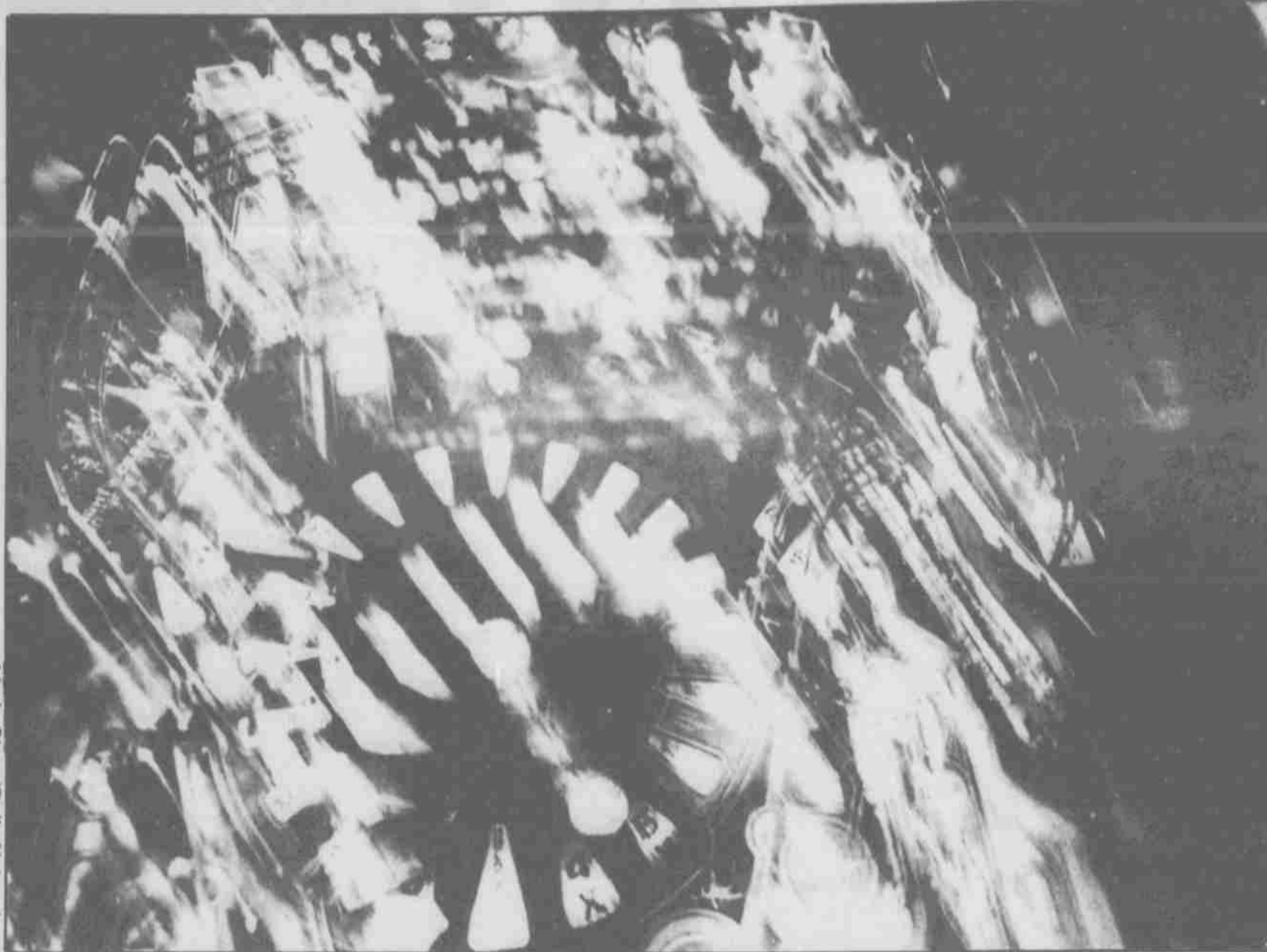


"Touch"

Zen & The Art of Pinball

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I've been fascinated with pinball machines since the age of four, when my dad first hoisted me up on a bar stool to do battle with the flashing lights and silver ball. Pinball wasn't extraordinarily popular back then. Most machines were stuck in the dark corners of cafes or bars, and there weren't many big arcades or pinball palaces lined with rows of noisy machines and pinball maniacs.

That time came in the late '70s when the computer chip caught up with pinball, and, almost simultaneously, I grew tall enough to play without the aid of a chair or bar stool.

The new computer chip speeded up the machines, racking up points faster than the old rolling counters.

My friends and I spent endless hours playing the new-generation machines — "Flash," "Star Trek," "Playboy," and "KISS" (terrible band, great machine). For an entire summer we played, desperately trying to beat the machines, bragging about fantastic games that only occurred when no one else was around, and living for that loud pop that meant a free game.

"Be one with the ball. You are the ball. Use the force," we said, mocking that summer's nit movie, "Star Wars." What else did a 15-year-old have to do in Omaha during the summer? Cruising Dodge Street or walking aimlessly around shopping malls never occurred to us back then.

Pinball was a big fad for everyone that summer. Arcades were popping up everywhere, and people from all walks of life aspired to be pinball wizards. But like all fads, pinball-maina ended. The pinball manufacturers got greedy and made most machines harder to beat and switched from five to three balls per game. Meanwhile, the video game craze took off, and the arcades were taken over by Asteroids, Space Invaders and Donkey King. What was a pinball devotee to do? Some manufacturers even had the nerve to ask 50 cents for a three-ball game! Soon, even I was driven to play the new video games. Most arcades only kept a few token pinball machines, which sat ignored in the dark corners of the arcades.

I still played pinball from time to time over the years, but I returned to the flashing lights and silver ball two years ago when I was a student in Bordeaux, France. People often asked me what I did during my year abroad. Most of the time I lie and tell them I was a "student" attending classes. In reality, I spent that entire school year playing a machine called "Jacks or Better" in the Gaudiois Cafe, a seedy bar, on the Place de La Victoire with a lanky Englishman named Andy, a true wizard who never let the ball drink down the middle. I assure you a finer education I could not have received in a French classroom.

After I returned to the States, I became a pinball fanatic again. I just don't feel right after a day of classes until I've unwound in front of one of my favorite machines. My whole day can depend on how well I do with the silver ball. If I can't score any points or win any games, I go home in a bad mood. On days when the ball never seems to drain, I feel OK, almost at peace with the universe.

The cliché being for me to write would be that pinball is my life. Well, that isn't the case. Pinball *is* life. When one plays pinball, he is, in fact, playing life. Jerzy Kosinski used pinball as a metaphor for a character's life in his latest novel, "Pinball." It was a stupid, useless novel, but a great metaphor.

The silver ball is not unlike our lives. We desperately try to keep the ball up, fighting gravity and scoring more points, trying to improve our lot in life. The only things we have to aid us are the flippers. Like life, the flippers only give us limited control over the bill whose path we can never predict too far in advance.

The path of the silver ball, like the path of our lives, is unpredictable. But the more we play the machine, and the longer we live, we learn the little tricks that help us keep playing. The only rule is that you can't be too rough with the machine. If you get too mean, and shake it too hard, it tilts and you lose the right to play. Life has its rules.

But no matter how good you are at pinball, no matter how long you keep the silver ball

bouncing around at the top among the bumpers, the fifth and final ball will drain, and the "Game Over" sign lights up. Death. It's inevitable.

But wait, we still have those free games. And if that isn't a brilliant argument for life after death, I don't know what is.

Pinball machines are also like our world. They've fallen on hard times. Now that the video game craze has passed and many of the big arcades have closed, the machines are stuck back in the dark corners of bars as they were when I first discovered them when dad put me on a chair so he would go shoot pool with his drinking buddies.

After I got back from Europe the downtown Lincoln arcades had all but disappeared. Tommy's and Game Galry are gone, and most pinball machines are in bars, which doesn't help the under-21 crowd pass the time away. The union has a few machines to help kill time between classes, and a new arcade called The Loft has opened in the Gunnies complex, 13th & Q streets, with pinball at bargain prices: two games for a quarter and five balls per game as it was meant to be. The Loft only has three machines at the moment, but more machines are on the way, the management assured me.

Pinball machines are not only like life, they're also like the movie industry. Pinball has its bombs, its hits, and its trends. Just because pinball has fallen on hard times doesn't mean Bally and Williams, the two big manufacturers, have quit making machines. No, in fact they have both put out some fun, slick machines over the past few years. So here's a partial list and my opinions of the machines found in the downtown Lincoln vicinity.

● **Space Shuttle.** One of the best new machines to come out in years. It's not too complicated to learn the little tricks to win the multi-ball, which can be compared to a multi-orgasm. The only thing I hate is having to watch the unused multi-balls drain at the end of a game. It's like watching a favorite baseball team strand men on base at the end of an inning. Any rumors that this machine will blowup after 76 seconds are not true.

Where it's found: The Loft.

● **Comet.** This is one of Bally's new machines cluttered with clear loop-the-loops and ramps which are entirely too distracting. Pinball is like any other sport, you have to keep your eye on the ball. That's impossible with Comet.

Where it's found: The Zoo Bar, the Union.

● **Motordome.** Another irritating machine with clear, yet still distracting, ramps. The only thing interesting about this machine is that you can program in your skill level. I didn't really like it enough to try to figure out what skills level makes it easier to beat. Keeping the ball up is fairly easy.

Where it's found: Brass Rail.

● **High Speed.** A state-of-the-art machine that's just plain fun to play. It's not at all complex. Just hit all the traffic lights, then escape off the ramp. Lots of interesting noises and a James Bond-like soundtrack. This is the best machine to come out in years.

Where it's found: The Union, W.C. Frank.

● **Eight Ball Deluxe.** An old standard with several different versions. But all entail knocking the flags representing the pool balls with, of course, the eight ball last. Not my favorite, but a classic machine.

Where it's found: W.C.'s, the Union.

● **Fire Power.** One of the more popular machines to come out in the last 10 years. I don't understand why. There are not many interesting things to shoot at. The multi-ball is easy to get along, though. Maybe that explains its popularity.

● **Centaur II.** I never played Centaur I, but this machine is definitely the best discovery I made while researching this article. I beat the machine on the fifth try, but I'm not sure how. At one point, the machine unleashed an incredible five multi-balls on me. That might be a few too many to handle, but I still had fun. My only advice until I've played the machine more, is simply to keep knocking things down, then hit the shaft on the right side.

Where it's found: The Loft.