

Mean Pinball

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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Growing up in the 1980s, one of my favorite things to do with my buddies was heading to the mall and hanging out at the arcade. With five bucks, we could play our favorite games, such as Donkey Kong, Pac-Man, Dig-Dug and Gauntlet all day. For some of the more popular games, kids would line up five or six deep to play, resting their quarters on the bottom of the screen to signify their on-deck status. But in the corner of every arcade, stood three or four lonely pinball machines, only occasionally being played by the out-of-place 50-year-old guy.

We youngsters were more drawn to the electronic pixels that dazzled on the big screens of our beloved video games than the relatively primitive and mechanical pinball machines. Because of the naiveté of youth, we didn't recognize the significance of the trailblazing forebear of our video games.

Little did we know that pinball was actually outlawed in many of America's big cities from the early 1940s to the mid-1970s, including New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, where the game was born and where virtually all of its manufacturers have historically been located.

In New York City, Mayor Fiorello Henry LaGuardia (the namesake of the airport) banned pinball on January 21, 1942. The basis for the ban, as was the case with most cities, was that pinball was viewed as a game of chance, not skill, and therefore it constituted a form of gambling. One reason pinball was considered a game of chance was that the flipper wasn't invented until 1947. Accordingly, players had to bump and tilt the machines to maneuver the ball, mostly relying on gravity.

In addition, many lawmakers speculated that pinball was a mafia-run racket that was corrupting America's youth. Mayor LaGuardia alleged pinball machines robbed the "pockets of school children in the form of nickels and dimes given them as lunch money." The NYPD even had Prohibition-style raids where they confiscated thousands of machines and arrested their owners. Mayor LaGuardia and the police commissioner then publicly and ceremonially smashed the pinball machines with sledgehammers and then dumped them into the city's rivers.

Because of the ban, people who played pinball were seen as rebels. To perpetuate that persona, whenever Hollywood wanted to portray a counter-culture anti-hero, they would have him playing pinball. The Who's Pinball Wizard and Happy Days' Fonzi are prime examples.

Finally, in April of 1976, the New York City Council held a hearing to consider lifting the long-standing ban. They were convinced that pinball was a game of skill and not chance after 26-year-old pinball wizard Roger Sharpe told the Council he would pull the plunger and place the ball down the middle lane, which he did. The Council immediately lifted the ban.

Sharpe went on to become the Licensing and Marketing Director at Williams Pinball, the world's largest pinball manufacturer at the time. Unfortunately, Williams closed its pinball division in 2000, so now Stern Pinball in the Chicago suburbs is the only company in the world that still makes pinball machines.

So the next time you see a pinball machine, don't look at it like an ancient relic from a simpler time – see it for what it is – a pioneer of gaming, that persevered statutory bans to open the door for the very arcades that I used to hang out in. Pinball machines deserve our gratitude and respect – full tilt.

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