



ROBERT GLASHÜTTNER / REANIMATE, 14 JUNE 2024

PINBALL!  **PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE PLAY
MACHINE BETWEEN SKILL AND (A BIT OF) LUCK**

OVERVIEW

- ▶ Pinball?
- ▶ Preconceptions
- ▶ History
- ▶ Skill and luck
- ▶ Art, storytelling and spectacle
- ▶ You and the machine
- ▶ Techniques and performance

WHAT IS PINBALL?

- ▶ Shoot a ball on a tilted playfield
- ▶ Try to keep the ball in play (mostly with the flipper fingers)
- ▶ Hit targets (often in a specific order, within a limited amount of time)
- ▶ Get a high score
- ▶ Play with your body
- ▶ Have fun and be intrigued

Whether you've played a pinball machine before or not, you probably could pick it out by sight.

Most share a similar silhouette, but under the glass, each holds a different assortment of components, art, and angles that make up the game.



In this age of video games and powerful handheld devices that use controllers loaded with inputs to transport the player to lushly rendered worlds—



—you might look at the two control buttons on a pinball machine, realize you are swatting at a metal ball rolling down a piece of plywood—

—and ask yourself:



What's the big deal?



It's just another arcade game; a big, wooden box of flashing nonsense.

And there's no strategy to it!



You flip the flippers and hope you get lucky enough to hit something.

The game is built to cheat you.



And I've played pinball before. If you've played one, you've played them all.

PRECONCEPTIONS

- ▶ „Pinball is a game based mostly on luck“
- ▶ „Pinball has no depth to it“
- ▶ „Every pinball machine is the same“

HISTORY

- ▶ Bagatelle (ca. 1700, France)
- ▶ Billard japonais, Stoßpudel (1750-1920)
- ▶ Patent of the spring launcher by Montague Redgrave (1869)
Start of the US based pinball culture (Ohio, Chicago - mostly in the Northeast)
- ▶ Coin operated „Pin games“, mostly sitting on a counter or bar top (1930s)
- ▶ Electromechanical pinball - EM - that kicked out balls and counted scores (1933 onwards)



O see here. We cant stand this! Old Abe's gettin all the pots on the board, this game will have to be played over again or there'l be a fight, **THAT'S CERTAIN.**

This „Cue” is too heavy! and the Platform's "shaky"! O! O! I want to go back in the yard!!!

I say Mac, you travel too near the ground, to play on this board, better surrender **UNCONDITIONALLY.**

Hurrah for our side, go ahead Old Abe! O aint he bully on the bagatelle? you're only got a few more to make, **IT'S A SURE THING!!**

I'll do the best I can Andy, I can do no more.

There is nothing the matter with the **CUE** or the **PLATFORM**, you had the first red, and did not make anything, now he'l win the game.

Pendleton

Little Mac

Old Abe

Grant

Andy Johnson

Vallandigham

A LITTLE GAME OF BAGATELLE, BETWEEN OLD ABE THE RAIL SPLITTER & LITTLE MAC THE GUNBOAT GENERAL.

Published by J.L. Magee, South East cor. Third & Dock Sts. Philad.

Bagatelle



Stoßpudel (ca. 1920)



Billard japonais (ca. 1760)

HISTORY

- ▶ Introduction of the flipper fingers in „Humpty Dumpty“ (1947)
- ▶ Solid-state electronics - SS - with circuit boards and digital displays (mid-1970ies onwards)
- ▶ Videogames vs. pinball (1980s, 1990s)
- ▶ Drought (2000s)
- ▶ Renaissance (2010 onwards)

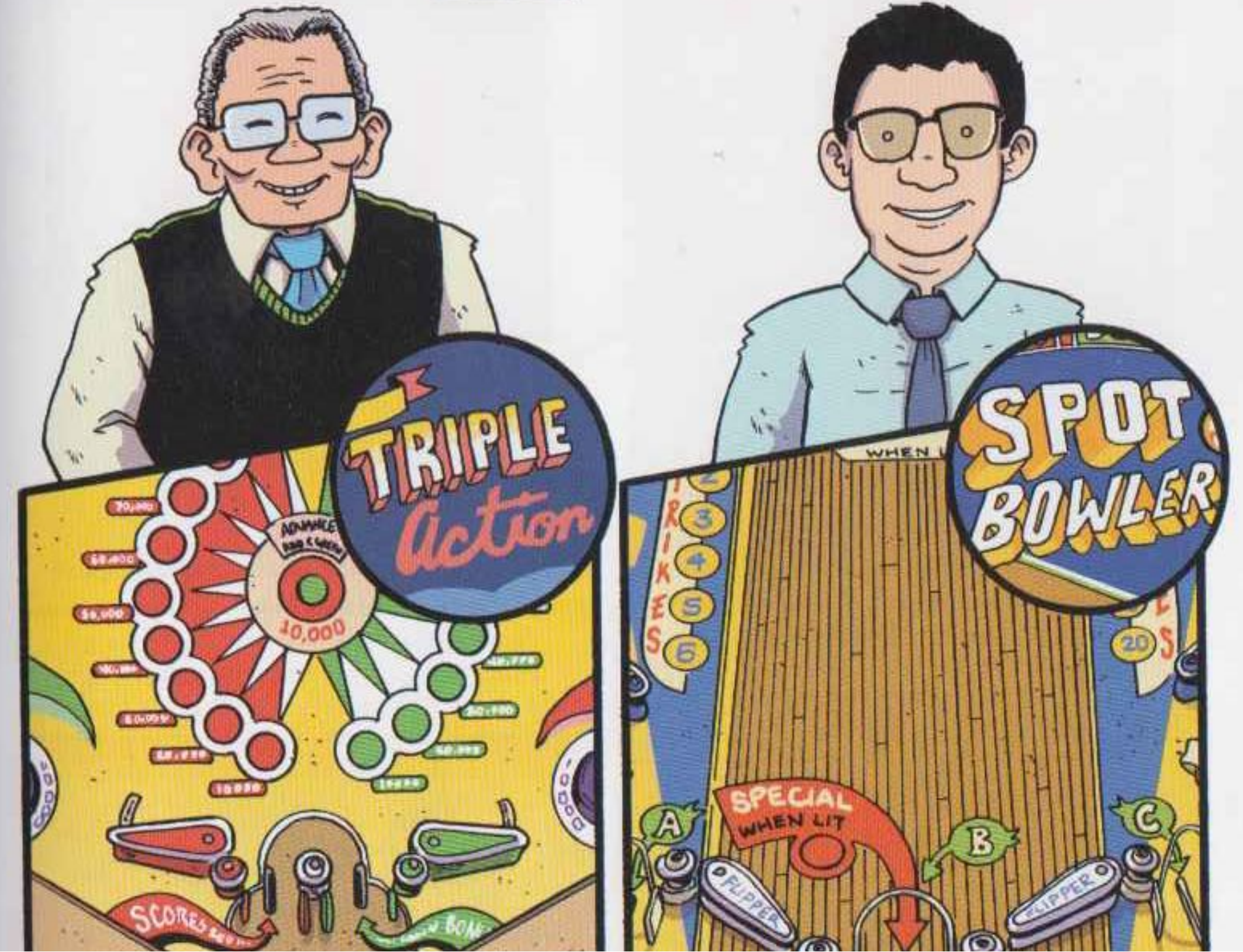
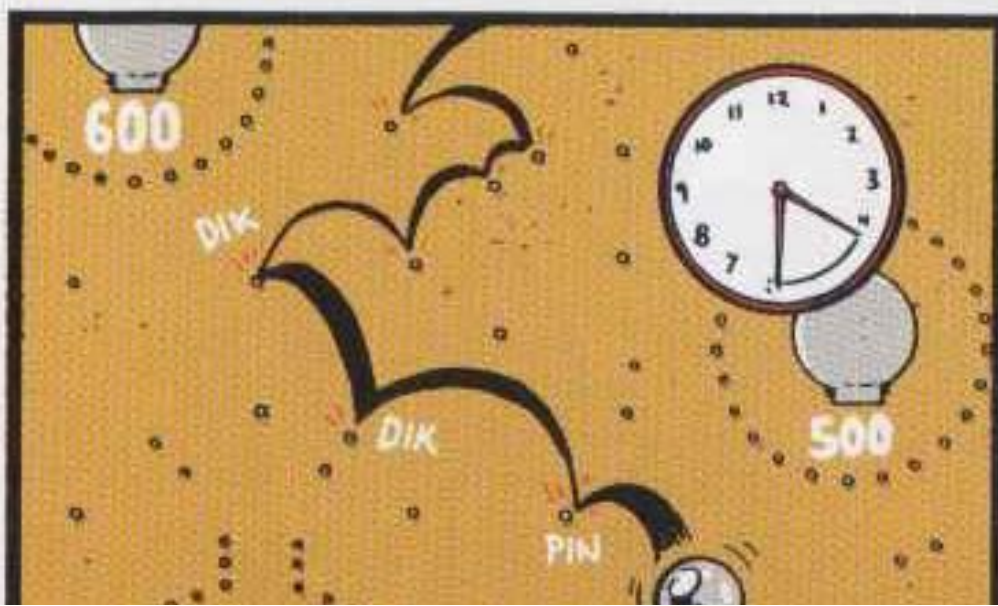
This new way of interacting with a pinball machine was an instant success. Almost overnight, the flipper had made all other pingames obsolete.



Flippers allowed players to control where the ball was directed on the playfield. To stress this, flipper buttons were originally called:

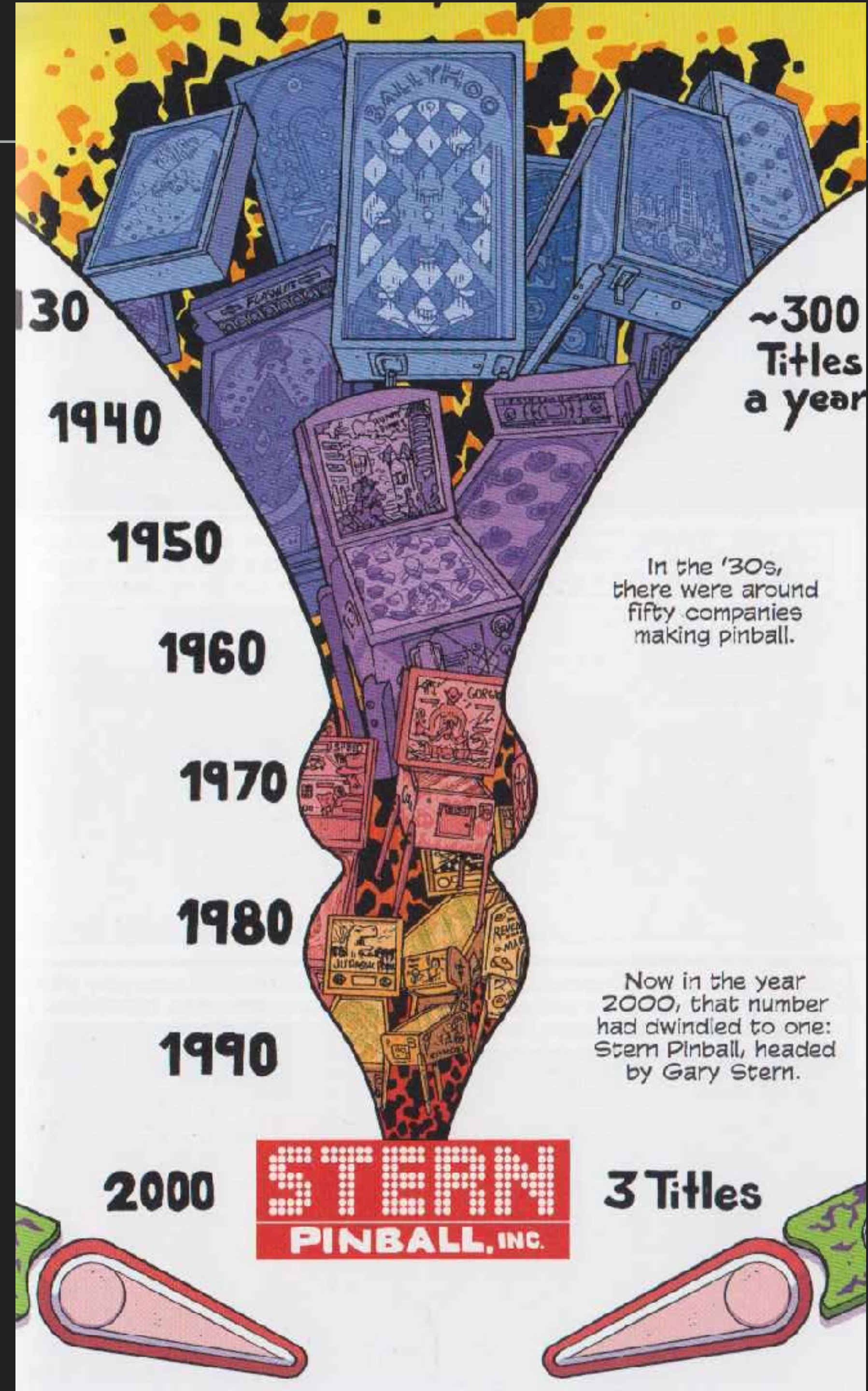


All manufacturers began making games with flippers, or conversion kits to put flippers on their existing, flipperless games.



HISTORY

- ▶ Early pinball was very pervasive and very affordable
- ▶ Fight against videogames was briefly won in the early 90ies
- ▶ Pinball barely survived in the 2000s



SKILL AND LUCK

- ▶ Gambling history: pinball has roots in „mob culture“ of the 30ies and 40ies
- ▶ Ban in the US from the 40ies until the 70ies
- ▶ Roger Sharpe testified in the court in 1976 by calling shots and hitting them:
„The man who saved pinball“
- ▶ „A game of skill“, going upwards from the 50ies and 60ies
- ▶ For some, it was confusing why you'd want to play if it's only about high scores and free games

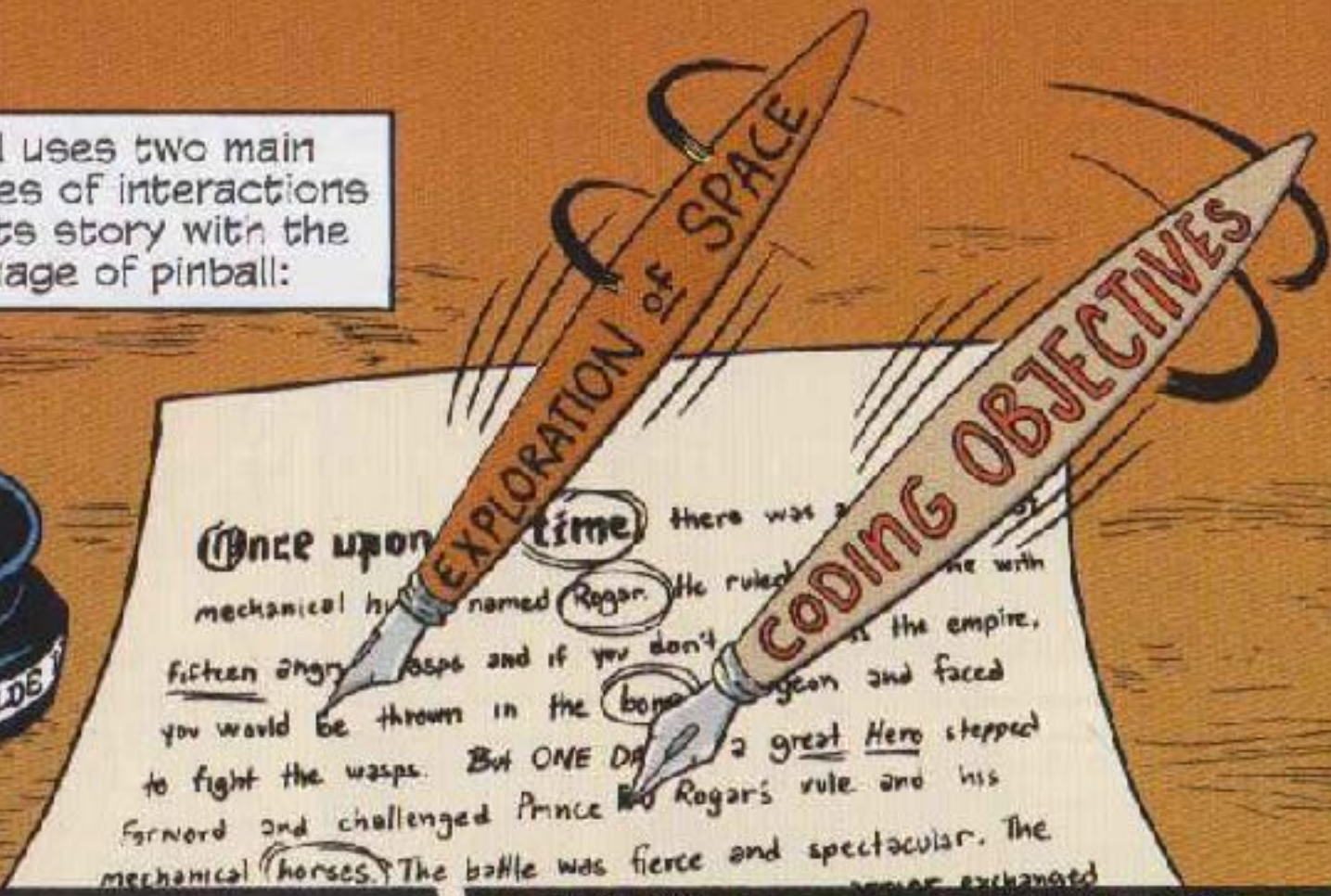
OFFICIAL GAME TRAILER



ART, STORYTELLING AND SPECTACLE

- ▶ Elements: Art, sound, music, game design, but also physical necessities (distances, angles, sturdiness, etc.)
- ▶ Multiple layers of intensity can be achieved. The longer you play, the more you lay free, the bigger the spectacle becomes.
- ▶ Special modes, missions and endgame („wizard mode“) are hidden within.
- ▶ The machine is making many noises, does a big knock when the player gets a replay and uses its lighting very effectively.

Pinball uses two main categories of interactions to tell its story with the language of pinball:



With art, sound, lights, ball path, and topography, shots are dressed to make the player feel like they are being transported to the Jurassic period—

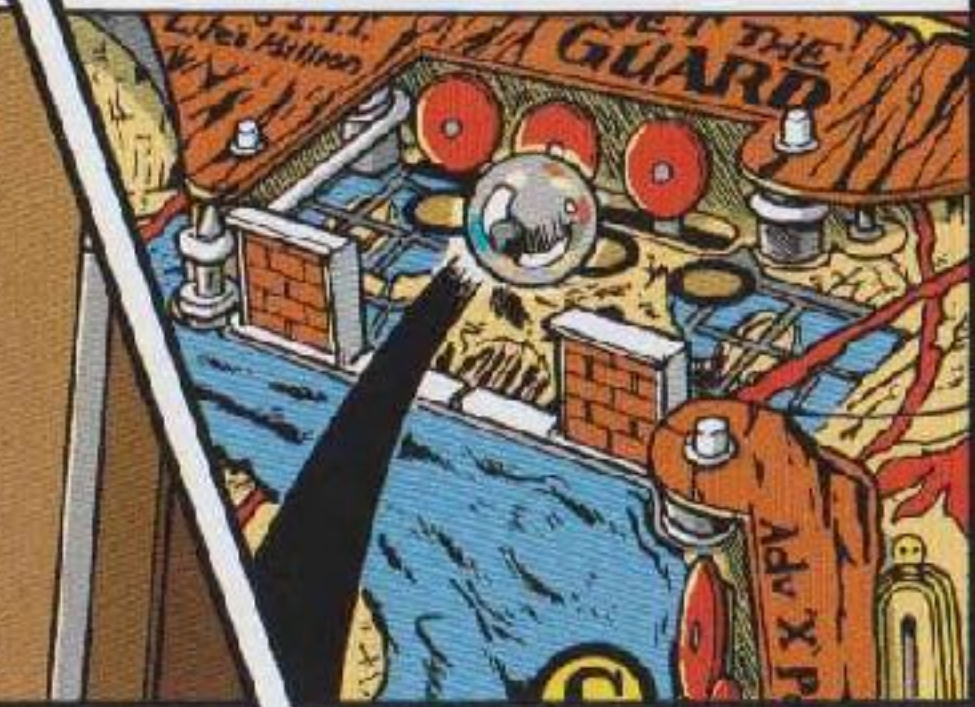


Cautiously investigating the top floor of a haunted house—

—plunging into the depths of a dangerous ocean—



—or evading guards to explore a secret path to the dungeon.



The other way that a pinball machine tells a story is by recoding objectives and interactions between the ball and the machine.

Describing what is actually happening in a pinball machine can sound very benign.

I used a button to activate a solenoid that flipped a plastic flipper that sent a metal ball heading over a switch.

MUSIC

illustration!!

Kinetics!

SOUND &

Lights



I got away from the cops.

Detached from its reality, these moments add up to a transportive experience.



YOU AND THE MACHINE — A SPECIAL KIND OF INTERACTION

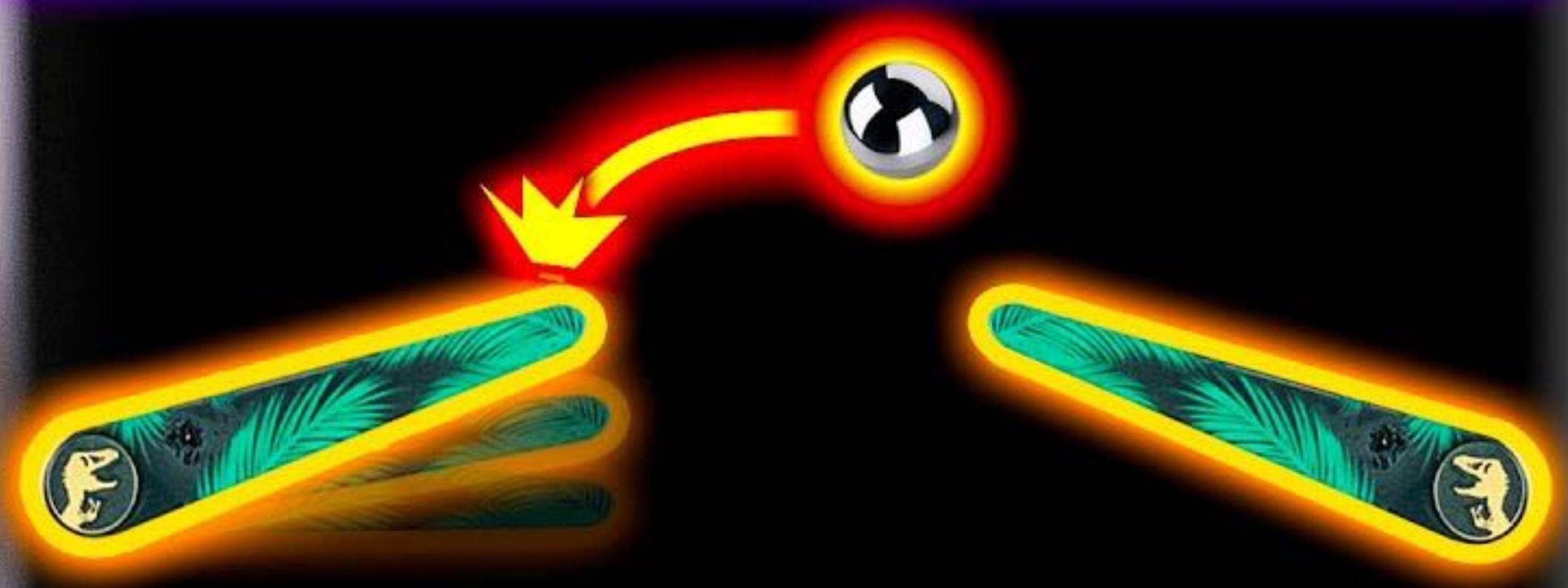
- ▶ The machine is your foe and your ally
- ▶ Symbiosis between human and machine
- ▶ „The ball is wild“ (Harry Williams)
- ▶ Not just every game is different, every single machine is different
- ▶ Playing on your very own table and then on another one of the same design can become difficult

TECHNIQUES AND PERFORMANCE — INTERFACES

- ▶ Interactivity through different buttons
- ▶ 2 (sometimes more) flipper buttons
They are in practice not simple on/off switches!
- ▶ 1 plunger (sometimes a plunger button)
- ▶ 1 start button
- ▶ 1 action button (optional)

HOW TO

MICRO FLIP



TECHNIQUES AND PERFORMANCE — NUDGING

- ▶ Nudging: play with your body!
- ▶ **Nudging the machine is a legitimate action by the player.**
- ▶ It is as important for higher level play as the flipper buttons are.

T I L T

HOW TO

SLAP



SAVE



TECHNIQUES AND PERFORMANCE: PINBALL STANCE. PLAY WITH YOUR BODY!



PRECONCEPTIONS - REVISITED

- ▶ ~~„Pinball is a game based mostly on luck“~~
- ▶ ~~„Pinball has no depth to it“~~
- ▶ ~~„Every pinball machine is the same“~~



Wrong.

In reality, the only certainty about pinball is that every game will be different.

Between the *plunge and drain*,* there exists a cacophonous world of infinite possibilities.

Wh-whoa!

A realm whose randomness is a unique entry in the world of gaming.

While the player is trying to complete game objectives and keep the ball on the playfield, the pinball machine envelops you in a new world.

Pinball machines use art, sound, and game geometry to not just challenge the player, but to also tell a story.

*For more pinball lingo, turn to the glossary at the back of this book.



The skill set used to play pinball—coupled with how pinball machines communicate with players—creates a gaming experience unlike any other.

Incredible! How long has pinball been like this?

For HUNDREDS of years! Pinball is ingrained into the history of American gaming and arcades.

The story of pinball isn't just tied to the arcade boom of the late '70s/early '80s. It goes back much further than that.

And it's a story that almost *ended* in 1976!

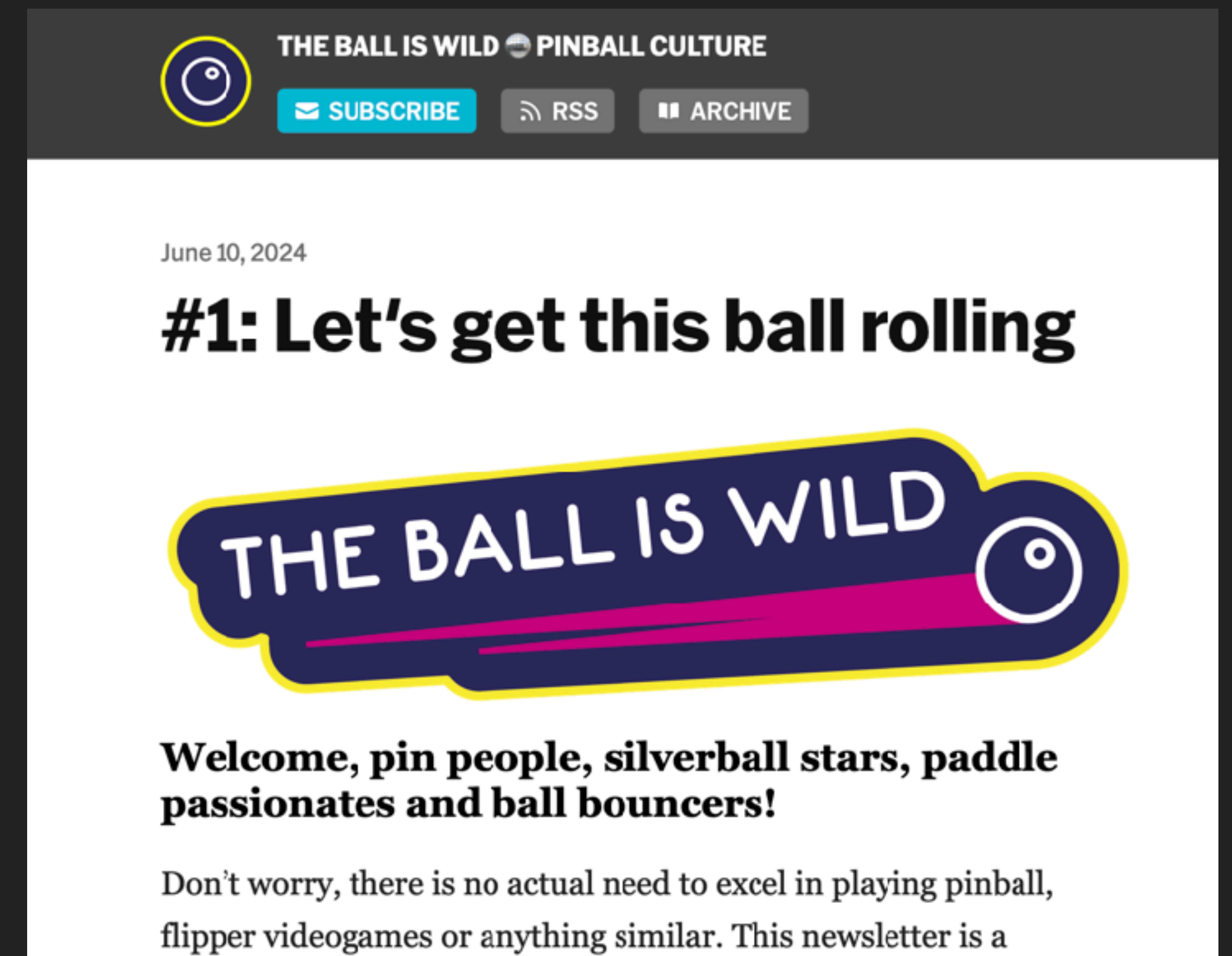
„Pinball: A Graphic History of the Silver Ball“ (Jon Chad, First Second, 2022)

THANK YOU!

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New pinball newsletter! 🌐 🌐 🌐

buttondown.email/TheBallisWild



The screenshot shows the top portion of an email newsletter. At the top, there is a dark grey header bar containing a circular logo with a pinball icon on the left, followed by the text "THE BALL IS WILD" and "PINBALL CULTURE". To the right of the text are three buttons: "SUBSCRIBE" (in a blue box), "RSS" (with an RSS icon), and "ARCHIVE" (with a list icon). Below the header bar, the date "June 10, 2024" is displayed. The main headline reads "#1: Let's get this ball rolling". Below the headline is a large, stylized graphic of the newsletter's logo, which consists of a dark blue rounded rectangle with a yellow border and a pink diagonal stripe, containing the text "THE BALL IS WILD" and a pinball icon. Underneath the graphic, the text reads "Welcome, pin people, silverball stars, paddle passionates and ball bouncers!". At the bottom of the visible section, the text begins with "Don't worry, there is no actual need to excel in playing pinball, flipper videogames or anything similar. This newsletter is a".