By Peter G. Balbus

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The MIT community features individuals who spend large amounts of time acquiring and developing skills which enable them to flash lights, activate bells, and achieve high scores. No, these people are not engineers or technicians, but pinball players.

Pinball enjoys widespread popularity at MIT. In addition to the thirteen machines in the Student Center, there are seven machines. Some fraternities even possess their own private pinball machines.

Veteran pinball players see their efforts as further refinements to the state-of-the-art of pinball playing. One MIT student is credited with playing pinball continuously for nearly five hours. It cost him 25 cents. Such feats prompted one non-player to remark, "I've got a friend like that... he's crazy!"

Well, maybe not crazy, but pinball enthusiasts are decidedly dedicated. A management science student carrying a 72-credit load said, "I always try to get an hour or two of pinball a day no matter how pressed for time I am, I find pinball to be far more satisfying than the courses I'm taking."

But besides the notion that pinball is truly satisfying, what is it that motivates the MIT pinball wizards to collectively part with over $25,000 annually to play the silver ball? An unidentified pinball enthusiast remarked: "It's the psych factor. With pinball, you've got a good chance to beat the machine; with computers, forget it. Pinball gives you the respect computers take away..."

An observer agreed, "I derive great pleasure watching the machine lose." Another quipped that "it's a great way to relieve a lot of your tension. It's good for the soul."

When one veteran pinball wizard was asked the best way to win at pinball, he grinned and said, "the most efficient way is to thrash the machine."

The noises stop. The lights slowly fade. And with great revenge, the machine flashes TILT for all around to see that you've failed. It can be most embarrassing.

Pinball is an exacting science. With precision, the plunger is drawn back, slowly released, and zap! The ball is rocketing off the rubber bumpers, the lights are flashing, and the bells are ringing.

At first, the cacophony that results rasps against your nerves. It makes for fine headache material. In time, however, the din becomes soothing, almost hypnotic.

No matter how soothing the effect is on non-players, though, it is positively electrifying for enthusiasts.

The noises pique the favor that rages within ardent participants. Pinball can be terribly addictive. In moderation, it provides for a fine way to socialize. But in excess, it can have many harmful effects.

Another pinball enthusiast was heard to say, "If I wasn't here tonight, I'd probably be home tooling, and ruining my eyes."

"Now," he said, "I'm down here ruining my eyes, and my ears too."

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