

The Time America Outlawed Pinball

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Pinball machines at the Pacific Pinball Museum in California. Photo from Wikimedia

American cities once outlawed pinball machines. The arcade game had developed a bad reputation. Officials thought the games caused crime and that children spent too much money on it.

On March 6, 1948, a New York City police officer entered a store. He dropped a penny into a machine called "The Marvel Pop Up" and began playing. On his sixth try, he won a free game. The officer arrested the store owner for having a "gambling machine." This arrest was one of many crackdowns on pinball.

Many opinions surrounding pinball

The first coin-operated pinball machine was invented in 1931. For years, the arcade game was seen as a danger to society. Players made bets on games. The winners received prizes, such as free games, gum or even jewelry. So, police thought pinball was a type of gambling. Churches and school boards said pinball encouraged children to steal coins, skip school and waste money. It was said that some children went hungry because they spent all their money on playing pinball.

People also said that criminals controlled the pinball business. New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia wanted to get rid of the game. He believed it led to crime and bad behavior in children. LaGuardia claimed that children spent all their school lunch money on pinball machines.

In 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The attack marked the start of World War II for the United States. At this time, America needed to make more weapons. Pinball machines were made out of copper, aluminum and nickel. LaGuardia believed these metals should be used to make bullets and bombs to kill war enemies, not to make games. He said that pinball was unpatriotic.

The anti-pinball crusade

On January 21, 1942, the New York City Council decided to outlaw pinball machines in public places. The council is the group of politicians that makes the laws of the city. Police were ordered to storm into candy stores, bowling alleys, bars and arcades. They took away as many as 2,000 machines. LaGuardia and police chiefs stood in front of journalists and smashed pinball machines with sledgehammers.

Soon after, Milwaukee, Chicago, New Orleans and Los Angeles also outlawed pinball. In Washington, D.C., children could not play the game during school hours.

Pinball's bad reputation lasted for years.



Pinball wizard shows off his skills

It finally started to become acceptable in the 1970s. The California Supreme Court is the court that decides what is or is not legal in the state. In 1974, it ruled that pinball was more a game of skill than chance. The game was allowed again in Los Angeles. Two years later, the New York City Council considered doing the same. However, many people were still against pinball. A member of the city council said pinball might look like a harmless game, but that it would bring gambling back to the city.

The Amusement and Music Operators Association wanted to make pinball legal again. The group had been started to defend the use of arcade games. Its goal was to prove that pinball was a game of skill, not luck. To prove this, the association brought one of the top players in the country to New York City. The player's name was Roger Sharpe.

A pinball machine was placed in the room where the council met. City council members and reporters crowded around the machine to watch Sharpe play. It was then that Sharpe made the shot of his life. He said to everyone that by hitting the ball a certain way he could tell exactly where the ball would end up. The pinball went exactly where Sharpe predicted. Pinball really was a game of skill after all, and the council made it legal.

New matchup: pinball versus video

Just when the public began accepting pinball, kids started playing video games instead. Today, only one pinball machine company remains. However, the game is becoming popular again. More than 1,800 pinball tournaments a year offer more than \$1 million in prizes.

LaGuardia would not have been happy.

Quiz

- 1 What effect did World War II have on pinball?
- (A) World War II made pinball more popular with young people.
(B) World War II made people less interested in pinball.
(C) World War II gave the mayor of New York City an excuse to outlaw pinball.
(D) World War II gave the people of New York a reason to stop playing pinball.
- 2 According to the article, why were churches and school boards against pinball?
- (A) They believed it was a danger to society.
(B) They believed it was a form of gambling.
(C) They believed it encouraged children to waste money.
(D) They believed it was unpatriotic.
- 3 Read the paragraph from the section "Pinball wizard shows off his skills."
- It finally started to become acceptable in the 1970s. The California Supreme Court is the court that decides what is or is not legal in the state. In 1974, it ruled that pinball was more a game of skill than chance. The game was allowed again in Los Angeles. Two years later, the New York City Council considered doing the same. However, many people were still against pinball. A member of the city council said pinball might look like a harmless game, but that it would bring gambling back to the city.*
- What is the structure of the paragraph?
- (A) chronological order
(B) pro and con
(C) cause and effect
(D) question and answer
- 4 In the first paragraph, the author of the article:
- (A) introduces the topic of the article
(B) tells a story about the topic of the article
(C) describes where the events of the article took place
(D) compares an issue from the past with a current issue