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Pinball Wizard at Full Tilt

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Electronic Indiana Jones, CSI and Twilight Zone pinball games sounding off like miniature police cars and laser guns are what most people want to play when they walk into the Pacific Pinball Museum in Alameda. But Michael Schiess, who founded and runs the place, lodges those games behind four other long rooms, all the way in back.

In the 4,000 square-foot museum—the first to publicly curate pinball machines as artifacts of American art, science and pop-culture—there are seven decades' worth of playable pinball machines Schiess wants visitors to discover first. About 90 of them line the base of walls painted with bold, pop art close-ups of vintage pinball bumpers. Light bulbs glowing like neon Broadway show lights frame Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire look-a-likes in machines from the forties. From the fifties, there are sexy, Technicolor parodies of TV shows like *Dragnet*. Jetson-esque artwork prevails in the sixties space-race era; sex and rock 'n' roll rule in seventies' games like *Captain Fantastic*, (featuring Elton John as a pinball wizard chased by busty groupies). For decades, guilds of top-of-their-game artists and mechanics would spend months drafting and crafting these machines for maximum seduction. So addictive were some of these older machines that at one time they were outlawed in cities from New York to Oakland. In the fifties and sixties, pinball machines raked in more money than the entire film industry.

Schiess has made it his mission in life to get people to understand why.

“Nobody was promoting pinball the way I wanted to see it promoted,” says Schiess, whose usual smile turns into a wince at any suggestion that gaming variety and nostalgic pleasure are all his museum offers. “If you think about it, these things were built for people to put money in them, so each one says something meaningful about American culture in the year it came out. It would be a shame for all that to just rot away.”

So Schiess often stands at the entrance, his brown hair slicked back, ready to give visitors a more in-depth tour of the museum. A usual polo shirt-and-jeans combo gives him the professional but comfortable look he needs to bounce easily between the museum and the nearby warehouse where he and a crew of volunteers are perpetually restoring and repairing more pinball machines. He's a 56-year-old with an arthritic hip, but the closer he gets to the pinball machines, the more he looks like a young boy who can't wait to show you the most awesome collection of toys you've ever seen.

Outside the museum, though, the objects of his passion have barely survived. Video games almost completely decimated the pinball industry in the mid-nineties. Only one company in world, Chicago-based Stern Pinball, still makes pinball machines. And, because repairing old pinball machines can be so complicated and costly, most machines ever made have been trashed instead of preserved.

So why does Schiess, an electric mechanic who rents out the bottom half of a house he shares with his wife in Alameda, think he can continue making a living while curating a

pinball museum? Or, a better question yet: Why is Schiess so dead-set on expanding the museum into a 40-50,000-square-foot bar/diner/“Smithsonian of pinball museums?”

Partly because his faith in a full-blown pinball renaissance—fueled by an appreciation of pinball history, rather than any coming 21st century innovations—is starting to pay off. Pinball tournaments have grown so popular at the museum that he’s stopped advertising for them. The \$15 admission rate for unlimited games has kept the museum profitable even during the recession. On one day in December, more than 4,000 people using Groupon bought admission tickets. More youth and student groups are visiting for field trips by day. More pinball parties are popping up by night. A showcase at the San Francisco Airport featured the museum’s pinball games as art, while companies as large as Google and Genentech have rented part of the museum’s collection for up-scale events. The annual Pacific Pinball Expo Schiess helped start and organized for the last four years in San Rafael now draws thousands of visitors from more than 20 countries, and is the largest pinball expo in the world. And if imitation is a form of flattery, the Pacific Pinball Museum is getting plenty of it from pinball museums now popping up all over the country.

But that isn’t the real reason.

It’s this: Schiess manages the most rare and largest known collection of pinball machines in the world, and he believes its future preservation now depends on the museum expanding into something bigger and more permanent. Collectors across the country came out of the woodwork to donate their games when the pinball community Schiess developed merged with a financially supportive set of collectors who became the Pacific Pinball Museum’s board members. One collector from Florida—who spent half his life hunting up and down the east coast for games—has donated 240 1950’s wood rail machines. One local collector has committed another 800-plus collection, many pieces of which no one else owns. The rest came from a large network of Bay Area pinheads who have all a) chosen to splurge on pinball games instead of Porsches for their mid-life crises and/or b) suddenly realized the whole concept of the game might die with them if they can’t find a way to interest another generation in it. Many in the same network volunteer weekly to fix and restore hundreds of pinball machines awaiting exhibition in a gigantic warehouse. Altogether, they and Schiess are intent about maintaining or restoring at least 1,300 machines.

Meanwhile, Schiess’ uncertainty as to whether this collection can continue to be stored in its current warehouse is growing. Protecting the games from the leaky roof is growing more problematic, especially when trickling water threatens the rarest flipper-era machine, the illustrious Mermaid, a 1951 Gottlieb masterpiece valued at \$17,000.

And though the first lease for the space was a steal, the leasing company has gradually piled more fees onto the warehouse rent, including property tax. The company assured Schiess that rent won’t skyrocket when the lease is up for renewal in a few months, but it’s a worry that stays in the back of his head. Unable to afford a large space anywhere else yet,

Schiess has tried for months to lease a long-vacated, 1930's style warehouse on Alameda Point. On the outside, its columns and regal lion statues give it "that museum look," and, inside, its high ceilings and two-story open level design would make it easy to take in the entire museum in one intensely colorful view. Schiess pictures creating an original recreational destination that draws people to the city the way Neptune Beach—a legendary beachfront amusement park—used to attract people to the city in the early 1900's.

So far, though, city officials have been unresponsive to calls for any support—or even Schiess' invitations to visit the pinball museum.

"For how many people we bring into the city, it's amazing how much they ignore us," Schiess says. "I thought when we asked about this old, vandalized space they were going to say 'Sure. Fix it up. What else are we going to do with it?' But before they'd even let me see the inside, they wanted me to draw up plans and see how much money they could get out of us."

He also knows, though, that Alameda is no exception to the thousands of cities across the country struggling with budget problems and law suits. A small chance that the pinball museum could move to a pier next to the Exploratorium when it relocates to San Francisco's Embarcadero gleams in the future. He just hopes he and his volunteer team can keep the ball rolling in the East Bay for the meantime.

"We've got a lot of important American culture here," Schiess says while working in his warehouse one evening. "And we want to be in a facility that should be totally clean and environmentally controlled. But we're in a warehouse here because this is what we can afford. We don't get any funding and grants—this is just a lot of people throwing their backs into this thing and making it work."

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Schiess was 13, and living in Albuquerque, New Mexico when he got hold of his first pinball machine. His father was an engineer and a tinkerer with a backyard scrap heap, so when a nearby car wash closed, Schiess rolled a wheelbarrow down to the abandoned site just to see what interesting junk he could find. "One of the things I found was this big arrow with all these big bulbs on it that would light up," Schiess recalls. "I got it going again and traded it to my friend for a pinball machine. I'm pretty sure it was a Gottlieb Kings and Queens. We beat the crap out of it."

Pinball was always fun for Schiess. But from the time he first laid eyes on the game, he was also endlessly fascinated at how alluring so simple a game could be. Some mystery about human desire had to be lurking inside it.

"I always thought that, as a species, that it was pretty amazing we came up with this amusement box," Schiess says. "That always blew me away. You just put a quarter in and

this ball starts bouncing around? That's *it*? So then I did it, and thought, 'Wow. This is fun. So this is what humanity has been bred for.'

What he didn't know then was that he was joining a long line of Americans who had been just as fascinated by the simple goal of keeping a ball bouncing around a playfield. According to pinball historians, that line started at the American Revolution. French soldiers brought America the bagatelle, a pinball precursor, at the same time they gave New England colonies the martial power needed to defeat British rule. Players shot balls with cue sticks around a small box with nails, or pins, used to ricochet them into holes with varying point values. It was French King Louis XIV's favorite game. Bagatelle continued to be played in America by the poor and the presidential for more than the next century. Schiess has one, from 1879, displayed under glass at the very front of the Pinball Museum.

Then Baffle Ball, one of the first coin-operated pinball games, hit the American market in 1931 with such force that its producer, David Gottlieb, couldn't manufacture enough to meet public demand. The wooden tabletop game featured baseball-field bases and bagatelle-like pins nailed into the playfield. The game didn't have flippers yet; scoring completely depended on the force with which you plunged the ball into the game and the players' ability to gently nudge the ball without activating a "tilt" sensor that would end the game. One cent bought a player seven balls, which made Baffle Ball an overnight hit for a depression-era public eager for cheap entertainment. Enough points won the player free games they could sell to others or a coin payout—which would later lead to pinball being called a gambling device.

Within a year of Baffle Ball's release, at least 150 other pinball manufacturers had popped up, all started by individuals tinkering in their garages. Some were even funded by National Recovery Act grants. A restored Baffle Ball game is displayed at the museum, but it is still off-limits to everyone but Schiess and other museum personnel, who love to show people how it works. "You got to kind of knock it around to make anything go right," Schiess demonstrates. Then the devices became even more exciting with the 1933 Rockola World Series: The plunger that sprung the ball into play wound up a set of rotating infield bases that could be filled with multiple pinballs that could score runs.

Proliferating styles of the game addicted so many people that for decades, pinball was illegal in many US cities, including New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and Oakland. It was often suspected of being a gambling and crime-funding game. In the weeks following the attack on Pearl Harbor, New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia even told police their top priority would be confiscating pinball games, then smashing each in public with sledgehammers. Because of the coin slots they shared with slot machines of the day, pinball games were associated with gambling rings that financed now legendary New York City criminals: Frank Costello, Charles "Lucky" Luciano (often considered the father of modern organized crime in America), Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, Jacob "Gurrah" Shapiro and Louis "Lepke" Buchalter (the latter two created Murder, Inc., a nationwide murder-for-hire

syndicate). On the Pacific Pinball Museum's wall are photos of La Guardia and police bashing pinball playfields in. At first, the machines' crushed remains were sunk like murdered bodies into the Hudson River. But once scrap drives started for World War II, newly confiscated pinball games were instead turned into 7,000 pounds of scrap material, 3,000 pounds of it from steel balls. There's a good chance, in fact, that some of the pinballs once shot at games' imaginary enemies were melted down into bullets that shot at very real Axis soldiers.

On the opposite coast, similar pinball raids were taking place in Oakland. A Bally Bumper from that era, the first game with electronic bumpers and scoreboard, was saved from destruction in Oakland by a cop who hid it in his own garage in Alameda, at the time a red-light district and pinball safe-haven. The policeman played it and kept its minimalist art deco designs in mint condition for 70 years before he died and his brother donated it to the Pacific Pinball Museum. Games like Bally Bumper didn't have flippers yet either. When Schiess plays it in the museum now, he physically tilts and knocks around the large, antique box, the way everyone else did back in the day, to score points.

To survive the illegalization movement and conserve materials during World War II, pinball manufacturers started focusing more on interchangeable art for the games. Colors multiplied and were lit more brightly. Bells rang louder. Imagery became more sexy and carnivalesque. One of the most popular was Gottlieb's 1954 Dragonette (each game has a placard summarizing its history). The Roy Parker backglass art is a soft-porn parody of the TV crime drama *Dragnet*, which centers on a scantily clad female. While a suspect in the corner glances at her and grabs a pickle from a barrel, a detective says to her, "Just want the facts, mam! The bare facts ... mam." By the 50's and 60's, rebellious youth inching toward an era of sexual liberation were so drawn to empty their pockets for pinball that the game made more money than the entire film industry.

In the 1970's, pinball fever was the center of the first rock opera, The Who's "Tommy." The story dwelled on a traumatized, deaf, dumb and blind kid who goes from being exploited for his disabilities to being religiously worshipped as a pinball champion who masters "feeling all the bumpers/Always playing clean/He plays by intuition" because "he sure plays a mean pinball." Those are the lyrics of "Pinball Wizard," one of the many lasting classic rock hits to come off the epic album. But that would end up being the height of cultural consciousness for pinball. With the advent of video arcade games, pinball's popularity flickered; by the mid-nineties, home video games had taken over, and the only pinball machines left in public were lonely, corner wallflowers in the decreasing number of bars, restaurants and bowling alleys willing to maintain them.

Over the years, guys like Schiess didn't love the game any less, though.

"Once you eject that ball, chaos theory comes into play. No two games of pinball are the same," Schiess says. "It's not like a video game where every possible outcome is

programmed into it.”

While pinball’s cultural significance basically went on life support, Schiess decided he’d finally do more than play the game—he’d take a deeper look at what exactly did go into a pinball machine by designing his own. It would be a sacrilegious machine called “The Last Supper,” featuring Jesus Christ, his disciples, and lady-friends having fun and getting their divine drink on. He wanted to design it in the style of one of his favorite pinball backglass artists, Christian Marche, who drew uber-mod characters with sharp angles and gracefully elongated limbs. But as he reconstructed the old pinball body he wanted to use for it, Schiess also fell in love with the creative electromechanical and geometric designs used to make the machine work. And that led him into learning about how entire teams of artists, engineers and game theorists would spend weeks or months mocking up the strategy and story behind each game.

Schiess had to get his hands on more vintage pinball machines to play, but they were hard to come by. Schiess couldn’t afford to fully indulge the endless appetite he now had for vintage pinball machines, so he started putting feelers out for other pinheads who might invite him to play their collections. You had to know people who knew other people and get invited to their private basements to play them. No one person had too many on hand—except for one guy, a legend of the Bay Area’s pinball subculture.

Suddenly, Schiess decided, finishing “The Last Supper” was much less important than finding this guy.

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*This gambling mania is even worse than liquor as a spectacle of complete waste. It’s a waste of money, a waste of time and social waste. The very atmosphere of respectability associated with slot machine clubs adds to the sum total of evil.” — Dr. Daniel A. Poling, national church leader speaking out against pinball clubs in the Spokane Daily Chronicle, 1949*

So for two years, starting in 2000, Schiess spent Thursday nights cruising around East Bay residential neighborhoods looking for one thing: a glowing, blue-violet light bulb. The light! Where the hell was it? For two years, spotting anything close to it did not happen (or, at least he won’t admit to bothering people who lived near anything like it). Beyond the bulb was a decade-old party scene and local pinball kingpin he needed to acquaint himself with. It sounded like he was one of the few pinheads who had truly fallen in love with the game’s art and construction as much as he had.

“It was so secretive, I didn’t even know what city he lived in,” Schiess recalls. Then, while picking up house wares in a downtown Berkeley shop one day, Schiess began chatting with a tall, free-spirited guy who worked there. The conversation hovered around Schiess’ vintage motorcycle until he spotted something in the back of the shop.

“Is that ... a pinball machine?” Schiess asked.

“Yeah, I fix them up on the side,” the shop employee said. “You got one?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, well you should come to this thing I do at my house on Friday nights.”

“You’re—you’re *that* guy?”

Schiess had finally found him—and learned that the parties took place only a block and half away from where he used to live. Within reach stood a legitimate initiation into the Bay Area’s full underground pinball scene.

So the next Friday night, Schiess drove to the blue-violet bulb illuminating an inconspicuous basement door in Berkeley, unknowingly arriving at a turning point in his life.

On the other side of the door, within walls and a ceiling covered in kitschy holiday ornament lights, toys, US President masks and comics, was a kaleidoscopic wonderland of pinball machines. Lights glowed and seductively danced around the backglass art and playfields of over 40 vintage games, each one set on free play for Bay’s most dedicated pinheads and their friends. No other place in the country had such an operating collection.

“It was mind-boggling,” Schiess remembers.

Games from almost every decade, stretching back to the 1930’s, represented the kinds of fantasies people most wanted to be sucked into in each era. On “Ship Mates,” imaginary swim-suited babes swarm a sailor who would obviously like to be doing other things at sea. Others took the player to the circus, a burlesque show, or a space journey. One year after another, the complexity of games transformed to entrance more players. Despite how ubiquitous these American-made pinball machines used to be for decades all over the world, the games are now exceptionally rare—playable versions of them even more so. Only small fraction of games had fallen into the hands of people who knew how to repair and restore them.

The guy who'd put this basement collection together was one of those people. He has a real name, but in these circles he goes only by the name Pinball Mac, or just “Mac.” His lair had become a place where an underground subculture of pinball collectors and lovers could network and share a unique addiction. Even the pinball machines many of his guests own at home descend from a pinball rescue trip Mac made in the early-nineties. Mac traveled out to Omaha, Nebraska to find 500 abandoned machines before they were about to be trashed, and then shipped them to Bay Area via a Union Pacific train. Mac isn’t the classic “gamer”

type interested in beating everyone else's high score. It was only after being pressured to use his electrical engineering skills to fix a friend's machine that he fell in love with the history, artwork and creative networks of mechanisms inside each. Schiess and Mac have that love story in common.

At Mac's place, Schiess realized what else he loved—this atmosphere of people kicking back and reviving artifacts of American pop-culture history; of people zoning into a carefully crafted, physical game with no computerized routes to victory. As Pinball Mac continued to revel the esoteric culture of the small number pinball lovers left in the world, the thought of such collections privately shriveling up and dying off with each owner killed Schiess. His gut told him that if the public had a chance to see and play with pinball history, the game's popularity could be revived. And from Mac's basement, Schiess met other artistic types like Dan Fontes who believed the same.

“In the eighties and nineties, you had this rise and fall, rise and fall based on the success of certain games,” Fontes says. “But what's unique about this point in time is that there's this wave of privately owned pinball machines, pinball shows and now a third wave of small pinball museums, and that had never happened before. There's something about the American identity to be discovered in these games — the love of inventing, tinkering, amusing, winning and even cheating to win are all very American.”

So six months later, Schiess respectfully asked Mac if he could start his own pinball lounge and get-togethers. Mac gave him not only his blessing, but also a neon “Lucky Juju” sign that had once hung outside his own basement. Schiess displayed it next to the doorway of the small pinball parlor he started in 2002, and named the parlor, accordingly, the Lucky Juju. As Schiess's connections grew, the parlor expanded into the Pacific Pinball Museum and Mac continued to support him.

That didn't mean Mac wasn't skeptical about what Schiess was doing, though.

“Pinball's money-making days are over,” says Mac, at one of the Friday-night meetups he still hosts. “They're nowhere near as cost-efficient or convenient as video games and we're not going back in time. Some have more metal parts than most cars do these days. I'd rather just maintain and open up my games to others for fun.”

But building up the pinball museum has never been about making money, and that in itself, ironically, has helped Schiess and other museum board members rack up enough monetary support and pinball machine contributions to make the museum what is today. As word got around that Schiess was building up a nonprofit museum to revive pinball as artifacts of American art and science, he traveled around the state more and more to pick up individual donations. Two years ago, Schiess stepped up to cross-country pickup along with Larry Zartarian, the museum's board chair; and Pacific Pinball Expo founder Jim Dietrick. That quest to Poughkeepsie, New York and Orlando, Florida took them to a one-of-a-kind

collection put together by Gordon “Gordo” Hasse. Schiess and the museum’s board members had found a kindred spirit Hasse, a creative ad executive who had spent half his life plotting out road trips from New York City to basements and warehouses in small towns from Kentucky to Maine just to pick up pinball machines. His searches, which began in the sixties and came to a close just as eBay got big, added up to 240 of the 1950’s Gottlieb wood rail machines he eventually donated to the Pacific Pinball Museum. Afraid of having them commercially shipped, Hasse would stuff the machines into his station wagon over a weekend, sometimes daring to strap two to the roof of his car. “It was tedious,” Hasse says of driving with two pinball machines tied to the top of a car for hundreds of miles. “But I couldn’t let any of them get away from me! There was always the chance I’d never find one of them again.”

Asked how much his collection was worth, and if he ever considered selling it instead of donating it, Hasse says he doesn't know and no—he’s never estimated how much, and he has never considered selling it.

“It was just never my motivation,” Hasse says over the phone from his new home in Orlando, Florida. “I collected because I value the games inherently and I want them to be available to be seen and played. The average person younger than 55 has never even seen a wood-rail.”

But Schiess also gets support from pinheads who have a more old-fashioned attitude about pinball. One is Tim Arnold, director of the Pinball Hall of Fame in Las Vegas. His place is set up more as a moneymaking arcade than a museum.

“Tim Arnold called them quarter whores, and I thought, what is he talking about?” Schiess says. “And from an operator’s perspective, yeah, [the machines are] either pulling in the quarters or it’s ‘Get back out there and pound some pavement, bitch.’ But I just keep on looking at him and he says, ‘Mike, you’re still in the romantic stage. Soon you’ll begin to see them like we see them.”

“But I don’t think I could ever leave that [stage], because if I did, it would kind of change the whole thing for me.”

A year and a half after starting the museum, and never taking home a salary higher than \$1,600 a month, Schiess still says his job is about much more than money. For him, preserving pinball is about preserving his favorite American invention.

“Pinball is a nice slice right through the heart of American culture,” Schiess says. “It’s one of the things I think America can be really proud of because we did pinball better than anyone else and we still do. Europeans tried to build some but they just were never as popular as the American ones. We seem to get beat at our own game with cars, electronics and other technologies. But they can’t touch us on pinball.”

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Every Monday night, a rotating cast of more than 20 volunteers show up to prepare more machines for eventual display at the annual Pacific Pinball Expo, if nowhere else. Some of them are just learning the ropes of repair, by learning how to wax down playfields and degrease smaller parts first. Others, like Christopher Kuntz, are experts. Kuntz often comes in still wearing his work shirt, after a full-time job repairing arcade games during the day, because he says working on the kinds of machines stored in Schiess' warehouse is a privilege for him.

“Even in my line of work, where I’m picking up the phone every day to repair someone’s pinball machine, coming across a lot of these is very rare,” Kuntz says, while looking with Schiess at the complex circuitry beneath a pinball playfield. “And there’s always something little that wants your attention. Sooner or later, you’re going to have a wire that breaks off and you’ll have to find it and solder it back on, or there’s flipper parts that wear out to the point where it’s no longer fun to play or actually doesn’t work.”

The repair room of the warehouse is divided into two parts. One is stacked with so-called organ-donating machines that may be damaged, but contain parts that can breathe life into a better-operating game. The other contains machines currently under repair. Bright white lights illuminate the mechanics below the playfield or behind the backglass, while volunteers sort through pinball parts strewn on a long plywood table nearby. When certain mechanical pieces are no longer made and can’t be found in one of the organ donors, Schiess has resorted to barter— learning how to bee-keep and help gather honey, for example, for a man who in return could lathe the right custom-built part together. On average, a dedicated team effort to refurbish machines can fix up three games a month.

Twice a year, that process speeds up during visits from a Portland pinhead named Christopher Nash, also known in his home city as “The Pinball Doctor.” In exchange for a bed at Schiess’s house, Nash comes because, for a pinball lover, he says, no experience compares to the Pacific Pinball Expo Schiess puts on every year. Last year over 400 machines drew an international crowd of more than 3,000 in one weekend in San Rafael.

“I used to travel all across the country to different expos,” Nash says, while organizing pinball innards. “But there’s no point to that anymore. This show—it’s the cat’s meow of shows. It doesn’t get any better than this.”

The museum’s volunteer team is one of the reasons Schiess believes no other spot in the country can preserve or promote pinball as well as the Pacific Pinball Museum. The board of directors and team of over 80 volunteers who help put on the Pacific Pinball Expo are a big reason Hasse decided to donate his collection to the museum.

“We weren’t rich, but we were dedicated,” Schiess says. “I think Gordon made the right

choice because that's the one difference that we have from the other people trying to do this. We've got a group that believes in this and it's a passion that drives us all to do this. There are more pinball museums popping up around the country now, and that's great. What we're afraid of is that all those are going to be temporary blips because they don't have the kind of community support we do."

Almost every day Schiess is right there working in the warehouse with his volunteers, or without his volunteers. In a way, restoring the machines has become just a longer, more complex and rewarding way to win a game of pinball.

"The biggest payoff of all," Schiess says, "is when you get the special or score enough points to hear that sound every pinball player wants to hear — that clack, that knock, that pop — that lets everyone know you beat the machine."

But finding ways to dominate the actual weight of each machine is wearing down on Schiess. Inside the warehouse are at least 200 games he's hoisted individually into a 2000 Dodge Ram Van, and it's taken its toll. He's known for a while now that his hip was becoming arthritic, but last month doctors took an x-ray and told him he officially qualified for a replacement. Schiess discussed the operation a bit with doctors until the details made something apparent.

"I asked them, 'Wait, so if I get my hip replaced I'll never be able to pick up a pinball machine again?'" Schiess says. "And the doctors were like, 'Oh, no. You'll never move a pinball machine again!' So that was it. I was like 'No thanks. See you later!'"

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Beneath a ceiling draped with garlands of multi-colored Christmas lights, more than thousand visitors flooded a 22,000-square foot floor loaded with more than four hundred pinball games each day. In the opposite corner of a diner where pinhead brothers, families and couples took a break to eat and drink, pinball players competed and learned tricks from each other at a tournament station. To the left stood an entire pinball science section including a transparent pinball machine and exhibits demonstrating how magnetism, chaos theory, mechanical gears, gravity and velocity work in a pinball game. Twelve giant painted murals painted by Fontes and Schiess's long-time friend Ed Cassell paid homage to some of the most eye-popping pinball back-glass art in the history of the game. The Pacific Pinball Museum had almost achieved the ideal version of itself.

But that only lasted three days last fall in the form of the 2010 Pacific Pinball Expo in San Rafael. "See, that's what I see the museum eventually being," Schiess says while getting lunch with Fontes down the street from the museum. "Not just a museum, but a genuine and unique meeting place for all walks of life."

Schiess and Fontes also don't want to be the last generation willing to preserve the game

either.

“My favorite job at the expo is being the ticket-taker person,” Fontes says. “Because when you’re in the hallway, you can spot the newbies and their faces just go from dull—nothing’s going on—to hearing the intensity of the noise in there and it’s almost like this big, casino feeling. And then they get inside and you just see their mouths open and their eyes go slack and then they look around and go ‘I get to play all on all of this. This is all on free play for as long as I want!’ Yeah, it’s an interesting emotional moment that I look forward to every year.”

But for now, Schiess has given up on getting the City of Alameda’s attention on the expansion issue. A coin store next to the museum has defaulted on its rent a couple times this year, and he’s got his fingers crossed that the museum might at least be able to take that space next. It wouldn’t double the size of the current museum space, but it would be big enough for classes and exhibits by day and parties serving alcohol by night.

“People are getting used to where we’re located,” Schiess admits. “That’s a good thing.” And the museum does look like it’s in good, quirky, retro-business company on Old Town Alameda’s Webster Street, which is home to shops selling antique books, comics, vinyl records and scuba gear.

The idea of possibly making the leap to San Francisco, if The Exploratorium decides to share its pier space with the pinball museum, is still up for discussion during board meetings.

“But in the meantime, our time is going to be better spent by trying to grow with what we have,” Schiess says. “The entire time, I’ve been able to grow the museum organically. We never moved ahead until it felt completely natural and easy to. I think that’s been part of our success so far.” As more groups from Boy Scouts, Girls Incorporated and Alameda College come for educational field trips, Schiess hopes winning academic grants that can help expand the museum’s science and engineering curriculum gets easier.

There’s a lot Schiess doesn’t know about the future of the museum, even as it stands now. He has a respect for chaos theory whether it’s in a pinball game or his own life. But no matter what, Schiess says he promises he’ll find a way to preserve the memory of his favorite game.

“I was joking with my wife the other day, and I was saying, we’ve got to build a bunker way down deep in there, and build this infinity generator that can always generate 110 volts, and put a pinball machine in there,” Schiess says. “When they dig through the rubble 2,000 years from now, they’ll find a pinball machine that’s still running, and they can figure out what the human race was all about.”

## Source List

- ☒ Michael Schiess, executive director of the Pacific Pinball Museum in Alameda
- ☒ Dan Fontes, Pacific Pinball Museum Board Member
- ☒ Pinball Mac, Bay Area pinball collector (wished not to share real name)
- ☒ Dan Miller, Pacific Pinball Museum Board Member
- ☒ Gordon Hasse, pinball collector
- ☒ Tim Volz, Pacific Pinball Museum Board Member
- ☒ Christopher Kuntz, pinball repair man
- ☒ Christopher Nash, Pacific Pinball Museum volunteer
- ☒ Jim Dietrick, owner of pinball repair shop Pinball Revival/found of Pacific Pinball Expo
- ☒ “The Mr. & Mrs. Gordon Hasse Jr./Pacific Pinball Museum pinball collection East

Coast to West Coast Migration.” Larry Zartarian. *Pinball News*, 9 July, 2009. <http://www.pinballnews.com/news/ppmdonation.html>.

- ☒ “11 Things You Didn’t Know About Pinball History.” Seth Porges. *Popular Mechanics*. <http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/gadgets/toys/4328211-new#fbIndex1>.