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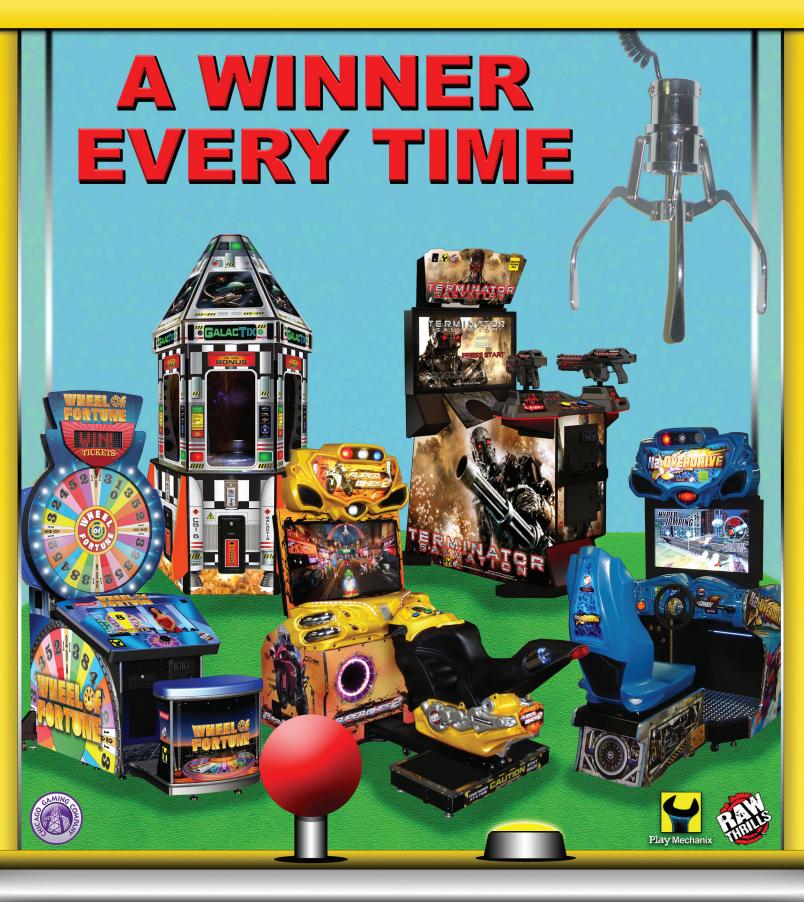




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Stern Pinball recently required the rights to and created an Avatar Pinball game. Gary Stern spoke with *Play Meter* about the licensing process, the blockbuster film, and pinball in general.

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BONNIE THEARD Editor

We want to hear from you about any of the articles in this issue or topics you'd like to see.

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he recently concluded Amusement and Music Operators Association (AMOA) Mid-Year Board Meeting provided an opportunity for face-to-face interaction, an exchange of ideas, and a place where peers can work together to conduct the association's business and help find solutions to common problems encountered by the operating community.

AMOA members should know that the association is under the direction of fellow dedicated businessmen who take personal time and use personal funds to travel to the Mid-Year Board Meeting. While they work on programs for the common good, along the way they forge friendships that last a lifetime. The AMOA staff is equally dedicated and serves as the support system.

It sounds like a cliche, but this is truly a bonding experience. Everyone has an opportunity to put ideas on the table and discuss the merits. No one is offended if their idea is not heartily endorsed, and they are open to any other suggestions. The idea is to get as much input and new perspectives as possible. This is not the time to be shy.

Each committee is made up of a cross-section of operating companies from all over the country. While they face a variety of issues on a local level, they take the time to serve on committees that range from the Hesch Scholarship Fund to the Notre Dame Management Program, and from jukebox promotions to seminars at the Amusement Expo 2011, March 1-3, in Las Vegas.

Like the AMOA Council of Affiliated States Meeting, which will be held Feb. 10-12, 2011, in Tampa, Fla., the AMOA Mid-Year Board Meeting brings industry members together in a business setting with a sprinkling of social events that encourage camaraderie and allow for networking away from the conference room.

The challenge faced by the Membership Committee stood out for me because of its impact on everything the association is trying to accomplish. If you don't have the numbers, you can't support the resources needed to offer the same level of services, and you certainly can't help protect the industry from excessive taxation or adverse legislation.

The national association and state associations are grappling with the issue of declining membership. The industry has experienced consolidation at all levels; no one segment has been spared. We are bound together by our common predicament.

I am going to make a bold-faced pitch to anyone who has not joined AMOA or their state association: Do it now; it's important. This industry we love pays our salaries, puts our kids through school, and provides for our retirement.

Yes, these are difficult times, but giving up is not an option. Nothing is accomplished if you are frozen with indecision. What can you do about your current situation? What can you do differently? What promotion would bring players into locations and put quarters in your machines? Conducting business the same old way will not deliver new results.

The small amount that could be saved by skipping association membership dues will more than be made up in terms of the benefits derived from participation. That saying that touts "strength in numbers" holds true. Be sure you are represented and have a voice. Reinvesting not only pertains to equipment; it also pertains to personal commitment and pride in the industry. \blacktriangle

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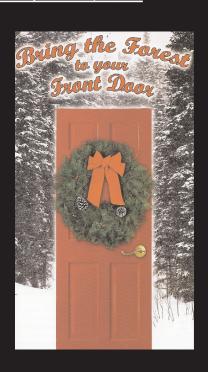
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STERN BRINGS TO PINBALL

A new philosophy melds with a red-hot license for the latest release from Stern Pinball.

tern Pinball has secured one of the most sought-after licenses to bring the 3D experience of the mega big screen hit "Avatar" to the pinball machine equipped with playertargets, and custom speech provided by

Stephen Lang, who portrays Col. Miles Ouarwitch in the movie.

Here's a testament to the skillful adaptation of the movie to pinball: Jon Landau, producer of "Avatar," was so impressed with the prototype backglass that he brought it home, to keep.

Play Meter caught up with Gary Stern, President of Stern Pinball, as he was preparing to leave on an international business trip. We wanted to learn more about Avatar, the importance of licensing and its long journey to completion, and the new design philosophy at Stern Pinball.

Stern is no stranger to the licensing process and rubbing shoulders with celebrities who take great pride in having one of their films, TV series, or other creative projects immortalized in pinball.

Popular games from the past come to mind: Back to the Future, Family Guy, The Simpsons (two pinball games and one redemption game), and Guns and Roses, to mention but a few.

Stern recalled that when a Back to the Future pinball was brought to the film's director, Steven Spielberg, he had already purchased one for himself. Matt Groening was involved in The





Simpsons products, and was happy to know that someone was keeping pinball alive. Musician Slash of Guns and Roses contributed to the game design of the Guns and Roses pinball.

CONTINUED BUZZ

A new buzz has surrounded "Avatar" since "Avatar: Special Edition" was released Aug. 27 in theaters with 3D capability. The new "Avatar" includes nine additional minutes of footage never seen before. By the end of August, the movie had grossed over \$700 million.

Stern said, "We are excited about Avatar; our game is just as great as its namesake." He added, "The movie is back because 3D movie theaters had contracted to show other movies, and could not accommodate the long run needed for a popular film like 'Avatar.' This movie is not going away. Sequels are coming and 3D DVDs are coming out before the end of the year. The will be constant talk about this property."

The pinball features a 3D backglass, something Stern said is "absolutely phenomenal." He added, "The player is immersed in the plot of 'Avatar' and battles to save the Na'vi and ultimately fight Col. Miles. Along the way he must knock down the motorized target in front. The game offers considerable ball interaction. The artwork, which must gain approval of the producer, is fantastic."

"Studio executives are high on the pinball game," said Stern. He pointed to one of the game's main ingredients: "It's fun for all levels of players."



Stern Pinball employees keep their pinball skills sharp.



Gary Stern in his office.



A busy scene at the factory.

That play factor is part of a new philosophy at Stern Pinball. Stern said, "We started with Big Buck Hunter and Iron Man pinball to change our philosophy, and we've done it successfully."

NEW PHILOSOPHY

Stern explained, "We looked at games of years ago, and we looked at what we made recently. We decided our games had become too skillful and did not offer enough randomness. We saw that we needed to make the games more fun to play for everyone. The result is greater game appeal and increased earnings on location."

He continued, "Everyone wants to broaden their player base, keep the core player but provide fun for the casual players. That's what we are able to do. As Harry Williams said, 'The ball is wild!"

Jody Dankberg, Director of Marketing for Stern Pinball, said, "We're trying to get back to the way pinball used to be." Stern interjected: "We're retro, not nostalgic. We still have the ramps (people don't want a game without ramps), but we're solid state, and games like our new Avatar are stunning."

Also new at Stern Pinball are product introduction parties that help increase awareness of each new title. The International Flipper Pinball Association (IFPA) has assisted in arranging the parties at operator locations.

LICENSING PROCESS

Stern said, "We've been doing this (licensing) for a long time. We have relationships with various licensors; the Avatar license is through Fox. Each time you license something you have to deal with the underlying movie company or TV company. For Family Guy we dealt with Seth McFarland. Our Art Director Marc Schoenberg works on licensing almost full time."

He continued, "The licensor has to protect their property and wants to be sure we give them the best presentation. We've never had a licensor that's unhappy with the finished product; they are always happy." Dankberg explained, "We have to do custom speech with the actors because words used in the games are not common to a movie or TV series, such as 'shoot again' and 'multiball." Dankberg said watching the voice recordings "is very cool."

STERN MERCHANDISE

As the only company producing this American creation, pinball, Stern Pinball appreciates the continued interest in its product, and decided to spread word of its brand to players, fans, and collectors all over the world by offering a wide range of Stern-emblazoned merchandise.

Dankberg has designed a complete line of Stern Pinball merchandise including fitted caps, knit hats, full-zip hoodies, men's and women's shirts, decals, and stainless steel tumblers—all available at the Web site (www.sternpinball.com).

"A lot of people are interested in pinball," said Dankberg, "both casual players and experienced players, and we wanted to make all of them happy by creating this merchandise."

In addition, the company has become increasingly accessible. Stern Pinball has always opened its doors for group tours related to industry events such as the annual Pinball Expo. Now the scope of those tours is expanding.

Dankberg stated, "We're making our office and factory more consumer friendly and tour friendly. We've added a gift shop, showroom, and displays of pinball history and how games are made."

Tours can be set by appointment with Dankberg, (847)970-8628; e-mail (jody.dankberg@sternpinball.com). "We're happy to do it," said Dankberg. "We not only entertain the public, but also let them see and learn more about pinball."

ON THE HORIZON

Stern Pinball will turn 25 in 2011, which will be cause for celebrations throughout the coming year with a variety of promotions. Dankberg plans to maximize exposure for Stern Pinball with promotions, social networking, and a more attractive Web site.



Designer John Borg (I) and other Stern Pinball staff.

He noted, "We have a new feature on our Web site: Operators can list their game locations so players looking to play pinball can find the games. There is a real pinball community."

That community is loyal to favorite games, which led Stern Pinball to do additional production runs of some of its games. The company continues to make Batman, Shrek, Spider-Man, and Big Buck Hunter. Special edition limited runs (500 only) of Spider-Man Black and The Lord of the Rings were produced for collectors. Gearing up for a small run adds to the cost of the game.

Stern explained that the company is producing three game levels: Regular/Pro for operators; Premium for such games as Spider-Man Black or The Lord of the Rings, which have more bells and whistles; and Classic for homeowners with a different, non-coin cabinet. Not all games are available in three versions, and some playfield features will be different. The goal is to make pinball accessible to everyone.

Historically, the international market has been good for pinball. Stern spoke about that market at the present time: "As a percentage it is probably better than it has been. This year we will do twice the business we did last year, which was a quiet year. We have to watch what's happening with the dollar. Other countries have the same economic problems that we do; the credit crunch is everywhere."

Does Stern have any advice for operators that will help them survive in



A side view of Avatar backglasses.



An assembly area with Avatar games in the background.

these tough economic times?

"They need to reinvest," said Stern. "Operators have to be careful what they spend, but they should not disregard reinvesting. I've heard reports of improvements worldwide, so the worst may be behind us. People are still looking for entertainment. We're ready to provide it."

For more information on Stern Pinball products and services, call (708)345-7700; Web (www.sternpinball.com). ▲

Memorable career for Dennis Rhodes

After 43 years in the coin-op amusement business, Dennis Rhodes of Broadway Music Co., has seen his share of changes, from phonographs to digital jukeboxes and from electromechanical games to solid state.

Dennis was recently honored with a retirement party attended by a crowd of 50 composed of employees, industry friends, customers, and family.

For months, he had been slowly separating from the company, not an easy thing to do. The "letting go" process of retirement takes time. His son-in-law, John Farmer, General Manager, has been working with Dennis for four years and has taken over the reins of the distributorship. Broadway Music Co. has offices in Memphis, Tenn., and Caruthersville, Mo.

Prior to the retirement party, Dennis told *Play Meter*: "I tell myself I'm officially retired, but I go to the offices two days a week to help out."

Dennis tells the story of his long career:

My introduction to the coin machine business came in the summer of 1958 when I was just 10 years old. A friend



and I were on a mission to beat the high score on an old wooden rail pin-ball machine set on nickel play. The high score at that time must have been 1,000 points (not like the new ones today). After many attempts, and many nickels later, I finally achieved my goal. It took all the nickels I had at the time,

which was not that much in those days.

I joined the U.S. Navy in the summer of 1966 at the age of 17. After being stationed in Norfolk, Va., I was transferred to Millington, Tenn., awaiting discharge. It was 1967 and I met a coin machine operator named Bill Forsythe of Forsythe Vending and Amusement Co. Bill wanted me to work for him because he knew I could repair electronic equipment. My discharge came in the summer of 1969 and I decided to settle down in Memphis.

After looking at a Memphis newspaper, I noticed a job opening at Music Systems, which needed a technician (we were called mechanics at that time). I was hired and found out that Music Systems was owned and operated by Rowe International, which was in the music and vending business (right up my alley).

One month later, Rowe bought Southern Amusement Co., closed Music Systems, and moved me to the parts department at Southern Amusement Co., which was a full distributorship that dealt in pool tables, jukeboxes, and full line vending.





From left: George Johnson, Dennis Rhodes, and Rick Williamson.



At the retirement party, (I-r): Dennis Rhodes, Bob Ellington of Ellington Music Co., Rick Williamson of Eight Ball Amusement, and George Johnson, retired from J&H Amusement.



Bob Goad

While I was working in the parts department, one of my jobs was to view the films that came in for Rowe's new system called Photo View. It was a machine that could be mounted on top of any Rowe jukebox and allowed patrons to watch a short film while the jukebox played music. This was a popular feature at the time. Photo View was new and exciting and gave me an opportunity to meet and deal with a lot of operators.

I then moved into sales, where I quickly learned the games and vending side of the business. I was able to sell equipment to the same customers I knew from the parts department.

At that time we sold many different lines of games and pool tables such as Irving Kaye and United pool tables.



Cole Porter (I) of MCR in Memphis and Mike Williams of Arkansas.



In the showroom, (I-r): Dennis Rhodes with Paul Plessinger and Neil Desio of Brady Distributing in Memphis.



Nostalgic item: a Ms. Pac-Man marquee.

The late Marty Shumsky sold United tables and became a good friend. Bob Goad, who came to Rowe from Sammons-Pennington, had introduced me to Marty at a Music Operators Association (MOA) trade show in Chicago.

Games sold then were mainly oneplayer, which changed to two-player and four-player machines. Pool tables were a big selling item at \$595 each in the crate.

I remember being at one of the Amusement and Music Operators Association (AMOA) trade shows when Pac-Man was introduced. My wife was playing this little game and remarked how much fun it was to play. I was talking with someone from Midway and said the game would never be a hit. Boy, was I ever wrong!

I continued working for Rowe and became General Manager of the Mem-



A Chicago Coin Mini-Baseball game at the office.

phis branch. Bob Goad left Rowe to go into business for himself and wanted me to join him, which I did in 1974. Then in 1976 I decided to enter the distributing business and start my own company. Bob named my company Dennis Rhodes Enterprises, which appeared on my first business license; I later changed it to Eagle Distributing Co.

Eagle Distributing Co. kept that name until October 2008 when Eagle acquired Broadway Music Co. and the two companies merged.

I continued to sell many games, pool tables, and jukeboxes over the years to operators in this part of the country, as well as to the families of operators such as my dear friend Bob Ellington (now retired); the late Burt Hyde and his son, David; the late Lee Williamson of Eight Ball Amusement and his son, Rick; and four generations of the Hendrix family.

What a great job I have had for over 40 years. If anyone ever loved a business, it has been me. The people I have met in this industry—manufacturers, distributors, and operators—should be proud to be a part of this business. It has its ups and downs as we all know, but what a good life and business it has been. I will sincerely miss all of you.

I would like to mention everyone by name, but the list would be too long. I could tell 1,000 stories of those I met along the way and those who have touched my life, but who among us could not. Thanks for the memories.



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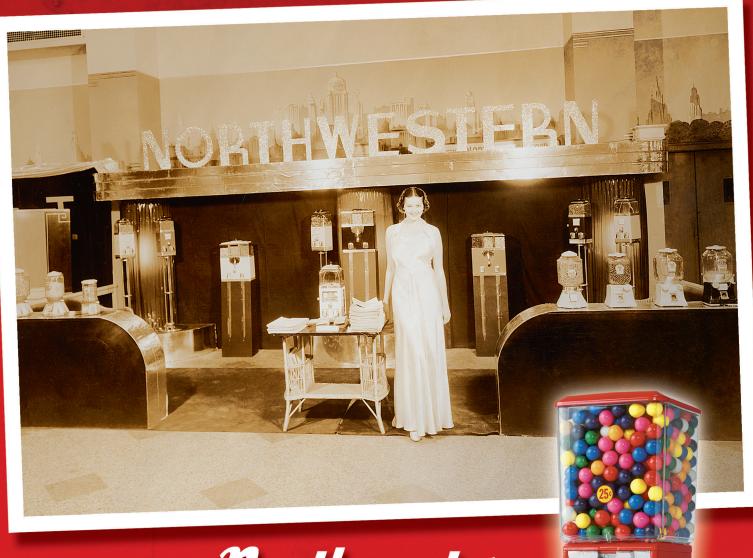
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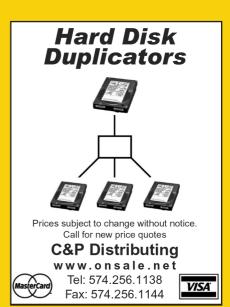
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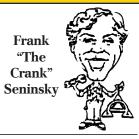
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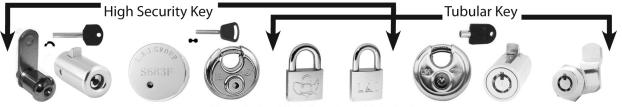
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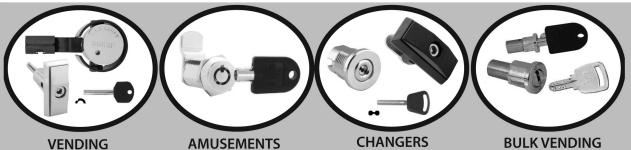
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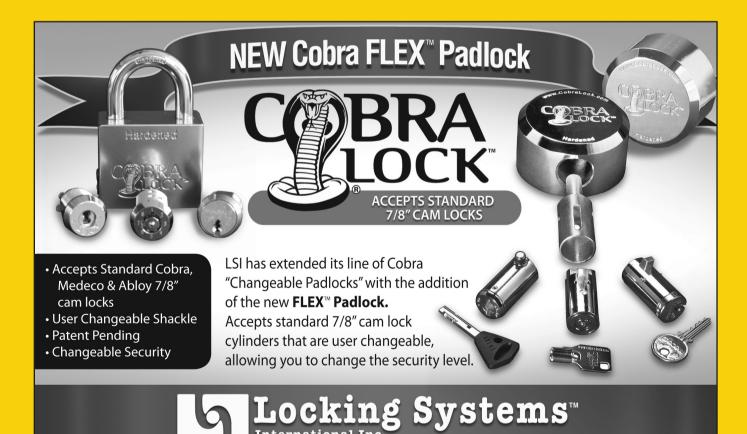




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