

EXTRABALL DEUTSCHES FLIPPERMUSEUM



EXTRABALL: A Pinball Museum ... in Germany!

by Regine Eickhoff

In September 2011, Extraball, the Pinball Museum in Neuwied on the Rhine, will celebrate its fifth anniversary. When we opened the museum in 2006, we presented about 50 machines in seven rooms. The place seems to be growing tentacles, however, and we now have five additional rooms with a total of almost 150 pinball machines on display (almost all of them working). Additionally, our collection now includes a few oddities such as the 'Assomats' - a kind of shrunken version of a pinball machine (about 2/3rds the size of a regular one) manufactured in Germany in the 1950s. Contrasting those small pinball machines, our exhibition also features the largest machine: the huge Hercules (Atari, 1979). Another machine in a category of its own is the Super Flipper (Chicago Coin 1975), the first video pinball game, a sort of "ancestor" of the iPhone pinball app.

It all started quite harmlessly about ten years ago: Axel Hillenbrand, co-founder of Extraball, came across a Star Trek pin on eBay. A real Trekkie, he was excited to win the auction, but soon found out that the machine did not work properly. Luckily, his close friend and museum co-founder Harald Fleischhauer is a trained electrician who loves to tinker with all sorts of machines. Harald managed to fix the Star Trek and hasn't stopped repairing pinball machines since.

Axel and Harald make a good team. While Harald is the one with the technical knowledge and skills, Axel is the



Regine and Harald

hunter-gatherer type who has a talent for finding pinball machines (or wrecks...) in remote villages or under the strangest circumstances. There can be the occasional awkward situation, such as the one with the angry young woman who much too cheaply sold us a Sexy Girl pin (a German conversion of a Bally Playboy) after the couple had split up and he hadn't picked it up ... Another noteworthy acquisition was Sega's Apollo 13 from 1995 that was hardly used when Axel bought it. It had failed to work relatively early in its "career" and the owners had never made the effort to get it repaired. The early damage had caused the machine to remain in excellent condition.

Harald has by now taught himself to fix all types of pinball machines, each one with the help of manuals and instructions he finds on the internet. Without all of our pinball geeks and fans out there who have

made that knowledge available on the web, our museum would not exist! We are very grateful for what you have provided.

So far, there has been only one single machine that Harald hasn't been able to fix: the Atari Time 2000. The frustrating part: it worked when it arrived! But when Harald did a few routine tests on it, he caused a short and blew the main board. There can be quite some trial and error involved when first confronted with a new repair situation. Harald is especially proud of our functioning Hot Tip. This was the first electronic Williams pin (1977) and according to Harald is a particularly nasty candidate when it comes to maintenance and repair.

I want to emphasize how lucky we are to have so much affordable space for the museum. Axel and his parents own a three-story apartment building that sits on the family property in Neuwied. When the old lady who lived on the ground floor moved to a nursing home, the idea of actually starting a museum became a realistic possibility.

When we started to implement our plans, we were soon confronted with the inhibiting rules and regulations of German bureaucracy that keep many innovative (business) ideas from ever being realized. We quickly learned that founding a non-profit association (for which you need a minimum of seven members) was the most sensible way for us to go. Each one of us brings his or her various talents to the

project and together, we have made the museum what it is today.

Behind an attention-grabbing and colorful street front, the museum starts with a kind of lobby/mini-coffee shop plus a set of the earliest pins, the only ones that visitors are not allowed to play. We display some old treasures such as a Bagatelle game (produced in Belgium ca. 1899, a pinball ancestor), the 1904 Bajazzo plus several German machines from the 1930s to 1950s.

Additional ground-floor rooms feature popular classics from the 1990s such as the Addams Family (gold edition, of course!) or Scared Stiff. A special feature are two NBA Fastbreaks hooked up to each other for competition-playing. We also show all four serially produced Capcom pins, including the very rare (at least here in Europe) Breakshot. One of my personal favorites here is Sega's 1997 Starship Troopers. I think that the screeching and screaming monster insects are a cool feature as well as the ugly Brain Bug that occasionally pops up out of the playfield.

We also show newer developments here, for example the 1999 Revenge From Mars and also two contemporary machines from Stern that our guests tend to play a lot (Family Guy and Pirates of the Caribbean).

In the basement, we have roughly a dozen older electromechanical pins

Axel and Harald



from the 1950s to the 1970s including the Knock Out (Gottlieb, 1950) and the Fireball (EM version from 1972).

Upstairs, we focus on the 1980s and have some goodies such as the 1981 Vector with its futuristic artwork. A personal favorite of mine in this section is the somewhat strange Grand Lizard (Williams) from 1986 that produces weird hypnotic sounds throughout the time you are playing it. We also proudly present quite a number of Data East pins such as the popular Guns N' Roses machine from 1994 or the less known Robocop.

Then, there is a didactic room where you can look at the interior of a pinball machine and learn some terminology. The most successful GamePlan pin was the 1979 Sharpshooter and Axel and Harald have a complete version plus two extra playfields. These are now in display cases one facing front and the other back. Speaking of didactic - each room has at least one wall-mounted (German) text on various issues that relate to the world of pinball machines.

The most recent addition to our museum is a diner-like area which seats about 20 people. People can rent the museum for birthday parties, office parties or even weddings. Axel and his friend Bernd are excellent cooks so even (fantastic!) catering is possible!

All machines run with old Deutschmark-coins. This adds to the nostalgia! People pay an entrance fee and receive five coins. With those, they can try out five of the machines and can then exchange more Euro if they want to continue to play.

We get a lot of bright-eyed men full of memories of certain machines that they rediscover in the museum. Families with





Mr and Mrs Hillenbrand, Petra and Axel



excited children stay all afternoon – finally a museum that attracts kids away from their computers. I noticed something interesting: because of their computer games, some of these kids have amazing reaction times. They have never played a pinball machine before, but manage to keep the silverball in the game due to their well-trained reflexes.

Do make a stop in Neuwied should you ever come to Germany! We are located only about an hour northwest of Frankfurt international airport in a town called Neuwied. Right nearby is a whole string of amazing castles you can visit along the Rhine, so there's a lot to see and do in the area.

Each time we lock up the museum after another busy weekend, we agree that it feels fantastic to be able to provide such fun-filled hours of happiness to the people coming to our museum. We really enjoy keeping alive and making known the tradition of pinball machines.



For photos and a short English introduction to the museum, please visit our website www.extraball.eu.

You can also follow us on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/extraball>

