

Interaction between strangers in both places was limited to commenting briefly upon the machines, praising play (but never criticizing play) and negotiating access to more popular machines. Less popular machines were often used as repositories for drink cups, coats or books. These objects were quickly removed at the request of persons who chose to use these machines.

RULES AND CONTROL AGENTS

A sign high on the wall above machines in the pier arcade (and probably out of the line of vision of most players and watchers) attempted to establish the etiquette⁵ (Black, 1976:36) of the setting. It read:

Please do not stand between machines. If game doesn't work look for coins in return cup. If you have a problem ask for help. Do not block or put clothes on machine. Do not sit or beat on our machines.

This is a family arcade.

No profanity.

Press button to start.

Come let us have fun all year on . . . Pier.

This sign recounted norms of the setting which if followed would avoid (a) damage to machines; (b) encounters between players and watchers if play was disturbed; and (c) annoyance to non-pinball players, especially children and women who might use other amusements in the vicinity.

Why is a recitation of what would appear to be normal rules for public use of vending machines necessary? What does this sign imply about pinball players as they are perceived by the arcade's operator? The public plea for normal etiquette in the pinball setting seems to stem from an assumption by management that pinball players will react abnormally to mechanical breakdowns, or personal inconvenience associated with machines or fellow players; that players will react by cursing, by damaging machines and by fighting with persons who disturb play.

In short, the operator of the arcade who has the most to gain and most to lose by social control within the setting assumes that there is a falling away of the rules of decorum which players might enforce among themselves in other places (Goffman, 1959:133).

The arcade management had two employees who roamed the area making change. They called police when major damage occurred or fights broke out, but they did not otherwise interfere with players.

In the student union, student assistants were less visible. Two incidents of intervention were noted, one against a person who pounded the glass and another against an overt cheater.⁶

EMOTIONAL REACTION TO THE SETTING

THE MOST COMPLEX QUESTION

Each setting was technically open to any and all who desired entrance to it. Yet many who had access to it did not enter. Still others (usually the dates of male players) entered the setting with obvious reluctance and distaste.

One such female said this of pinball:

"I hate them. I expect Hell is full of them [machines] with their stupid pictures. They are mindless."

This informant's view of pinball is not atypical. A popular magazine set forth a public view of long standing when it characterized pinball as "a sucker's game and a gangster's racket" (Githers, 1942:18). Even in an age of purported public permissiveness the game was outlawed in New York City and in Chicago until 1976. Conversely the activity has been extolled by David Halberstram, Tom Buckley and Anthony Lukas, all authors, present or former correspondents for the New York Times on weighty matters of national concern and all self-proclaimed closet pinball freaks (Buckley, 1966; Lukas and McPhee, 1975; Buckley, 1976).

DISCUSSION

To understand the emotional reactions to pinball and its setting, something more than a study of pinball arcades and their overt traits seems to be necessary. The developed distaste, and even hostility, for pinball play has evolved within the larger society that never enters the setting. Despite, or perhaps because

of, this labeling players enter the setting. Their conduct there and their rationalizations of their conduct appear to be shaped in part by society's predisposition toward the game and its setting.

What, then, does the setting represent? It seems to represent something more than a place where strangers, predominately young and male, congregate to play pinball and to watch others play. The settings are clearly commercialized places with little "fancy milling" where persons seek a predictable kind of action (Goffman, 1967:196). There is little or no attempt in the setting to conceal the "gratuitousness of chance taking" (Goffman, Id:212). The setting offers "cheap thrills" common to arcades.

The machines are clustered, pushed aside from other activities. The setting allows for short-term, solitary pinball play and brief, secondary association with other strangers who are prepared to cluster around the machines and identify directly or indirectly with pinball play.

This description of the setting illustrates, but does not explain, what players and non-participants read into the setting. The face-to-face encounters found there are products of more than the setting. The setting is a product of the expectations of those who enter it and those who do not.

Critical questions about the setting remain unanswered. Why, for example, is there an expectation shared by participants and non-participants that there will be a weakening of the rules of decorum that define appropriate treatment of persons and private property in other places, even in other places in the same room?

To appreciate the pinball setting, we must analyze the interplay between the setting and the larger urban society. The linkage among pinball play, the player and the machine, and the perception of the core activity by the larger society seems to be the most significant influence on the setting. It feeds into and is fed by the characteristics of participants in the setting.

Edgerton (1977) suggests that the illusion of how-it-is or how-it-will-be that one brings to a setting is somewhat determinative of one's conduct in or impression of that setting. It seems equally true that a predisposition to believe that a setting harbors deviance or low-life fun may screen out some participants or attract others. Further, the conduct of players may be colored in part by the illusion of how-it-is. Some may react defensively and dispute this image. Others may luxuriate in what they view as an image that liberates them from weighty social restraints. Here is the machine that can be the target of anger against machines that could lead to arrest if vented on telephones, soft drink machines or computers. Not only legal restraints, but social restraints shared by the customers of other machines, inhibit aggression against them even when they steal one's money.

Pinball players have selected themselves out of the general population to enjoy a different relationship with machines. As players pass from the general population into the arcade, they take up special and nearly solitary relationships with machines that dominate their attention. Human relationships are secondary. But they do this with some continuing reference to the general society's label of their activity. They are not members of a

subculture. Their participation in the community of pinball players is short-term; their participation in the larger society is a continuing event.

The next section of this article will treat the singular relationship between the player and pinball machine, and the aura of deviance which non-participants have created for pinball. This step is essential. The core activity is shaped in part by this social aura of deviancy. This, in turn, manifests itself in the setting in ways only implied by the rules of conduct listed upon the sign on the pier.

THE PINBALL RELATIONSHIP

The interaction between the pinball player and his machine is a relationship of greater depth and openness than one finds in other public face-to-face relationships or even in other gaming encounters (Goffman, 1961:36). The player interacts with the machine until he masters it or until it masters him. Physical and mental energy are expended; the intensity of this effort shows.

Pinball systems offer closed systems with rules, rewards and penalties. The rules are printed on each machine, but most players "learn" a machine by playing it or by watching others play.

The goal of pinball is to win games through a combination of skill and luck. Beyond pure luck, however, the key to winning is to dominate the machine. In the player's view this means not merely to overcome the various hurdles of the playboard or the less obvious idiosyncracies of the machine arranged by its owner or by fate, but to subdue the machine, to make it "cry uncle."

Machines are carefully assessed for their soft spots. Those which provide no soft spots and make victory improbable are ignored by regular players. To win means to turn the machine back upon itself, to "turn it on" so that it gives away free games not only for high scores but also for hitting various targets which glow when the machine is hot. Lights which glow only after especially skilled and accumulative foreplay provide game after game.

Each game rewarded to the player is signaled to him by a mechanical noise, a "thwak". The thwak takes on paramount significance to some players. The machine gives up; it comes. The thwak demonstrates proficiency not only to the busy player (who cannot take time to read his score), but also signals skill to bystanders who may gravitate to a machine and a player where special skill is being demonstrated.

Players learn how to dominate a machine by watching other players. Their comments to other watchers and the comments between the player and observers are usually limited to the recipes for "turning on" the machine.

Each machine is different. This is why the printed rules are often ignored. Even the same machine in two locations are different. This means that the limits upon what a player can do to a machine are set in ways other than those recited by printed (rarely intelligible) instructions.

How easily can the machine be "tilted"? That is, how much body language can be propelled into the machine before its circuit breakers cut off the flow of electricity and end the game or (as in more recently manufactured machines) the play of a single ball?

Tilting out a ball may cancel out the score accumulated during the ball's activity, but not yet added to the total.

Here is what appears to be a critical difference between pinball play and other games. There is little or no onus placed upon cheaters. In fact, among regular players there are no cheaters.

Cheating is part of playing. It is frequent and continuous. Virtually any technique that can be developed by a player to use against a machine is considered legitimate. Cheating does not destroy "the integrity of the game" (Contra: Goffman, 1961:67). The institutional surroundings do not create a "spirit of play" which assists external control agents (management and the tilt mechanism) in curbing cheating (Contra: Goffman, 1969:123).

For example, some players are adept at hitting the front end of some machines to force a ball back onto the playing field. Other machines (with faulty tilt mechanisms) can be lifted slightly to keep the ball in play. When observed by other players, these acts are condoned. Players and watchers repeat them to other pinball players in praise-filled anecdotes. They are never reported to management.

A FIELD EXPERIMENT

In order to test the proposition that a breach of the rules integral to pinball machines was not a breach of the integrity of the game, the author obtained a large magnet and took it to each pinball setting. While the magnet was not very strong, the appearance of this square, black metal box on the glass of a playboard could not be overlooked.

The author played many machines in each location for over two hours. He employed the magnet to trap the ball in "death" alleys and slow or change the trajectory of the ball.

In the student union, approximately 10 persons noticed the magnet and its influence on the game. Seven practiced civil inattention (Goffman, 1963:83) similar to that which often accompanied watching skilled play or waiting for a machine to become vacant. However, when questioned, several indicated that they were watching to learn if the benefits of the magnet outweighed the loss of vision caused by the magnet's presence on the glass.⁷

A player on one side warned the author when an employee of the student union appeared in the area. When the author asked why he should worry about this employee, the player replied that the employee was not himself a pinball player and was not "in touch with the pinball philosophy."

INTERVENTION BY A CONTROL AGENT

A young man came up to the author's machine and in apparent disregard of pinball etiquette leaned over the glass of a machine in play to read the label on the black box.

"A magnet. You can't use that," he said.

"Why not?" asked the author.

"Well, do you think it would be fair to lift up the end of the machine?" he replied.

"That would tilt it," the author replied.

"Well, it gives you an unfair advantage," he said.

"Who are you?" the author asked.

"I am an assistant here," he offered.⁸

THE EXPERIMENT IN THE PIER ARCADE

In the pier arcade, when the experiment was repeated, civil inattention again dominated the response of players and watchers. However, one female was overheard commenting loudly to her date at the machine beside the author, "He has a magnet; he's cheating." Her date did nothing.

The employees of the arcade observed the magnet, but did not intervene. They pretended that they did not see it.

In neither location did any person report the use of the magnet to the management.

AGGRESSION

Some kinds of aggression practiced on pinball machines have nothing to do with winning free games. In both settings, the author observed players pounding the glass when they lost or when the machine tilted. Sometimes the glass was broken.

Other players did not report these acts or intervene, although some commented privately to one another on the danger that a player might take a "good" machine out of play.⁹

Aggrieved players have been observed on many occasions to give a machine a final yank to "tilt it out" or even to lift the entire front end and drop it before they departed. Only the possible intervention of non-players prevents greater displays of anger by players who lose.

AN APPRAISAL OF AGGRESSION BY FELLOW PLAYERS

Pounding the glass does not indicate skill. It may indicate an off-night or a fatal slip. It may elicit some sympathy from observers, but more generally it signals an inability to master a machine.

An angry player or one who is obviously overwrought is not likely to win games or to demonstrate skill at pinball worth watching. A "cool" player, who reserves his moments of violence upon the machine for key moments when the ball may be lost, is the player who will dominate a machine and who deserves attention.

Some players speak of achieving a kind of sublime interaction with the machine, a kind of interaction with the machine that is so perfect that they are an extension of the machine and it of them. But even in this coupling of machine to player, it is the domination of the machine that is critical.

WHAT CONTROL MEANS

To control a machine, the player positions himself to "call the shots," to drive the ball into a frenzy of rotations which keeps it afloat inside the machine, so that the thwak, thwak, thwak of mechanical orgasms provides a pleasurable result. He does not read the score in such a coupling except between balls. His body and mind are riveted on the playboard. His wrists and forearms govern the flippers. His eyes never leave the ball. His body throws motion into the machine in total disregard of the appearance of gyrating buttocks to the people around him.

This last overtly sexual image of a player standing before a machine, his pelvis rotating as he shoots steel balls into the innards of a machine, probably serves a "gatekeeping" function that legitimizes it among players who know that it does not necessarily mean that games will be won. Many women would find such a public self-image repugnant; even though they may not have been socialized to view pinball as deviant behavior, the public aggression of players, transmitted through words and body language, may keep them out of this setting.¹⁰

THE ILLUSION OF DEVIANCE

The foregoing description has focused upon the core activity of pinball. It is not necessarily the description of pinball that insiders relate to outsiders. Finally, it departs to a substantial degree from the underlying themes which comprise the aura of deviance that isolates the pinball setting from other recreative activities discussed in public journals. Both critics and advocates of pinball tend to interpret pinball in the context of its aura and not in its more parochial context as a commercialized game.

What are these themes? First, that pinball is gambling with social ties to gangsterism. Second, that the pinball setting is conducive to loitering by purposeless and vaguely mindless loners who should be purposely engaged and who are probably up to no good (e.g., playing hooky or waiting for drugs). In short, the setting is peopled by that element of the population who can't be trusted when unemployed and can barely be trusted when they bide

their time in "those" public places.

Third, that it is a setting that corrupts youth. Its Lorelei-like lights, bells and rock music tempt young people to waste their parents' money and rub shoulders with the trash of the community.

There is a mix of fact that sustains each of these themes of the deviant image in the pinball setting and beyond.

GAMBLING

Pinball machines were classed as gambling devices from their inception in public places. They came into vogue after crackdowns on "one-armed bandits." Early machines paid off in cash and then in tickets for cash paid to the player by the operator of the setting. Pre-World War II, machines had meters which proprietors could read to pay off the player in nickels (Anon., 1946:36).

Nearly every machine bears a sign, "For amusement only," and the stranger who feeds in his nickels gets nothing but whatever fun he can find in seeing the gadgets flash. But watch the regular, the young fellow who hangs out in the place. When he gets a high score, he whistles to Jake behind the counter. Jake looks at the blazing scoreboard and nods. Later Jake will pay off in cash or in trade. Prizes ordinarily are small; it is petty gambling but it demoralizes many youngsters. Candy stores and lunchrooms near schools and playgrounds have made pinball the child's primer of gambling (Githers, 1942:135).

In order to avoid anti-gambling laws, manufacturers removed these devices. The machines began to give free games only.

The dispute over whether chance or skill predominated was fought in many states. Even after flippers were introduced many cities including Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Detroit continued to view the machines as outlawed games of chance.

GANGSTERISM

Pinball has always been big business. In 1941, there were two hundred thousand machines doing in excess of four hundred million dollars in trade (Shalett, 1941:12). Three companies, all located in Chicago, came to dominate the postwar market: Bally (known then, as now, for slot machines), Gottlieb, and Williams (inventor of noise in machines). Their coin operated machines, like other vending machines, were usually placed on location by distributors who split the take with operators in each location.

The potential for skimming off the top, laundering dirty money and small-scale corruption were present in pinball as in other vending machine businesses. But while pinball received special attention from police and social crusaders, other machines (e.g., commercial washers and dryers)¹¹ did not:

Pinball has connotations both sinister and symbolic. Ever since a Brooklyn man, an executive in the firm of Murder, Inc., was dropped into a Catskill lake lashed to a pinball machine because he had been cheating on pinball revenues, law-enforcement officials have had a funny feeling about the game (Benjamin, 1961:76).

THE GAMBLING REALITY

That a game rewards does not per se make it a gambler's game of chance. In the two settings, no payoffs occurred and no bets were made on play. Yet many players explained their play of pinball in terms of its game winning potential. Players stressed that they could parlay a few purchased games into an evening of entertainment on a machine that they could beat.

Other players said that they did not play video games because games could not be won on those machines.

While these statements seem to reaffirm the general public's association of pinball with gambling, they must be considered with some suspicion. Purposeful pinball play seems to require an explanation that other games do not. Gambling and its aura have after all, attractive as well as unattractive connotations for pinball players and for non-participants. It is easier to explain play in terms of games won to an outsider than to launch into an exposition on "energy flow" or on pop art; it would be hard to predict the reaction of a listener to such explanations.

In short, the player tells the outsider what he wants to hear. The questioner must be an outsider if he has to ask.

LOITERING

In 1939, William Saroyan depicted Willie, the pinball player, in "The Time of Your Life." Willie pours his energy and cash into a machine in a San Francisco bar. He wins his battle when the machine capitulates, flies the American flag and plays "America the Beautiful" (Saroyan, 1940:159-160).

Buckley, the pinball intellectual, notes:

Since Saroyan put one on stage, players have been regarded as dreamy, weird, alienated, bearing secret wounds which cause them to prefer the brilliant cartoon colors of the playfield to the real world (1977:31).

But even sympathetic commentators, including Buckley, have fueled the image by waxing allegorically over the pinball relationship:

In the pinball parlor, the player fancies, there is a machine he can do something about, a contraption he can meet on equal terms, an industrial challenge he can manipulate and master. To prove it, he must first defy the machine (Segal, 1957:45).

THE REALITY OF LOITERING

A 16-year-old female pinball player on the pier explained that in her Northern California home she never played because her friends would associate her with "hangers around" or, worse yet, with motorcycle gangs. She was careful to explain her presence on the pier; she worked there and was then waiting for her boy friend. Other females also felt obliged to explain how they came to be in both pinball settings. Even some male players said that they would not tell anyone how long they played pinball.

Pinball does involve, for some, mindless woolgathering, a solitary, public activity to provide a momentary respite from

interaction with strangers in public places. It allows players, especially males, to "kill time" (Goffman, 1967:162).

However, for females this secondary association with others has in it the potential for undesired encounters. Female players are not always viewed as serious players. The single minded attention to the machine that provides privacy for male players may not serve as a barrier against strangers for females.

As public activity, pinball is not sufficiently purposeful to screen out less desirable strangers who are attracted to the setting. Necessarily, one's back is turned at close quarters to strangers in a social arena where the restraints of etiquette have been loosened.

CHILDREN AND PINBALL

An early critic wrote:

Children who hang out in places where pinball is played form bad associations, are often led into juvenile delinquency and eventually serious crimes (Githers, 1942:20).

This rather improbable assertion found its way into New York law (Benjamin, 1961:76).

THE REALITY OF YOUTH AND PINBALL

Machines were located where young people would play. Few other opportunities to test skill and luck against machines existed for youngsters who lacked access to autos.

Pinball parlors provided legitimate sites for public gatherings

away from the street (and police) and at lower cost than restaurants or drive-ins. Machines allowed for a youthful display of aggression and skill. Youngsters could compare their skill against teenagers and adults. These reasons for pinball play among the young are as legitimate today as in earlier decades. Pinball operators located machines where school kids could break out of structured routines and enjoy them.

Even members of the upper class, including the present generation of pinball intellectuals, were attracted.

David Halberstam told Anthony Lukas, "It puts me in touch with a world in which I never lived. I am attracted to pinball for its seediness, its slightly disreputable reputation" (Lukas, 1973:82).

Anthony Lukas used pinball as an escape route from the routine and class bound society of prep schools. Tom Buckley learned pinball in the Army, one suspects, as a vehicle to become "one of the boys."

Pinball provided a male-only sanctuary. It also provided a way for introspective loners to become one of the gang without shedding their private self-image. Finally, it gave upper class boys a taste of the low life.

THE IMPACT OF AN ILLUSION

We have seen that the cloud of deviance formed by labeling overreaches the reality of pinball, but to some extent is confirmed by what players find there. To what extent has the aura of pinball liberated the activity from ordinary rules of public behavior?

To what extent does the aura make the decision to play a license to act in the pinball setting in a way that would be foreclosed in other settings?

Causation is hard to establish. But the relationships among the style of play, the rules of the setting and the interpretation of pinball by non-participants appear to be clear enough to conclude that change in any one element will influence the others.

THE CLEANSING OF PINBALL'S IMAGE

Throughout the 1950's and the 1960's, there has been an attempt by the pinball industry and by a cadre of Eastern writer-intellectuals to cleanse the public image of pinball.

The industry has suggested in its public relations ventures that the game had its roots in ancient history. Players of early versions of pinball were to be found in such diverse locations as ancient Greece, the court of Louis XIV and Abe Lincoln's White House (Benjamin, 1961:10; Jones, n.d:20).

The intellectuals criticized New York for its ban on the game. One wrote:

It would be logical to conclude that pinball and civilization are natural companions were it not for one regrettable fact. In New York City, there is no pinball (Anon., 1973:31).

As in other "liberation movements," prominent New York writers identified themselves and their prominent peers as heretofore "closet pinball freaks" (Anon., 1975:81 (Lucas) and Buckley, 1975:30).

Their criticism of the social and legal prohibitions surrounding the game were coupled with intellectual analyses of pinball which transformed it into a unique mental and physical experience. The profound insights to be drawn from the pinball experience were explained to non-playing readers of better magazines:

Suddenly there are sounds, colors, symbols, a flow of energy through the solenoids and replays and the bundle of wires striped like candy cane in the cabinet. It goes to the player himself who completes the circuit (Buckley, 1966:84).

Although this image building by the industry and by New York intellectuals may have softened the aura of deviance in some circles, the real push for legitimacy and for new markets occurred coincidentally with the merger of pinball companies with larger entertainment conglomerates. Columbia Pictures purchased D. Gottlieb and Co., for fifty million dollars. Williams was purchased by Gulf and Western (Buckley, 1977:30).¹²

The merger of pinball companies with more powerful actors in the leisure industry had other indirect results. Pinball was finally legalized in New York City in July, 1976, and in Chicago in December, 1976.

Magazine articles on rock stars and other celebrities mentioned that they had pinball machines in their mansions. A major company produced a full-sized machine for home purchase for the first time. Even the Reader's Guide was impressed. In 1975, its editors separated pinball from the general category for gambling devices for the

first time since it had begun to list articles on the subject in 1932.

"Once upon a time," wrote Newsweek, "pinball was a tacky game played by punks who hung out in speedy luncheonettes. Now it's a respectable diversion for the leisure class. Suburban crowds man the flashing machines in plushly carpeted arcades; singles play the game in neighborhood bars; parents have even begun buying pinball machines for their children" (Anon., 1977:54).

This new public face has not yet affected pinball's etiquette in its familiar public settings. While it may have attracted some new players, especially females, these new players have had to adapt to the game as it is found in pinball parlors and not as it is purported to be in magazine articles. Operators of these settings have been convinced that plusher surroundings should be employed to mask a style of pinball which has proven to be profitable to them. The lower end of the pinball delivery system has not received the message issued from the top.

Players are still expected to assault machines. Other participants are still expected to approve or, at least, to say and do nothing about it.

PINBALL IN THE FUTURE

Huizinga decried the commercialization of "play" in organized sports, characterizing it as "false play" (Huizinga, 1955:205-6). But in recent years, the development of positive social images for many recreational activities in order to create new markets for this burgeoning segment of American industry has made categorization

of play according to the degree of commercial involvement an impossible intellectual exercise.

Play has lost much of its spontaneity or, at least, its origins in the innovations of small groups. Instead, classes of persons are drawn into new recreational activities in order to create new markets for leisure industries. Style predominates over individual choice. Thus, the advertising media has drawn new legions of white-collar persons into the previously ignored play of bicycle riding, jogging and cross-country skiing.

Blue collars have been attracted to snowmobiling in much the same fashion (Time, 1977:90).

The issue is not whether or not these activities are healthy or unhealthy. Each new game has been packaged and sold to new markets by entities that had far clearer notions of what constituted selling appeal than did those persons who were already joggers, riders or skiers. Where it was necessary to change the image of the player or the sport, they did so. Players were not relied upon to spread the values of their game to others. Too much was at stake.

It remains to be seen whether the continuing manipulation of pinball's public image will affect the community of pinball players in their setting.

One can expect that the next few months will see famous celebrities playing each other in pinball competition to the delight of television audiences. Just as likely is high-powered competition between "pinball wizards" with commentary by Howard Cossell; instant replays of fancy "flipper action"; and that competition for astronomical

prizes will fuel the campaign to change pinball's public face.

The problem that the conglomerate image builders and their advertising agencies will confront is the setting in which pinball is now played. If pinball operators are coerced into improvement of their machines' environment (in much the way filling station operators were coerced to clean their restrooms), will regular players change their ways or simply depart? Will more congenial casino-style surroundings that attract a mix of males and females inhibit the average player who seeks to dominate the machine in ways that might prove embarrassing in another setting?

Escape from more responsible settings is a key motivating force for players who seek their "time out" in traditional pinball parlors where deviant reactions to private property are tolerated and approved.

If the unsophisticated setting that repels non-players with its noise, limited space, profanity, violence and gyrating buttocks is transformed with Tiffany glass chandeliers, Boston Ferns and space for casual lounging, there will be a departure of regular players. For them, "something" will be missing.

For every pinball wizard who might relish a display of his finesse to a female audience (as in the movie "Tommy"), there are dozens of average players who unleash their frustrations on this machine. Their haven is the pinball parlor.

Even if art deco pinball flourishes in posh bars, hotels and private mansions, pinball freaks will find new havens in bus stations, truck stops and arcades where their pinball is played.

Pinball parlors in urban settings are, finally, a stage for public "acting out" that cannot occur elsewhere. As face-to-machine relationships, these are revealing if not profound.

Pinball proves again that one person's revulsion can lay the basis for another person's pastime.

FOOTNOTES

1. Until 1949, pinball machines lacked flippers. Industry literature describes their development as an attempt to localize "nudging" by players and thereby integrate it into the game. An earlier attempt to include it in the context of the game by means of an automatic device that caused the entire playfield to jerk toward the rear of the cabinet was found to be unpopular. Flippers did not end the practice of buffeting the machine to "reinforce" the bounce of the steel ball against rubber bumpers.
2. Good examples are young girls who play at being mother and wife, young boys who play at being killers (e.g., soldiers, cowboys and Indians) and adults who play at being high financiers (e.g., at Monopoly).
3. There is a style of pinball play in which the player sits in an elevated chair. No room for such chairs was available in either observed setting. In the student union facility, chairs in the vicinity were provided for observers of bowling. None was allowed for viewing of pinball play. They faced the opposite direction. They were never used by players or watchers.
4. Serious players means they were more expert and were observed repeatedly and for longer than average periods in the setting.
5. Black defines etiquette as the "social control of face-to-face interaction." It defines "what is proper and what is not, what is mannerly and rude, graceful and vulgar, kind, considerate, interested, detached, tactless, oblivious, or cold."
6. The first intervention was reported to the author by a fellow player who stated that the student assistant who had intervened had never played pinball and did not understand the pinball philosophy. Many other incidents of glass pounding were observed in the student union where intervention did not take place. The second example of intervention to stem cheating was induced by the author in an experiment to be described below.
7. One suggested that play with a magnet would be improved if a second player was employed to move the magnet about.
8. The author then persuaded the young assistant that the magnet really did not work, but was being employed merely to ascertain the reaction of those that saw it in an anthropology experiment. "Oh, anthropology," said the assistant. That appeared to satisfy him as an explanation of this bizarre behavior.

9. Pinball machines are constructed to take a phenomenal amount of physical pounding. That is the manufacturers' response to what they know to be a style of play by regular consumers. It is likely that the change from the loss of a game to the loss of a ball when a machine is "tilted" was incorporated into more recent machines in order to assuage the player's anger and its results on the equipment.
10. Female pinball players observed in both settings used noticeably less body language than their male counterparts. Several told the author that they had been initiated into pinball play by boyfriends who owned machines in their homes.
11. In a recent newspaper account, Solon, the country's largest distributor of coin washers and dryers, was fined \$900,000 for skimming off the top of its collections. No news service (except the Wallstreet Journal) noted the story. Clean clothes make for clean businesses.
12. Buckley reports "at least three books now in preparation will describe it [pinball] as a great American art form and as a test of judgment and skill, seasoned with luck" (Buckley, 1977:30).

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