
Feminist Pinball

How Women Are Changing Competitive Play and the Industry

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The author investigates why some women pursue women-only pinball tournaments and how the pinball industry represents them. He argues that women are absent from the top rankings not because of their biological differences from men but rather because of problematic social environments and the pinball industry's approach to representing women in games. Thus, pinball's culture involves gender-related issues similar to those in the broader game industry. Banfi discusses pinball's popularity in general and the growth of women-only leagues in reaction to harassment by male players, characterized, for instance, by the 2014 Gamergate scandal. He draws attention to women pinball players and how they are changing the culture surrounding tournaments, which often intersect with competitive gaming. **Key words:** competitive pinball play; feminism; game archives; game history; pinball

FAR FROM BEING A SETTLED American pastime, pinball remains an evolving game. Although pinball may be perceived as mere Americana,¹ its origins trace back to European bagatelle games. Emerging from the Chicago manufacturing industry in the 1930s, pinball transformed into a mass-produced, coin-operated multimedia amusement. Since then, pinball has persisted through city legal bans² and industrial declines.³ In 2016 The Strong National Museum of Play opened *Pinball Playfields*, a permanent exhibit showcasing pinball's importance to game history. In these ways, museum curators and player interests have solidified pinball's place as a recreational activity, but many people also play pinball competitively. Organizations such as the International Flipper Pinball Association (IFPA)⁴ oversee thousands of professional and amateur global tournaments annually, and its database lists 125,690 players.

Competitive pinball remains a male-dominated activity. Of the 125,690 players, 94 percent—some 118,890—are male, which raises questions about gender dynamics. Women consistently encounter barriers such as harassment,

and some have been sexually assaulted at tournaments. Moreover, the pinball industry reinforces the marginalization of women by including hypersexualized imagery of them in their games. Given these practices and dismissive attitudes toward women's skills, they have struggled for inclusion, a trend that mirrors broader issues within the gaming industry. In turn, many players have established women-only leagues, seeking inclusive spaces to develop their skills and hoping to create a community.

Such practices have certainly been helpful. In 2023 three women surpassed the top one hundred IFFPA player rankings. From 2006 to 2019, Helena Walter Higgins was ranked fifteenth, beginning in 2007, and consistently remained in the top fifty until the early 2010s.⁵ Except for Higgins, no other women players were ranked in the top one hundred. While there are 4,618 women in the IFFPA rankings based on those who have played in open tournaments (coed competitions), 6,800 IFFPA-registered women have competed in women-only tournaments. Thus, more women are opting to play against one another than against men. Academics argue that men have an advantage over women in sports because they are physically stronger (on average),⁶ yet strength has little to do with how well one plays pinball. For instance, Escher Lefkoff won the World Pinball Championships at the age of 13.⁷ Thus, Lefkoff could outplay men much stronger than he.

Drawing on interviews with professional players, archival material from The Strong National Museum of Play, and gender studies, this article examines why women are participating in women-only pinball tournaments and how the industry represents them. My inquiry into these topics began during my 2020 book project on pinball, after I noticed that people were opting to play in women-only tournaments. This led me to explore pertinent issues, including social environments and players' resistance to particular pinball games. Two games that stood out to me because of individuals' comments and controversial designs were *Playboy* (Stern 2002) and *Whoa Nellie!* (Stern 2015), which were created by the most prominent pinball manufacturer of the time (during the aughts, Stern was the only pinball company). Over the past six years, I have not seen such strong reactions to a pinball game like *Whoa Nellie!* Moreover, it is clear from my reviews of Facebook and Reddit posts regarding *Whoa Nellie!* that numerous pinball fans found the game troubling, thus echoing the opinions of the people I interviewed, including pro players. Following my initial research and interviews concerning these games, I noticed a pattern of sexist promotional material regarding professional pinball leagues and magazine articles about pin-

ball during my 2024 research fellowship at The Strong. All these materials and interviews made me ponder how women find ways to play pinball in problematic social environments and how they negotiate play when the industry designs games (even in relatively recent years) that sexualize them?

Because this project heavily depends on interviews, I have used pseudonyms for those individuals susceptible to unwanted consequences. When quoting from online users discussing the pinball games, I provide only first names and have renamed the arcades. Following T. L. Taylor's research about the online gaming community, I remain committed to anonymization because I view it as the best practice for protecting those who have helped me. Furthermore, the people I interviewed have little control over how I handle their input. As Taylor notes about her work, even if participants "review drafts . . . none of us involved can anticipate the consequences of publication and how readers will take up the material. For those who are building companies and livelihoods, particularly in precarious industries, utmost care must be taken, and I consider anonymization an important part of ethical . . . work."⁸ Given this topic's sensitivity and because women are harassed online for their discussions concerning gender and play, I felt that anonymization is especially crucial. However, organizational anonymization presents further challenges. Because I am discussing specific games and there are just a few pinball companies, I cannot anonymize them.

It is worth noting that these stereotypical pinball games are not a new phenomenon. Manufacturers began releasing games that centered on buxom women (no matter the theme) in the mid-1950s to grow their customer base by attracting teenagers.⁹ Although seminude images of women began circulating in print media in the United States as early as the late nineteenth century,¹⁰ pin-up art or photos ("a clipping or photograph, usually of an attractive young woman . . . meant for display and concentrated observation")¹¹ became a "ubiquitous presence in America during [and after] World War II." These stylistic and cheerful images (including drawings)¹² often conveyed messages that "encouraged men and women in the armed forces to keep fighting, to keep working, and to envision a better, more peaceful time ahead."¹³ As the images were ambient in print and film, they also found their way onto pinball backglasses—the industry capitalized on the craze.¹⁴ For Keith Temple, pinball companies saw the opportunity to sell games that emphasized "macho image[s]" (e.g., men interacting with voluptuous women regardless of the game's theme), which remained dominant in the postwar culture.¹⁵ That art style persisted well into the late twentieth century. Melissa A. Fanton's thesis reveals that 79 percent of the pinball machines

made by Bally, Gottlieb, and Williams between 1970 and 1979 (games with a minimum production quantity of five hundred) “exhibited women in sexualized attire.”¹⁶ This sexualized style has remained ingrained in the pinball industry, as seen in games like *Whoa Nellie!*.

To be sure, pin-ups are not solely negative. For Maria Elena Buszek, pin-up pictures and art maintain a paradox as sexually explicit images allow women to “negotiate a space . . . between the fine and popular arts and define itself through the representation of a pointedly contemporary female sexuality.”¹⁷ This is to say, some feminists have embraced pin-up art and pictures because they interpret the images as liberating.

Whoa Nellie! and *Playboy* were released in the twenty-first century. Both games depict women in much more sexually explicit ways than before. In the new millennium, such images do not carry the same flag-waving and postwar culture meanings. Instead, many consumers read them as gratuitous sexual imagery. Therefore, pin-up art or images focusing on buxom women appear to be out of touch with the current culture. Consumers embrace contemporary pinball games that feature less sexualized depictions of female characters (which I analyze at the end of this article). Many players feel that to move past the sexism in pinball culture, they must create safe spaces and reject overtly carnal pinball games.

I argue that women are absent from the top rankings not because of biological differences but because of the pinball industry’s approach to representing women in games and problematic social and competitive environments. To begin, I analyze feminism in the context of game studies and masculine play and Carly Kocurek and T. L. Taylor’s investigation into gender and gaming. I then discuss my archival research on how pinball tournaments (and the broader culture surrounding the game) target male audiences. Following this discussion, I examine how women-only leagues rebel against tournament culture. In that section, I highlight Amelia “Millie” McCarthy, one of the first women to organize pinball competitions. To conclude this article, I examine the representations of women in pinball games, specifically how the influence of pin-up culture on pinball and the art of *Playboy* and *Whoa Nellie!* exemplify the objectification of women. I evaluate how—despite these tendencies—women have urged the industry to change its approaches to displaying them in its games.

Pinball’s culture intersects with similar gender-related issues in the broader games industry. Although many may not think of pinball as mainstream entertainment (like film, TV, and video games) or sport, a wide-ranging number of

gamers celebrate it, and the interest in pinball tournaments grows. Increasingly, women are finding homes in women-only leagues after suffering harassment from other players. In this way, the stakes are high for women who want to continue to play the game they love, and we have already witnessed how misogynistic the games industry (and gaming culture) can be toward women given Gamergate as a reference point.¹⁸ I hope this article will draw attention to women pinball players and how they change the culture surrounding tournaments and game development, which generally intersects with competitive gaming.

Gender, Gaming Culture, and the Importance of Pinball

Author and social critic bell hooks defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.”¹⁹ Many feminist academics, including feminist play scholars like Shira Chess, have in general adopted this definition.²⁰ Chess notes that feminism “is not a movement about excluding men but rather about equality for all.”²¹ Feminist pinball players and organizers advocate for women-only tournaments, which might suggest they mean to prohibit men from playing and spectating at some competitions. Barring men from tournaments remains a viable solution for increasing interest among women in pinball and creating a safe environment in which they can participate in the sport. These players are interested in playing in women-only leagues rather than coed competitions. Their end goal, however, is not completely to prevent men and women from playing in tournaments together (many of the tournaments remain coed) but rather to upset the current culture surrounding pinball.

We can trace gender issues surrounding gaming culture back to Brian Sutton-Smith’s observations about boys’ games and play and girls’ games and play. As one of the leading scholars in play studies, his work made a lasting impression on the analysis of gender, games, and play. Sutton-Smith explains that, historically, boys’ play has tended to emphasize competition and hierarchy. Girls’ play, on the other hand, fosters cooperation and communication. In the realm of the playground, Sutton-Smith has observed that traditionally, “Boys have ten times more space on school playgrounds, and yet they insist on interrupting and invading the games of girls.”²² Barrie Thorne contends that, although people may view “gender as the expression of natural difference, the women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s launched a powerful alternative perspective:

notions of femininity and masculinity, the gender divisions one sees on school playgrounds, structures of male dominance, the idea of gender itself—all are social constructions.”²³

Such constructions are relevant not only to playgrounds and play habits but also to video game development, which affects pinball culture because the two intersect. People regularly play pinball and video arcade games in the same spaces, and many game developers design both pinball and video games (e.g., Larry DeMar, George Gomez, Steve Ritchie, Mark Ritchie, and Eugene Jarvis).²⁴ In 1962 *Spacewar!*, one of the first video games, featured two players controlling spaceships as they engage in a dogfight to the death. Since then, numerous video games and arcade games have emphasized competition (which Sutton-Smith notes characterize boys’ games and play) and “aggression and violence,” reinforcing masculine attitudes in gaming culture.²⁵ Carly Kocurek notes, “Gender inequalities in video gaming . . . emerged through public discourse and public practice that accompanied the rise of video gaming’s early commercial success in the coin-op industry.”²⁶ This occurred because the video game industry slighted women by emphasizing “individualized competition and technological competency—[which] were . . . aspects most likely to be perceived as masculine.”²⁷ Conventionally, video games showcase “women as individuals who are acted upon rather than as initiators of action. . . . Women are [also] depicted as victims in the games . . . [and in many games] women are [constructed as] the ‘weaker sex,’ and constantly in need of aid or assistance. Thus, the games not only socialize women to be dependent but also condition men to assume dominant gender roles.”²⁸ Princess Peach, a prime example, constantly needs Mario to save her from Bowser in the Super Mario Bros. series.²⁹ Although modern video games like the Silent Hill series (*Silent Hill 2* was remade in 2024, thus showing its relevancy) question the standards of masculinity in video games,³⁰ social constructions have had an immense impact on gaming from issues on the playground to the “militarized masculinity”³¹ of military video games (among other genres and subgenres). Militainment games, such as the Call of Duty series, remain among the best-selling franchises.³²

Because academics have identified these patterns in play and design, I find it unsurprising that similar issues have arisen regarding contemporary competitive gaming in both physical and online spaces. Many players have migrated from taunting women on live gaming platforms to creating forums on Reddit (“r/gaming”) to promote “anti-feminist and misogynistic activism.”³³ Tensions at LAN (Local Area Network) parties led LAN organizers like Powers Gam-

ing to ban women from their events. In 2011 they did so to halt “a mixing of immature, misogynistic male gamers with female counterparts.”³⁴ According to Alex Carter, an academic expert on LAN culture, LAN parties remain predominantly hypermasculine.³⁵ Gamers may argue that excluding women from gaming activities (like LAN parties) merely mirrors women-only pinball tournaments, but men retain power in this hierarchy because they dominate game design in this triple-a industry. LAN parties commonly revolve around these blockbuster games.³⁶

Assessing gendered issues in competitive gaming, T. L. Taylor points to these problems to explain why women perform at a lower level than men in esports (electronic sports). First, she notes that some people use the retrograde argument that men are different from women biologically, producing limitations that affect women’s potential to excel in digital games. This argument is grounded “around a notion that in the past men were hunters and women were gatherers, and thus, it makes sense that women would not be as good at computer games, which often require hand-eye coordination or shooting skills.”³⁷ A second theory, “more commonly heard [concerning] why we don’t see more women in the pro scene is framed as a kind of perplexed question: ‘Anyone can play computer games, and anyone can enter tournaments so if women aren’t there it’s just because they aren’t good enough, aren’t trying hard enough, right?’” Taylor concludes that these two arguments “obviously miss . . . the deeply sociological nature of play and professionalization and the way structures shape access and opportunity.”³⁸

Like esports and video arcade games, which maintain an aspect of public performance, consumers and competitors play pinball in physical spaces, and this play—often streamed—reaches a broader audience. Walter Day has recorded high arcade game scores via his organization, Twin Galaxies (1981-present), and *Starcade* (an American TV game show that aired on WTBS from 1982 to 1983), emphasizing the importance of competitive arcade gaming. During this period, pinball tournaments also became celebrated, and they, too, depended on scorekeeping and public play.

Competitive pinball may be less lucrative than esports, but interest in it has been increasing exponentially. Stern’s Insider Connected app—a platform that enhances pinball game play by integrating digital tracking, achievements, and social features—has further expanded the market. The app attracts noncollectors by enticing them to spend money on bar- and arcade-owned, public-facing games. Anyone can download the app and log into their digital profiles using a QR code. After doing so, they can track their scores and achievements

across various games. Thus, the physical space of the arcade is becoming quasi digital. Although pinball may seem outdated in the age of esports, mobile gaming, VR (virtual reality), and ubiquitous consoles, it remains an activity that revolves around a community, becoming more popular for in-person events and online via Insider Connected. Furthermore, companies such as Stern, Jersey Jack Pinball, and Spooky produce pinball machines regularly purchased by consumers and bars and arcades, even as only a few U.S. companies continue to produce other arcade games, such as Raw Thrills.³⁹ In short, competitive pinball remains relevant.

Pinball also exhibits greater flexibility than esports, because the latter are more decentralized. For one thing, the pinball community maintains supple competitive structures and formats.⁴⁰ Esports remains constrained by corporate control and, at many times, developer-restrained ecosystems. This limits player agency. Because pinball is a niche genre, its marginalized individual players have created a community and fought against the mistreatment of women in gaming culture more broadly, as evidenced by LAN parties and Taylor's analysis of esports. Although women are creating inclusive play spaces, it remains crucial to understand how professional pinball was initially constructed to explain why players still feel alienated.

The Masculine Silver Ball

J. P. Cahn's 1960 article "Ungunchable Harry, King of Pins," appeared in *True, The Man's Magazine* (published from 1937 to 1974), an early document that exemplifies the hypermasculinity afflicting pinball. The article began, "With the possible exception of women, the modern pinball game is unquestionably the most complex snare ever devised to induce a man to part with his loose change in return for a little light, relaxing entertainment."⁴¹ Thus, Cahn compares pinball to prostitution, money for sex. In short, he uses his platform at *True* to pander to his male readership. We do not need such statements to discuss pinball, but because of the male interest in the game, writers, tournament organizers, and manufacturers (more on them later) represent pinball as an ultramasculine product.

Furthermore, Cahn's article draws attention to the physical skill required to play pinball by including photos of a woman's backside while she plays. The photo's caption reads, "Gunching in pinball jargon is the application of body English to the machine for the purpose of influencing the roll of the ball—and *in certain cases for the entertainment of the gallery*"⁴² (my emphasis). "Body English"

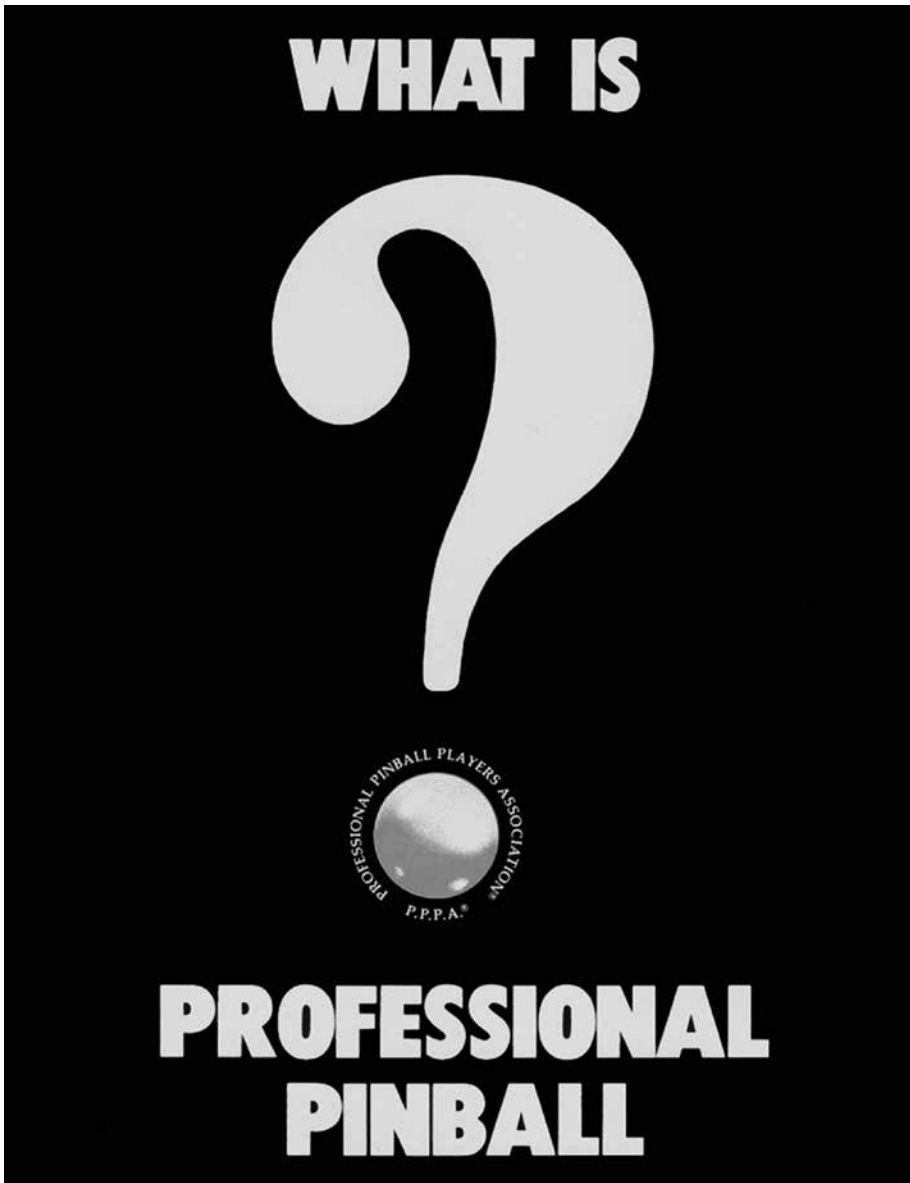
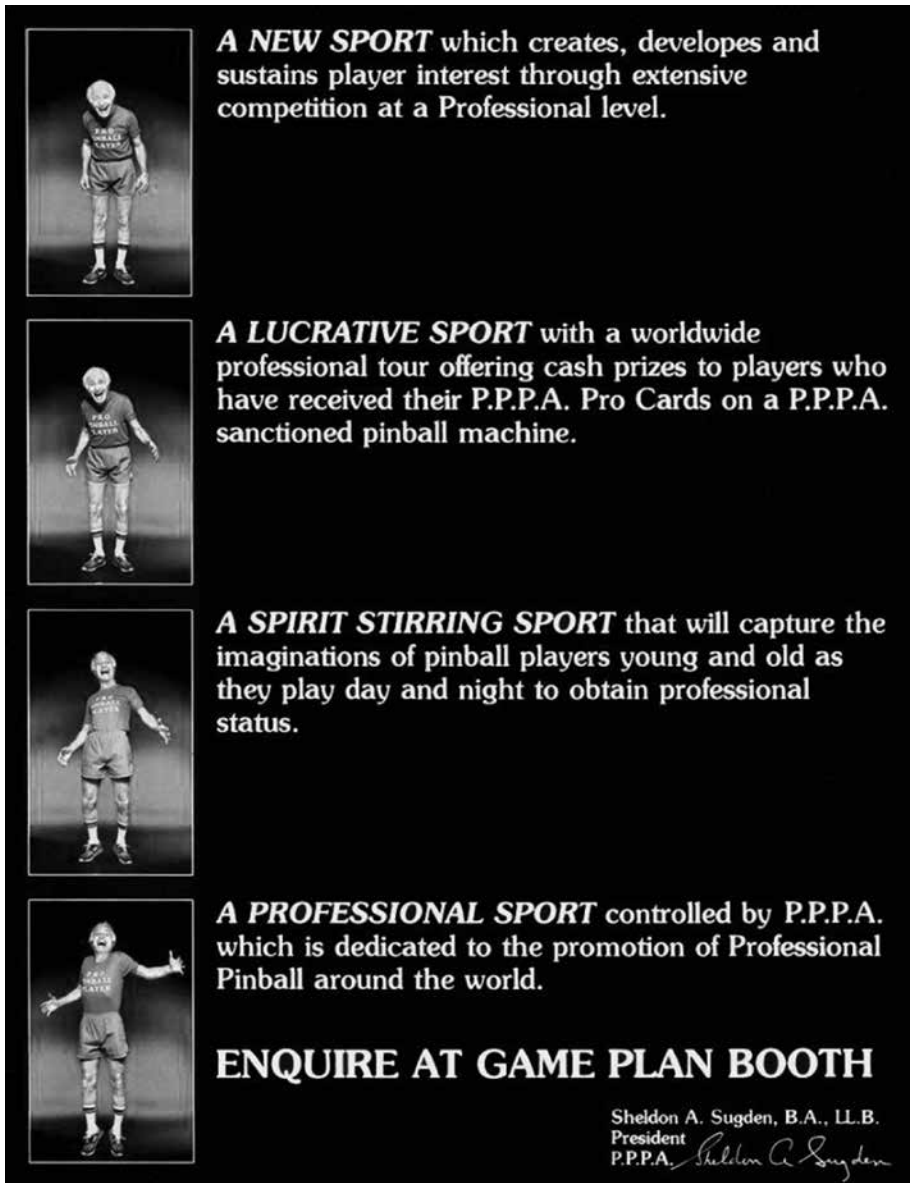


Figure 1. Professional Pinball Players Association (PPPA) flyer, cover page from 1981

refers to nudges players use to manipulate the pinball machine to keep the ball in play. The photographs show a woman playing pinball while moving her hips from side to side (not directly engaging with the machine), which highlights the



A NEW SPORT which creates, develops and sustains player interest through extensive competition at a Professional level.

A LUCRATIVE SPORT with a worldwide professional tour offering cash prizes to players who have received their P.P.P.A. Pro Cards on a P.P.P.A. sanctioned pinball machine.

A SPIRIT STIRRING SPORT that will capture the imaginations of pinball players young and old as they play day and night to obtain professional status.

A PROFESSIONAL SPORT controlled by P.P.P.A. which is dedicated to the promotion of Professional Pinball around the world.

ENQUIRE AT GAME PLAN BOOTH

Sheldon A. Sugden, B.A., LL.B.
President
P.P.P.A. *Sheldon A. Sugden*

Figure 2. PPPA marketing image from 1981 flyer

sexual innuendo of the picture's caption. The woman's bodily movements are not intended to earn points in the game, but rather to entertain the male gaze.

Pinball tournament organizers and their marketing strategies promoted

professional pinball as a masculine activity or sport that disaffected women. For instance, a 1981 advertising flyer by the Professional Pinball Players Association (PPPA) (now defunct) asks, “What is Professional Pinball?”⁴³ (figure 1). Inside the brochure, multiple photos showcase a frail old man, hardly the image of strength, jumping for joy while wearing a t-shirt titled “Pro Pinball Player” (see figure 2).

Such an inclusion suggests that we can consider men professional players at any point in their lives, thus further indicating that men can maintain their status in competitive pinball. Moreover, including an elderly man showcases that older men do not lose their masculinity. Instead, becoming a pro can confirm their machismo. As I have argued, game industries often highlight masculinity, and pinball is not an outlier but a validation of this cultural aspect. PPPA commercializes professional pinball by asking players to apply for a PPPA pro card. Such a credential offers players the opportunity to become professional players. The following page of the flyer (see figure 3) features a much younger man surrounded by women who are gushing over his professional status as a player.

The flyer argues that men of any age can play pinball professionally, but highly competitive players can earn a status that will attract women. PPPA’s pamphlet portrays women as submissive. A woman sits on her knees with her arms wrapped around the man’s leg while two other women hold him. All three women look at the man seductively, which implies easy access to sex. PPPA constitutes one of the first professional pinball organizations, and its brochure paints pinball as a masculine sport that leaves little room for women players. Instead, the females become objects to ogle.

Professional pinball players have expressed negative opinions about the status of women playing pinball, as evidenced by early threads found in the “rec.games.pinball” archives dating back to the early 1990s, forty-four years after the establishment of the PPPA. In one of the threads, a user posted Andrew Cohen’s *GQ* article “Cheap Thrills: Pinball is True Americana”⁴⁴ to begin conversing with competitive players and fans about sexism in pinball. Cohen claims that pinball is a “brotherhood, a guy thing. At last year’s annual Pinball Expo . . . there were exactly six women among an audience of 200.”⁴⁵ Echoing Cahn’s puns, Cohen describes pinball as “possibly the last refuge of undisturbed, unapologetic male-bonding machismo. . . . It has seldom been subtle—in fact, think ‘dirty old man.’ Whatever the ostensible theme of a specific game—billiards, baseball, betting—there’s a fourth B that usually predominates: busty babes. Make that big busty babes (although leggy showgirls enjoyed a brief vogue back in the Fifties),”⁴⁶ thus highlighting the art style I have analyzed.

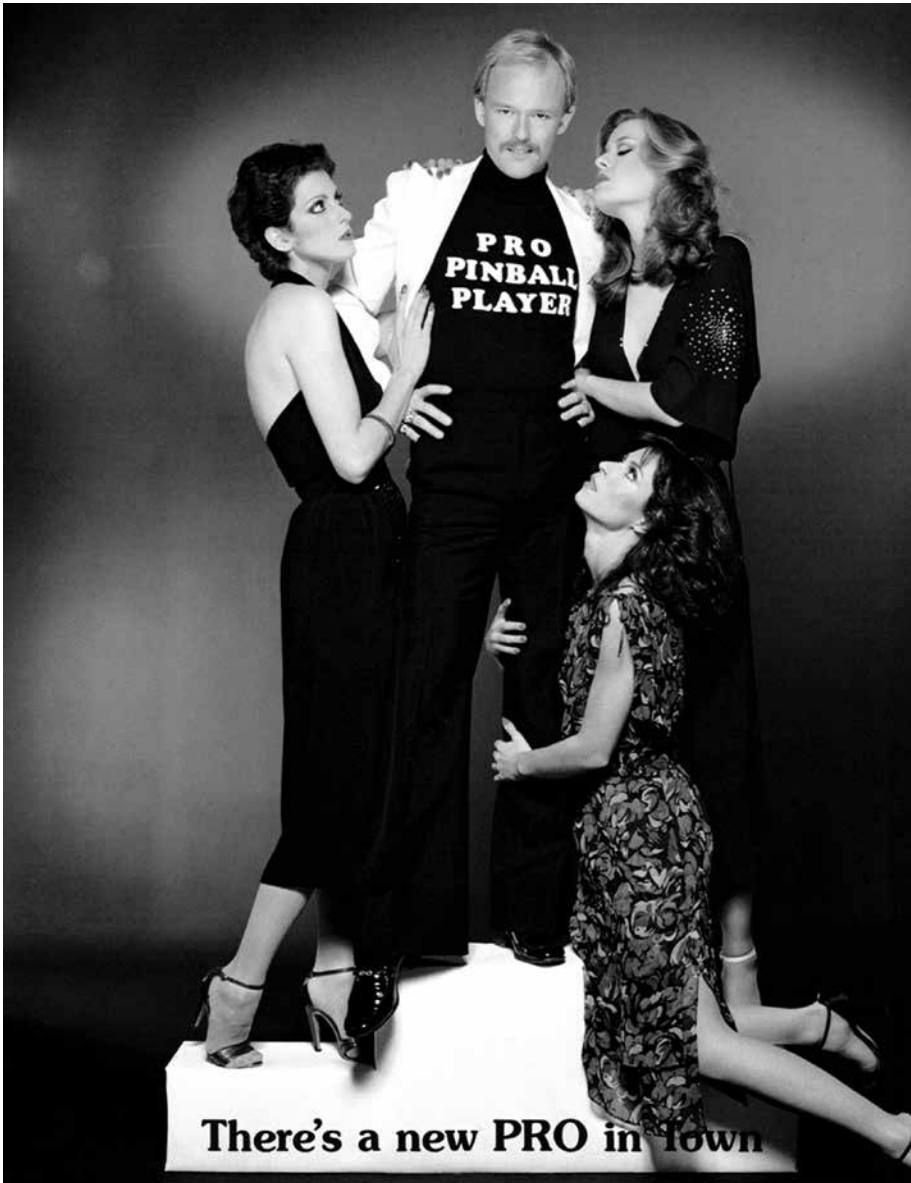


Figure 3. PPPA marketing image from 1981 flyer

In the discussion thread, Jordan Lee questions Cohen's description of pinball by claiming that it is "juvenile and repulsive," suggesting that the culture must change.⁴⁷ Taylor Morgan calls for the dismantling of the systemic sexism in

pinball as well, stating, “Anyone who feels that fighting against the oppression of women on pinball games is not worth fighting (that there are ‘better’ problems to be solved) is making up false arguments to avoid dealing with the issue at hand. . . . [E]nlarging women’s breasts is not the way to attract players nor does it highlight the theme of the game.”⁴⁸

A well-known competitive pinball player named John Smith argues against Lee and Morgan, “Pinball is a game for males in their teens and twenties, and one that’ll you’ll find more often in bars and bowling alleys than arcades. Hence, the artwork and game themes.”⁴⁹ Jack Norton, a renowned pinball player, responded to Morgan’s comment and the general dialogue, calling the thread’s exchange “rather silly. If and when more women either start doing the art or playing the game, you will probably see a change in the art simply by popular demand or whatever. Personally, I happen to find most all of the sexist art that I have seen so far to be cute and in reasonably good taste, and have, in fact, liked it.”⁵⁰

Norton’s opinion (echoing Smith’s) suggests that women do not play pinball much. Yet, it is evident from my research that women had participated in and were responsible for organizing tournaments from which Norton benefited. Because Norton was a top player, his comments (and attitude outside the online sphere) had been influential, thereby establishing the rhetoric for the pinball community’s response to gender inequality. His remarks suggested that gatekeeping in pinball was not a passive byproduct of history but a firm cultural barrier that dismissed objections to gender constructs as “silly.” Attitudes like Norton’s shaped the social and competitive structures of pinball.

Evidently, pinball’s journalistic, archival, and social history positions the game as an activity or sport that caters to male players. In turn, this creates problematic spaces for women, and again, this has much less to do with gender differences than it does with the communal and industrial construction of pinball as a masculine game. Looking more closely, we can see Millie McCarthy certainly had a significant impact on pinball, as she was one of the first women to organize tournaments. However, pinball historians have largely omitted her from historical accounts.

Amelia “Millie” McCarthy and Women’s Competitive Play

While women now direct tournaments and excel at competitive play, Amelia

“Millie” McCarthy began organizing pinball tournaments in Hurleyville, New York, in 1976, four years before the first official modern pinball tournament (the U.S. Open in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1980) and long before the founding of Belles & Chimes, a prominent women’s-only pinball organization. McCarthy worked as an operator in upstate New York with Catskill Amusements and Binghamton Amusement Co. In 1958 “she was elected president of the New York State Coin Machine Assn. and served until 1983.”⁵¹ McCarthy organized tournaments to demonstrate to the public that pinball was a competitive game. She sought to prove that it should not be banned—lawmakers and politicians had banned pinball in various counties and states since the early 1930s because they felt playing it encouraged gambling.⁵² McCarthy chaired the New York Coin Machine Association and used business incentives to fight the American lawmakers who sought to criminalize playing pinball.

McCarthy promoted the 1976 pinball tournament, hiring a marketing firm to help handle her first event. She sent official registration forms and posters to Coin Machine Association members to entice them to sign up for the competition. Her promotional video for the tournament encouraged both men and women to enter the contest. She made clear pinball should appeal to all, not just to men.⁵³ Her approach to marketing pro pinball contrasts sharply with PPPA’s tactics, which were concerned with targeting males. For McCarthy’s contributions to coin-op play, she was added to the Amusement Industry Hall of Fame in 2024. The Strong National Museum of Play also highlights McCarthy as a prominent figure in the history of coin-operated machines. The museum devotes an entire archival box to document her profile: “Amelia (‘Millie’) McCarthy papers (1959–2021).”⁵⁴ Although pinball’s history remains problematic in regard to gender, archivists and historians are preserving a history that honors prominent figures like McCarthy, which is crucial to understanding the representation of marginalized identities in game history.

Kocurek argues, “There are many compelling stories of women shaping the coin-op industry and our understanding of it.”⁵⁵ Instead of claiming women are nowhere to be found in game history, Kocurek contends they were present but we need to delve into archives and trade publications to investigate further to locate and highlight their impact on games. Kocurek emphasizes McCarthy’s contribution to coin-op history. In doing so, she creates a counternarrative of women entrepreneurship,⁵⁶ which other game studies scholars now strive to underscore.⁵⁷

Although McCarthy seems essential for the development of competitive

pinball, her influence became overshadowed by the overtly masculine orientation of such historians as Norton. This negatively shaped the culture, forcing women to seek out tournaments separated by gender. Pro player Jamie Clark welcomes such an outcome because she believes it makes the competitions more inviting. Clark claims that she feels unwelcome at various tournaments, which echoes other pro players' feelings.⁵⁸ When Clark played at a competition in 2019, a man approached her and asked her if she was "there to watch her dad play?" She constantly overhears other players joking about women playing in "their" tournaments. Namely, she mentioned that a man claimed he could dress as a woman and easily win the women-only tournament. His claim implies that women are inherently worse than men at pinball. Thus, maintaining women-only competitions appears essential to Clark and other woman-identifying players because these spaces seem safe and free of taunting based on gender.

Prominent arcades like Shorty's in Seattle allow women to create women-only competitions like the Powder Puff tournament. Organizers have begun hosting independent tournaments and leagues like Belles & Chimes and Babes in Pinland (these noted leagues welcome trans and nonbinary people). Belles & Chimes is one of the better known women-only leagues. According to Quinn Parker and Dakota Ryan, two Belles & Chimes members, "At its most basic, Belles & Chimes creates a safe space and reduces the barrier to entry for women into competitive pinball."⁵⁹ The organization has been successful at increasing interest in their leagues, showing how committed they are to diversifying the pinball community. For instance, when Parker began playing competitively in 2014, "There were only a couple of women playing in the entire state of Arizona, and now, after seven years of Belles in Phoenix, women comprise up to 30 percent of the players at any given open tournament in the Phoenix area."⁶⁰

Belles & Chimes describes itself on its website as an "international network of inclusive women's pinball leagues run by women, for women." The organization was founded in 2013 in Oakland, California, and any woman can begin a chapter if they adhere to Belles & Chimes' guidelines: Belles & Chimes events are for women only; chapters should include a link to bellesandchimespinball.com as well as use the following language on their website, on the "about" section of their Facebook page and in any press releases or media contacts about the league: "Belles & Chimes is an international network of women's pinball leagues started in 2013"; and sexualized imagery should not be used on any promotional materials (posters, flyers, Facebook event photos, etc.) for Belles & Chimes' events.

Pinball players Rebecca Hinsdale and Kate Porter started a Belles & Chimes chapter in Chicago to create a league for themselves and marginalized people to avoid the usual crowd at bars and arcades: “Male. Loud. White. Straight.”⁶¹ Emma Lane, another representative of Belles & Chimes, started a chapter in Boston after hearing about several other harassment issues at local tournaments. Lane collaborated with Anna Blake, “who got things started . . . and I kept things up and running with monthly tournaments. It built a great women’s pinball community. . . . We kept things going even during the pandemic with virtual tournaments on Zen pinball [(electronic pinball software)]. . . . And we started the largest women’s tournament in New England as part of Pintastic, The Silverbelle Brawl.”⁶² Following the success in Boston, Lane opened a second chapter in Chicago called the Chicagoland Belles after she moved to the city’s suburbs. When Lane “was playing in the city she noticed many women I had seen at open tournaments or friends’ houses were not making it out to the city Belles & Chimes events, so I decided to do a sister chapter in the suburbs and run tournaments one Sunday a month. And it has come full circle as a lot of the women that play in the suburbs also carpool to city events and vice-versa.”⁶³ For Lane, Belles & Chimes offers an opportunity for community building because she can connect with other pinball fans by hosting events and “making fun prizes and getting more women involved in the community. . . . I’ve also helped a few other women run their tournaments in other cities, and it’s great to see women’s pinball growing.”

Belles & Chimes has a positive impact on the pinball community, which is vital given the lack of representation for marginalized people. Lane noted that only some women competed in or observed many initial coed pinball tournaments (about 2006). Belles & Chimes “has been integral in changing that. . . . Belles’ tournaments [are] highly competitive, and people are vying for slots in women’s states and women’s world tournaments, but there also seems to be a lot more high-fives, cheering for great shots, and sharing tips and tricks between games. Recently, I’ve seen an increase in travel coordination to bring groups of women together at large events. It’s awesome to see three women in the top 100 IFPA world rankings where there weren’t any just a few years ago.”⁶⁴ In this way, Belles & Chimes has proven vital, inviting women to play and fostering a welcoming tournament environment. Pinball tournaments occur in places all over the country (see figure 4).

Because tournaments are wide ranging, women must work toward representing themselves at these competitions and at supporting one another, which Lane notes is changing pinball culture. Their work has had an immense impact—

women are now represented among the top one hundred players, a fact vital to proving that gender does not influence individual performance in pinball. Again, it is not a skill that hinders women from succeeding in competitive pinball, but rather, hostile environments. Evidently, women are flourishing in tournaments, which is not mere coincidence.

Lane notes that she has been “lucky” as a woman in competitive pinball because she has not been personally harassed, but she says she may be the only one. She has heard “first-hand accounts of harassment, touching, and hurtful comments so it definitely can be a challenge to play competitively or even just hanging out at a venue. . . . I try to watch out for it in any tournaments I direct, especially coed ones. But you can’t be around for everything. I was horrified to find out that just recently, a male player made comments to at least two different

Tournament Name
2023 Titan Pinball SW Regional Pin-Masters
Borås Pinball Open
Brisbane Masters
Cactus Jack’s Silverball Showdown
Castle Siege for Extra Life
District 82 Summer Pinball Classic
District 82 Triple Flip Open
District 82 Winter Series
Great Lakes Pinball Open Series
Hangar Pinball Route 66 Tilt Championships
IFPA 18
IFPA Late Summer Festival
IFPA Pin-Masters
It Never Drains in Southern California
Kristiansand Pinball Open
LPA Super-Pin 2023
Mid-Atlantic Open
NW Pinball Championships
NYC Pinball Championships
Pinball at the Lab
Pinburgh Match-Play Championship
Southern Hemisphere Pinball Championship
Starfighters SPF24 Classics
Stern’s Pro Circuit Championship
The Beast: Main Tournament
The Open - IFPA World Championship
UK Open

Figure 4. Prestigious pinball tournaments

women about not wanting to lose to a girl. Both destroyed him. Hopefully, that problem fixed itself, but there are still challenges.”⁶⁵

Parker and Ryan confirm that these issues face women in pinball. And they

mirror the challenges women face in society, having to go above and beyond to protect themselves in everyday life and still trying to reach a point where they are seen as equal to men. Pinball has been around since before women had the right to get their own credit cards, and...there are some male members who are toxic to the experience of women in the community. Men often don't know or understand the lengths women go to protect themselves, and it is hard for men to imagine the vulnerability of playing pinball, a game where your back is turned while you play. That simple fact may not even occur to men who haven't been taught to watch their backs and be fully aware of their surroundings. If you are in a bar and don't know or trust the people around you, that wouldn't feel like a safe space to play pinball. . . . There are, unfortunately, many stories that women have of experiencing anything from being belittled by a man while playing pinball to being sexually assaulted by a man while playing pinball. This is why Belles and other women's groups are important for creating that safe space in the community, increasing the number of women and allies in those bars or at tournaments, and watching your back while you play.⁶⁶

Parker and Ryan more fully describe the problems facing women at tournaments and the social hardships women have dealt with for centuries. They highlight problems with having their backs to the audience, which Cahn's article underlined in sexist fashion. Ryan and Parker also note that they “don't discount the fact that many male allies are helping to shift women's experience and decrease toxicity, but it is a reality.”⁶⁷

Riley Adams and Avery Reed are two competitive pinball players who identify as allies. Contrary to Norton's attitude toward women players, Adams and Reed advocate for safe play and women-only tournaments. Both men agree that neither men nor women are inherently better or worse at the game due to innate differences. Instead, men have been toxic toward women at tournaments, and this behavior hinders their abilities to perform, which is unsportsmanlike and unfair. Adams and Reed noted that women have been increasingly beating

men in pinball tournaments, attributing this success to the presence of women-only tournaments. These leagues enable women to hone their skills without facing harassment, and in turn, this has attracted more women to the pinball community. This, they say, constitutes “a huge plus for the community; it means more people playing pinball.”⁶⁸ Reed and Adams do not view the women-only tournaments as exclusionary. Instead, they view these competitions as disrupting current toxic behavior, hopefully translating to a more inclusive community over time.

If Lane and others believe competitive pinball is becoming more accepting, they would nevertheless like to see more women and marginalized people working within the industry. The industry’s treatment of women in pinball games highlights another concern. It is in the industry’s best interest to listen to women’s complaints. Unlike large video game corporations such as Nintendo, Xbox (Microsoft), and PlayStation (Sony), the pinball industry remains closely tied to its community, in part because they regularly engage with players at expos and online. To grow their market (and they must, as home collectors currently control it, and most are male), the pinball industry needs to foster a welcoming product. This is important not just for the commercialization of pinball but for game standards.

The Pinball Industry’s Representation of Women in Art and Game Play

According to Max Davis, the CEO of a smaller pinball company, current marketing studies show pinball consumers to be predominantly male, ranging in age from twenty-five to sixty years.⁶⁹ Before the pinball industry developed into a collector-dominated market at the turn of the twenty-first century,⁷⁰ official documents (archived at The Strong) clearly show that Williams, the largest manufacturer for much of the late twentieth century, catered to male players. In Williams’s proposal to design the *Star Wars: Episode I* pinball game, it claims that its “end customer varies, with the highest density being male, between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five.”⁷¹ Williams’s customer profile confirms Kocurek’s research—coin-op video games are targeted at men and boys. This male-dominated field affects game design.

Once the various pinball manufacturers declined after 1999, leaving Stern as the sole survivor for much of the aughts, the company had to cater to col-

lectors, a predominantly male population. In 2002, Stern released *Playboy* (see figure 5), an iteration of the popular licensed game that had several previous releases. Bally produced *Playboy* in 1978, and Data East (later Stern) released a version in 1989. Because writers and the industry have established pinball as a masculine game and because pinball companies have based their products on well-established licenses,⁷² it comes as no surprise that manufacturers have made *Playboy* machines.⁷³ Stern's version of *Playboy* was much more explicit than before to entice the collectors. The game includes nude images of women that players can place within the pinball playfield. Stern advertises this "bonus" in its flyer by writing that its game provides "interchangeable photo inserts included—Clothed and Nude." Just as PPPA advertised professional pinball as a masculine sport by displaying women in seductive poses (not unlike pictures in *Playboy* magazines), Stern also highlights its game as a titillating machine that includes soft-core pornography.

Mechanically, Stern's *Playboy* revolves around "collecting all twelve Playmates" in the game so players can start "mansion mania"—the game's primary goal. Collecting characters and objects in pinball may be a standard game play mechanic, but the act of "collecting women" suggests the playmates are objects and that players can own them, which resembles *Playboy* magazine's founder Hugh Hefner's attitude toward the women who lived in his *playboy* mansion.⁷⁴ Such behavior eventually led Hefner's brand to distance itself from him.⁷⁵ Stern's *Playboy* game also includes the possibility of hitting specific targets that reveal "centerfolds"—or nude photos of the women. Hefner engineered the centerfold picture during his early years at *Playboy*, and other men's magazines quickly adopted the idea.⁷⁶ The centerfold image showcases a full-body shot of a nude woman. This type of image is not suggestive like pin-ups but rather pornographic. Its inclusion in the playfield transforms the pinball machine into an arousing game that is not solely about game play. Instead, it can be considered a titillating object not unlike porn or erotica. Data East's (see figure 6) and Bally's (see figure 7) *Playboy* games display crude drawings of women in the playfields and on the backglass, but they do not contain explicit nudity as Stern's game does. By 2002 many pinball machines were sold to private collectors. This suggests that the games become sealed off from the public, further emphasizing the personal interaction between the player or collector and the scandalous media tied to the pinball machine.

Stern's *Playboy* represented a moment in pinball history when the industry was attracting male collectors, but the company has more recently also pro-



Figure 5. Stern's iteration of Playboy released in 2002



Figure 6. Data East's 35th anniversary iteration of Playboy



Figure 7. Bally's iteration of Playboy pinball

duced sexually explicit games like *Whoa Nellie!* (2015), which sparked broader concerns among women players and the community. Behind this anxiety lies the fact that competitive pinball has become more popular in the last decade. According to Sam Brooks, the IFPA, in 2023 “sanctioned over ten thousand events . . . which would equate to around thirty events every single day globally.” Comparatively, in 1991 there were only seven IFPA-recognized tournaments. Since 2019 approximately twenty thousand players have signed up each year to play pinball competitively through the IFPA.⁷⁷ Stern increasingly produces games that reach public locations (such as bars and arcades) rather than collectors, and its games remain those most played out of all the manufacturers at these wide-reaching tournaments.

Although only a small number of *Whoa Nellie!* games have been produced—and many bars and arcades do not own the machine—we need to note that Stern, pinball’s largest manufacturer, created it. Reacting to Stern’s release of *Whoa Nellie!*, many players and pinball historians described the game as problematic. For instance, pinball historian Owen Harris calls the game “tone-deaf.”⁷⁸ When I asked Clark about the current status of games and their representation of women, she immediately mentioned *Whoa Nellie!* as a negative example. She also described when she called out the game on Facebook and numerous people in the thread used *Whoa Nellie!* as a talking point to belittle women.⁷⁹ Several people on Facebook and Reddit pinball threads opined that the game is offensive (see figures 8 and 9).

A multitude of Facebook comments questioned whether this game would “fly” in 2015. Some commentators noted that, despite the game’s attempt at humor, the comedy seems not only outdated but also solely intended to allow the designers to construct a contemporary, sexually explicit game. Regarding the Reddit posts, Rjung (in reaction to SImcnulty’s post) rhetorically asks how many years it has been since Stern’s *Playboy* was released, thus drawing the line between the controversial games. The deleted users’ comments on SImcnulty’s post calls attention to *Whoa Nellie!* possibly alienating women. They make a poignant point about losing consumers, which affects a tumultuous industry that crashed at the end of the twentieth century because it failed to attract new buyers.

According to Jake Moore, a developer who worked on *Whoa Nellie!*, Moore initially

built four games cobbled from the original Gottlieb Continental Cafe games. One game remained Electromechanical, and three were refit-

ted with a solid-state node-based system. . . . Stern eventually adopted a similar system that the auto industry had used for years.

The whole project was considered a mash-up of retro pinball styling, fruit crate art, classic pin-up art, and a touch of the *Li'l Abner* cartoon strip. We were always interested in redesigning the standard pinball cabinet, so he designed a farmer-built stack of crates, which was truly inspiring for the whole project. Like we always said, . . . it's a game about farming.

At Stern, [we decided to] build the game in production numbers. We cleared this idea with our four buyers of the garage-built games and felt

Facebook Posts Regarding Whoa Nellie!	Comments that show negative reactions to the posts of Whoa Nellie!
<p>Josh Arcade: “2015 Stern Pinball Whoa Nellie! Big Juicy Melons (TM). I kid you not, that phrase is trademarked. Probably wouldn’t fly in today’s day and age. It is a really fun pin, though. I didn’t like it at first, but it’s grown on me” (October 5th, 2022).</p>	<p>Bobbi: “The racism and sexism didn’t fly with some of us when it came out. Just added to the list of cringe worthy games but luckily you rarely see this one in the wild.” Joshua: “It didn’t really fly when it was new to be fair.”</p>
<p>New Valley Pinball: “Newest arrival. Whoa Nellie! Big Juicy Melons pinball machine by Stern. Very small production run. Includes crate and legs” (October 5th, 2021).</p>	<p>Glenn: “Still hard to believe they made this thing. A serious wtf.”</p>
<p>Brian: “Visual Pinball. Today’s game is Whoa Nellie! Big Juicy Melons” (December 13th, 2018).</p>	<p>Kyle: “That game is what is wrong with society. Show us something non-sleazy.”</p>
<p>Johnson Pinball: “Whoa Nellie! Big Juicy Melons at CES in Vegas!” (January 6th, 2016).</p>	<p>Valerie: “Why are only men playing the game?”</p>

Figure 8. Adverse reactions to Whoa Nellie! on Facebook

it was finally a way to recoup the 100 hours of design. [We] saw it as a challenge to do something different, and the results were amazing.⁸⁰

Pinball fans appreciated Whoa Nellie!’s retrostyle game play, because this

Reddit Posts Regarding Whoa Nellie!	Comments that show negative reactions to the posts of Whoa Nellie!
<p>R/pinball – Posted by The Kog: Stern and Whizbang Pinball Partner to Build and Distribute a Classically Styled Pinball Machine: Whoa Nellie! Big Juicy Melons (2015).</p>	<p>MatchesMalone7: “Stern has been deleting comments that call the table sexist or creepy...”</p> <p>Tin_Foil: “Which is depressing. If you are going to produce something like this, stand by your product and accept it will be offensive to some.”</p> <p>MatchesMalone7: “Love the fact they are trying to bring back the classic pinball table but that backglass is a little creepy to me and I’m a guy. I wouldn’t want to constantly have to look at a bunch of creepy dudes drooling over some hot girl.”</p> <p>Monkdrum: “I get that it’s tongue and cheek, but it’s still a pretty offensive and out of date theme in this day and age.”</p> <p>ErbilT: “It’s funny, one of the things that I noticed when I went to the Pinball Museum in Alameda was how over-sexualized the women were depicted in the artwork from the 70’s era pins in particular. So, I guess I kinda get it, as the art seems to be a bit of a throwback to that era.... but still, it seems kind of foolish to me to put something out that could potentially alienate half of your target audience.”</p>
<p>R/pinball posted by Slmcnulty: “New Whoa Nellie! Pinball Machine...is mostly about boobs” (2015).</p>	<p>Rjung: “It’s been how many years since Stern’s Playboy?”</p> <p>[deleted user]: “The issue with this machine is that pinball is on an upswing, and they should try to be more inclusive. This alienates potential pinball fans for seemingly little benefit to the company. I don’t personally take issue with the theme, but I know a ton of women who do. Why make them feel unwelcome in a hobby that’s just now coming back from the dead?”</p>

Figure 9. Adverse reactions to Whoa Nellie! on Reddit. These posts and comments can be found in the R/pinball thread on Reddit. (https://www.reddit.com/r/pinball/comments/2jfwcu/stern_and_whizbang_pinball_partner_to_build_and/).

pinball machine is modeled after classic 1950s and 1960s games that maintained a simple rule set (unlike the complex current ones), and it scrapped a contemporary maximalist playfield, which includes ramps and LCD screens. Moore's game emphasizes retrostyle bumper caps and flipper bats rather than intricate toys.⁸¹ The game is inspired by pin-up art, which, as I have noted, is nuanced, because women used pin-up pictures to express sexual liberation.⁸² To be sure, pin-up art has characterized pinball design since the mid-1940s. Nevertheless, people find it odd that a contemporary company produces a controversial game like this. It is also interesting that Moore states that the game is "about farming." Such a design choice and description echo the earlier macho themes of 1950s pinball games. According to Temple, these games maintained generic themes but always contained a "pretty girl" in the game's backglass or playfield.⁸³

Consider Gottlieb's 1959 game, *Racetime*, a classic pin machine that displays pin-up art like Gottlieb's *Continental Cafe* games. The game's theme is horse racing, and the "dream girl sits in the corner holding her binoculars," watching the race unfold.⁸⁴ *Racetime* conveys generic rules for scoring points, such as hitting colored pop bumpers to advance correspondingly colored spots. In comparison, *Whoa, Nellie!* uses the farming theme to interact with the women characters, Melony and her sisters, unlike previous games such as *Racetime*. In them, the woman did not directly influence the game; she was there merely to gaze at.

Stern's official website shows that *Whoa Nellie!*'s narrative revolves around the player "scor[ing] points on the farm operated by the lovely Melony Mellon and her twin sisters while avoiding the wrath of their over-protective shotgun-wielding father."⁸⁵ The player assists Melony and her twins, Hellen and Ellen, to harvest the crops, but this task is secondary to interacting directly with the scantily clad women. For instance, the pinball rolling over the sisters' images in the playfield suggests a direct interplay between the player and them. On the play field, the Mellons's father sits disapprovingly with a shotgun in hand as he yells, "Hands off the Twins!" Thus the game implies the players are not farming melons but touching (or possibly groping) the Mellon sisters. Numerous other male farmhands and neighbors litter the play field as they gaze at the women and sput such innuendos as "Look at them honkers!" The inclusion of numerous puns in the play field, like a cow saying, "Complete and *Udder* Nonsense," and "Melony Mellon and her *twin sisters*," all exemplify puns on breasts (my emphasis). Key words like "Big" and "Juicy" appear across the play field to sexualize and humorize the machine. These buzzwords and jokes establish the framework and

sexual tone of the game, which extend beyond the lewdness of 1950s pinball. In this manner, *Whoa Nellie!* is not so much a recall to a pin-up art or midtwentieth century pin games, but instead an overexaggeration of carnal pinball machines, much like the progression of the *Playboy* games.

Lily Scott, an authority on sexism in media, notes what many others have seen in *Whoa Nellie!*

Whoa Nellie's illustration doesn't seem at all nuanced. . . . It appears to be a straightforward, generically ideal white woman who exists to be the butt of a sexual/physical joke about her breasts...being salivated over by a non-attractive, violently aroused farmer who seems to be there as a stand-in for the (presumed male) gamer. There doesn't appear to be anything feminist about this pin-up. Obviously, the artists seem inspired by vintage pin-up illustrations...but, as my book addresses, those come in many different flavors (many, sexist!). I'd say that this more reflects the post-WWII pin-ups in which women's sexual cluelessness/humiliation is the turn-on.⁸⁶

Scott identifies one of the key issues with the game and pinball more generally. The industry assumes the player is male. This makes problems for women because the games are designed to cater to this male population. Pinball is more abstract than video games because it does not offer the player an avatar to control the game. Instead, players play pinball as the "self." Espen Aarseth notes that playing as the self is one of the more integral aspects of games. He writes, "Unlike literature, games are not about the Other, they are about the Self. Games focus on self-mastery and exploration of the external world, not exploration of interpersonal relationships."⁸⁷

Pinball narratives are inherently abstract because a metal ball is an extension of the self.⁸⁸ With games like *Playboy*, the player is by default a heterosexual male. In this way, *Whoa Nellie!* exemplifies many of the problems Laura Mulvey discussed in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which argues that Hollywood produces its films through the male gaze. Although pinball is not cinema, Mulvey's theories have been adopted by various disciplines, including game studies. *Whoa Nellie!* obviously frames the women in the game "as sexual objects [for] erotic spectacle."⁸⁹ Mulvey also points out that pin-ups are emblematic of this culture, because they were produced mainly for male consumers. Like cinema, some of the pinball games are ordered "by sexual imbalance, [and]

pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.”⁹⁰ Games require more input than mere watching and playing, one that calls for a high level of interactivity. For this reason, people who play games like *Whoa Nellie!* engage further with the female body as a spectacle than they would when watching a film. They are using their own identity (the self) as a vehicle to complete objectives on the Mellon farm. This can raise ethical concerns, particularly for women who feel marginalized by tournaments and the pinball industry.

To negate being hypersexualized in pinball games, women form their cohorts, and according to their rules for starting these organizations, they refuse to buy into (or play in) a culture that sexualizes them. In this way, *Belles & Chimes* offers more than a league; it offers a form of protest, one gaining traction. Stern and the IFPA are adapting their approach in response. It is inconceivable that Stern would greenlight a game like *Whoa Nellie!* today, and pinball tournaments across the country will not tolerate nasty comments. The IFPA bans players for “Offensive comments including but not limited to those relating to gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, or religion.”⁹¹ Players’ qualms about pinball games can lead to mistrust between the industry and customers (of any gender). As I mentioned, the CEOs of Stern (and other pinball companies) interact directly with their customer base, and women increasingly play pinball.

Changing the Course of the Silver Ball

Women have affected the industry’s game designs by voicing their opinions online about stereotypical pinball games and refusing to play them. For instance, American Pinball’s game, *Oktoberfest* (2018), included a monkey groping two women in the game’s backglass. *Belles & Chimes* and others complained about this imagery, and American Pinball listened to the community’s feedback.⁹² In response, they removed the sexist image from its game.

Except for *Wrestlemania’s* (2015) inclusion of an alternative translite⁹³ with WWE “Divas” on it (which is quite rare), *Elvira’s House of Horrors* (2019), and *James Bond 007* (2022), Stern’s recent games do not contain explicit sexual imagery. *Elvira* pays homage to the TV series *Elvira’s Movie Macabre* (1981–1993). Parker and Ryan both say they do not view the game as offensive but rather “*Elvira... owns her sexuality, and it is a source of empowerment for her. Elvira is very well received by women in general.*”⁹⁴ *James Bond 007* centers on the Sean

Connery films (1962–1967), and it includes the “Bond women” in its rules and play field. I asked Dean Lewis, who worked on James Bond 007, about including the Bond women in the game. In my question, I mentioned that many find the Bond films problematic,⁹⁵ but I also noted that consumers must consider Bond a product of the early 1960s, and Ian Fleming’s first Bond book appeared in 1953. Lewis responded that he “had to comply with the brand’s guidelines. There are challenges in presenting material generated in a time with different sensibilities. My own opinion is that you must consider the work in the context of the time in which it was created. I think this applies to all art.”⁹⁶

Lewis’s approach to adapting the texts to pinball games tries to remain loyal to the source material. Theorists like Robert Stam argue that artists attempt to remain faithful to the urtext by incorporating reference points from the past text into the new narrative.⁹⁷ Consumers expect fidelity, and Stam validates their expectations. However, he also argues that consumers should be less “moralistic, less panicked, less implicated in unacknowledged hierarchies, more rooted in contextual and intertextual history.”⁹⁸ Although Stam is discussing adapting literature to film, his theory can also apply to film adaptation to pinball narratives. Lewis considers the contextual history for which Stam calls (although not directly), and this proves especially important for fans of the Bond series, who would not want Bond women removed from the pinball machine. Lewis’s game is milder than *Whoa Nellie!*. It features the Bond women, but the game implies that these women are assisting Bond in completing his mission. Players are not collecting them as they do with Stern’s *Playboy*. Comparatively, *Whoa Nellie!* does not depend on a urtext, but rather on a past culture embedded in Americana and pinball history. Thus, the game exposes an era many pinball fans want to leave behind.

Recently, Stern has manufactured two games that feature female characters in an unsexual manner. Players can unlock Gwen Stacy (“Gwenom”) in *Venom* (2023). *The Uncanny X-Men* (2024) features women superheroes like Storm, Mystique, Rogue, and Kitty Pryde. Both games portray these characters as powerful women, rather than objects of spectacle. *Jersey Jack’s Toy Story 4* (2022) prominently displays Jessie and Bo Peep, two of the few women in the *Toy Story* franchise. In these ways, pinball companies try to produce more productive representations of women, and all three games I mentioned have remained popular at tournaments.

Overall, the industry is responding positively to players’ concerns. Belles & Chimes and other leagues are creating inclusive spaces and tournaments for

players, and competitors claim that this helps improve player morale. It can also positively affect spaces essential for the pinball community. Stern is growing the pinball market by promoting Insider Connected in public spaces such as bars, arcades, and restaurants. Moreover, they are also hiring women pinball designers to create new games. For example, Leah Wells recently worked on a Stern game. Wells has “grown quite accustomed to being the only woman” and feels “accepted.” As Wells says, she is “very involved in the creative process. I converse with the lead designers, arguing my points and challenging theirs. . . . I emphasize the player, but again, I’m not sure if that is a result of me being a woman or just a product of a good game designer. Perhaps it’s a culmination of both.”⁹⁹ Stern also hires more women in other parts of its venture, such as in “other areas of the studio, the video graphics team, the bill of materials team, and the electrical engineering group.”¹⁰⁰ For such reasons, at least the future of pinball is looking brighter than before.

Shira Chess notes that “Video game audiences . . . changed substantially . . . from the mid-1980s through the early 2000s, video games were primarily designed and marketed to a presumed masculine audience, a combination of technological innovation and the interventions of feminist game players/creators aligned, not only to reshape what is possible in video games but suggest ways to rethink feminist practices.”¹⁰¹ For pinball, the 2020s may be the time that feminist creators revamp the game much like they updated the video game industry. Parker and Ryan both agree that “the culture is improving and becoming more accepting. Our experience is that people are listening and realizing that women have value in this community and buying power. It is worthwhile for manufacturers to market to and target women in their content and themes.”¹⁰² Lane, Parker, and Ryan all claim that women working within the industry are integral to improving the representation of women. They all note that women can bring diverse ideas to various pinball companies, which “will be great for the industry to continue to expand its market.”¹⁰³

Although pinball’s history remains problematic, as this article has shown, women’s leagues offer ways to teach gaming communities how to become inclusive. The esports community faces similar issues, yet there it proves much harder to oversee hypermasculinity and harassment because online players are effectively anonymous.¹⁰⁴ Pinball tournaments offer better possibilities because they are typically in-person and more malleable than esports, since the pinball industry must connect with its consumers. In contrast, the triple-a industry is less beholden to its customers as it has a more profitable and centralized struc-

ture. Given pinball's decentralization, players can use grassroots approaches to hold pinball companies responsible for their sexism. As a result, the industry must make changes that reflect contemporary opinions concerning gender. This is also changing the attitudes of pro players. Reed, Adams, and the IFPA, more generally, do not echo the views of Norton or the PPPA. Although the pinball industry and pro pinball organizations have troublingly depicted women, sparks of light exist in the archives, as evinced by Millie McCarthy's profile. I hope this article will inspire a broader investigation into the impact of women on pinball and the convergence of feminism and play more broadly.

Women pinball players look toward a more inclusive industry. To quote Chess again, "[Feminism] creates opportunities to rethink things, and one of those things gets to be how we play." The goal of women-only tournaments is not to exclude men, but instead to create an opportunity to reevaluate sexist issues and find solutions to the problems they create. By doing so, we will develop strategies to establish inclusive social environments. In turn, this will reshape the pinball industry and demonstrate to gamers that they have opportunities to influence positively the course of game design and social play spaces.

NOTES

1. Ryan Banfi, "Public Pinball." *Contexts* 23 (2024): 38–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15365042241293433>.

2. Ryan Banfi, "Toward a Study of Pinball." *Games and Culture* 17 (2022): 933. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211058315>.

3. Ryan Banfi, "Disco Pinball: Declining Games and Depression in Disco Elysium." *Games and Culture* (2024): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120241240018>.

4. The IFPA is the officially recognized governing body for pinball as a competitive sport. It organized tournaments from 1992 to 1995 and then became inactive. Since its revival in 2006 by Josh Sharpe, it has become increasingly popular.

5. Sam Brooks, email message to author, March 29, 2025.

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8. T. L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (2018), 18.

9. Keith Temple, *Pinball Art* (1991), 44–45; see Brian Channing Bill, “Pinball Illustration: The Artists and their Careers,” PhD diss., Syracuse University (2001), 27.
10. Joanne Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8 (1996): 10.
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