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OF THE ARTS

By Paula Lavigne

TV-free life has benefits, new freedom

Don't ask me what Rachel and Ross are doing. Deep Space Nine has been galaxies away. No, I haven't seen the new Smashing Pumpkins video. And I lost track of Sami's plot to destroy Carrie's life a long time ago.

Four months ago, after I took my television on a cross-country trip in the back of my car, the 20-inch RCA wonder gave up on me.

One of two pieces of furniture in my apartment, my TV just sits there looking forlorn. Hooked up to the VCR, it plays videos; but other than that, it's mute.

I didn't have enough time or money to get it repaired, and, at first, I wondered how I'd live without it.

No more coming home and flipping it on to fill the void of a lonely, silent apartment. No more lounging in front of it while working on a bowl of pasta.

So, when I started my TV-free phase, I thought it wouldn't last.

For the first month, it was kind of a pain. I wasn't a big fan of television before, but I missed the few shows I watched. I really missed CNN, but made up for that by watching the black-and-white TV at work (but only when the sports staff didn't turn it to ESPN).

I started listening to National Public Radio in the morning, and I started reading more at night. Then it became pretty normal, and I realized the benefits of not being plugged in.

Point being, I could have been doing better things.

I did. I mean, although it sounds odd for a news person to be turned off by a news medium, I really was sick of television. Aside from CNN, I felt that everything was geared toward the lowest common denominator. Commercials, fluff-news programs, talk shows, cops shows and poorly written sitcoms were the fruitcake of the television banquet. And I wasn't very hungry.

During my hiatus, I kind of pictured myself in the elitist position of someone who shunned pop culture and refused to give in to the forces of commercialized broadcasting. (Yeah, OK, so that's just an excuse for being too lazy to run the chunk of metal to Best Buy for a tuneup.) But it was kind of nice being free from "Tickle Me" Elmo commercials.

Even with that newfound freedom, though, I felt kind of left out. There are things you just have to see — like Nebraska football and seeing Bob Dole on Saturday Night Live.

So, even though it's been a successful experiment, I think I'm going to give up. When I move this January, I'll get the television fixed and subscribe to Cablevision.

Yeah, I know, it means I've re-assimilated. But, hey, I just have to know what my "Friends" are up to.

Lavigne is a senior news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan associate news editor.

Pinball wizardry

Game remains popular after centuries of play

By Cliff Hicks
Staff Reporter

The Who was singing about it in the '60s and '70s, it was banned in New York City for 34 years, it's centuries old and it's still making money across the world.

It's pinball.

Despite its age, pinball is still one of America's favorite pastimes. No fewer than 20 different major pinball machines are released every year, taking in an average of more than \$20 million annually.

"I spend like four bucks a month on it," said Chad Weidner, a senior business administration major. "It's a cheap habit."

Pinball is an addiction for thousands, and the reasons vary as much as the personalities of those who play the games.

Weidner said he played the game for the thrills involved.

"I live for the chance for a replay," he said. Weidner said his grandfather was a pinball junkie and the addiction was passed on to him.

"It's better than video games," Weidner said. "You can get a replay for free, which is something you never get on other games."

Free games or replays are skill-based, allowing skilled players to rack up enough points to win a free game. An additional feature known as the "match" dispenses free games if a random number matches the last two digits of a player's score.

The game traces its origins back to ancient Greece, where it was played on hillsides on a smooth marble surface, using large stone balls and holes in the ground.

After that, a large gap in the history of the game is filled with Pachinko and bagatelle, both of which are considered ancestors to the modern pinball machine. The first machine was upright, with just pins and holes in the board, thus coining the name "pinball."

Actual coin-operated pinball was introduced in 1931. Flippers weren't added to the game until 1936, and they weren't placed at the bottom and facing each other, as they do now, until 1950. Even then, they were tiny compared to the now standard flipper size, introduced in 1970.

The first customized addition to pinball (after the coin-operation system) was the tilt device, which most pinball players have come to hate. Any severe rocking of the machine will cause a coin-operated machine to lock up, costing the player one of their three game balls.

Since then, pinball has come a long way, with dozens of additional bells, whistles, chutes and other assorted gizmos.

But the steps have all been logical, according to Josh Paymer, a pinball historian who owns more than 30 different machines.

"It's just getting more and more complex to keep the game interesting," Paymer said. "Players constantly want new challenges and pinball companies are trying to provide."

Tables, as pinball machines are called, are now themed after various movies or topics. Current machines include:

- Goldeneye (after the James Bond film).
- Whodunit? (a mystery-noir theme).
- Star Trek: The Next Generation (after the television show).
- Star Wars (after the film classic).



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LANE HICKENBOTTOM

• Indiana Jones (after the film series).

• The Twilight Zone (after the classic television show).

There are upcoming tables based on films like "Space Jam" and "Daylight" as well. Movies and television are common themes for tables.

Currently, Tilt! on the lower level of Omaha's Westroads Mall only has one table, "Freddy's Nightmare" based on the horror icon, but tables come and go. Tilt!'s general manager, Kevin Kamphuis, said.

"They (tables) have their following," Kamphuis said.

Kamphuis also said there is no specific age group that plays pinball.

"It varies," Kamphuis said. "We get everybody."

Paymer said, "It's not uncommon to see younger kids playing pinball, but it's the older players who have the skill necessary to acquire a replay."

Weidner said he gets free replays about half the time. Some players even play for more than three hours on one quarter.

This system of free replays caused pinball to be banned in New York City for 34 years. Claiming the system was a form of gambling, Mayor Fiorello

Henry LaGuardia smashed several pinball machines in front of a supportive crowd.

In 1976, however, a man by the name of Roger Sharpe attended a City Council meeting and demonstrated that pinball was indeed a game of skill by winning a replay in front of them. The ban was repealed.

The ban is still in effect on replays in New York City, though.

However, most arcades, bars and convenience stores in New York ignore this ban — there are no known citations for giving out replays since.

There were three major companies making pinball machines at the beginning of this year: Bally/Midway, Gottlieb and Sega. Of the three, the Bally/Midway group is by far the oldest and most respected among players, with Sega simply a newcomer.

Each has its own plans for the future of pinball. Sega's idea is to add more balls and chutes, making game play more challenging.

"Sega seems to focus on the bells and whistles a lot, and not all that much on actual game play," Paymer said.

"Plus, they've been trying to do multi-balls with way too many balls."

Paymer said Sega's "Apollo 13" table has a 13-ball multi-ball mechanism.

"Those machines are always broken," Paymer said.

Bally/Midway is working on a token-redemption system, which will be released shortly. Such a move would give players an extra goal for which to strive.

"Bally/Midway are the biggest company in the business and probably the best," Paymer said. "They always seem to be one step ahead of the competition and their machines are rarely in need of repair."

Gottlieb, however, shut down in October of this year, citing poor responses to its machines in arcades and low productivity. Even though Gottlieb put fewer than five tables on the market each year, Paymer says it will be greatly missed.

"It's always sad to see a pinball company pass away," Paymer said. "If we're not careful, pinball could become a dead art."