

Swiss Pinball Culture: Between Nostalgia and Revival

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the decline and evolving revival of Swiss pinball culture as part of the CH Ludens project on Swiss game history. Pinball thrived in Zurich's arcades from the 1970s to 1995, when a slot machine ban led to their closure. Today, pinball persists in private clubs, driven by hobbyist passion. The paper analyzes three recent German-language publications that sparked renewed interest in pinball: Ivo Vasella's historical study of Zurich's arcades, Herb Bieri's visual homage to international pinball communities, and Andreas Bernard's autobiographical reflection. By combining cultural analysis with emerging fieldwork – including mapping historic and active clubs, participating in tournaments and interviewing collectors – this study contextualizes pinball as a nostalgic yet socially meaningful form of play. It contributes to the DiGRA community by broadening the discourse community-driven game practices and regional game heritage, highlighting pinball's relevance beyond retro aesthetics toward a dynamic, evolving cultural phenomenon.

Keywords

pinball, arcades, member clubs, play culture, media discourse, nostalgia, Switzerland

INTRODUCTION

This abstract explores the evolution, decline, and potential revival of Swiss pinball culture as part of the "CH Ludens" project, which examines the history of Swiss video game culture and design [1].

In recent years, pinball has resurfaced in a new, niche form in Switzerland, fueled by member-club-based hobbyist communities led by collectors and enthusiasts. Unlike the commercial arcades of the 20th century, these clubs rely on personal passion rather than profitability, attracting significantly smaller but dedicated audiences. Notably, 2024 has seen a resurgence of academic and cultural interest in pinball machines, marked by the publication of three German-speaking works that examine the history, culture, and significance of the so-called "Flipperautomaten". This article analyzes these publications and explores their implications for a potential revival of the Swiss pinball scene.

DISAPPEARED FROM THE PUBLIC EYE: SWISS PINBALL MACHINES

In Switzerland, pinball thrived between the 1970s and mid 1990ies, particularly in cities like Zurich, where, by the time of 1995, 68 arcades served as vibrant social spaces. However, the Swiss 1995 slot machine prohibition abruptly ended also the public arcade and pinball scene, forcing the machines' disappearance from urban life. Today, arcades and pinball machines may be found in passageways of stores, in the basement of restaurants and hotels, in vacation resorts, or at airports [2]. Parallel to this less than vibrant public pinball scene is a steady community of Swiss hobbyists and fans that come together (bi-)monthly to play each other's pinballs or pay a fee to play a bigger collector's machine.

RENEWED INTEREST IN LOCAL PINBALL CULTURE

In 2024, three new publications by Swiss and German authors sparked a resurgence of interest. This paper examines these works and highlights their different perspectives on pinball history, emphasizing their local cultural history, their visual attraction and their nostalgic appeal.

Pinball As "Zeitzeugnisse": Ivo Vasella's Local Perspective

In "Flipper und einarmige Banditen – Eine Kulturgeschichte der Zürcher Spielsalons" (Pinball machines and one-armed bandits – a cultural history of Zurich's gaming arcades), Ivo Vasella provides a detailed account of Zurich's pinball and arcade culture during its heyday. Focusing on the arcades that defined Zurich's leisure spaces from the late 1960ies until 1995, Vasella situates these 68 venues as centers of community interaction. Beyond their role as entertainment hubs, Vasella eloquently describes pinball machines as "Zeitzeugnisse" – contemporary testimonies that reflect shifting cultural, social, and urban dynamics (and is, in this regard, comparable to the British publication "Arcade Britannia" (Meades, 2022).



Figure 1: Book Cover (Source: [Hier und Jetzt Verlag](#))

The Visual Perspective: Herb Bieri's "Shoot Again"

Herb Bieri's "Shoot Again" expands the narrative beyond Switzerland, discussing the international pinball production and player community and offers essays by pinball community members. But the main authors are the machines themselves: Bieri's publication focuses heavily on their visual appeal, and gives them a central space. The subtitle of the publication ("Die neue Lust aufs Flippern": the new desire for pinball) points clearly at a success story, and a revival – and therefore paints a very different picture of pinball culture than the previous publication.



Figure 2: Book Cover (Source: [Kaeser Verlag](#))

The Nostalgic Appeal: Andreas Bernard's "Der Trost der Flipper"

While the first two examples are publications by Swiss authors, the third publication is written by German author Andreas Bernard. "Der Trost der Flipper" (the solace of pinball machines) adds an autobiographical dimension to pinball's appeal. He highlights the psycho-social qualities of pinball machines, describes in detail his relationship to certain pinball machines and their mechanics, and key moments of his childhood and adolescence that are tied to pinball, such as friendships, but also the psychogeography of German cities. Thus, he provides a complementary perspective, underscoring pinball's enduring charm, featuring the perspective of nostalgia (Davis 1979, Garda 2013, Wulf et al 2018).



Figure 3: Book Cover (Source: [Klett-Cotta Verlag](#))

DISCUSSION

What does this culmination in relevant publications mean for the contemporary Swiss pinball culture? Is the renewed interest a precursor to a broader cultural revival, or will pinball remain confined to hobbyist circles? How do the different perspectives of the publications by Vasella, Bieri and Bernard – as retrospective representations of the Swiss pinball culture of the past – connect with today's public and private pinball culture and their possible development?

CONCLUSION

These research questions and the study of Swiss pinball culture within CH Ludens focusses on pinball's significance as a social, historical, and cultural phenomenon. Currently, a map of today's and historic private Swiss pinball clubs is being established as part of the study, collectors and fans are being interviewed and pinball tournaments are visited (and actively participated in), in order to paint a more accurate picture of today's pinball scene and its ties to the past. The publication of the discussed three key works in 2024 by Vasella, Bieri and Bernard underscores a renewed academic and cultural interest in pinball machines, raising important questions about their place in Swiss society. While a full-scale revival remains unlikely, this resurgence in scholarship and hobbyist enthusiasm might suggest that pinball culture in Switzerland is not dead – it is evolving.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 For more information on the Swiss research project, see <https://chludens.ch/>
- 2 See for the discussion of the arcade revival at Swiss airport of Basel: Bauer & Suter 2023.