

where did all those quarters go?

'Pinball still the king' in electronic games

by Scot K. Meyer

Battalion Reporter

When you enter the world of electronic games, your ears are overwhelmed by the ominous drone of invaders from space, explosions from sea battles and car collisions, and innumerable pinball bells.

But you must listen carefully to hear the most important sound of them all; the sound that makes the others possible. It is the clink of quarters dropping into change boxes.

"It's a two-bit business, and you've got to worry about every quarter that drops into the machine," Ross Todero Jr. said. Todero Amusement and Vending Service owns and maintains the 17 pinball-electronic game machines located in the Memorial Student Center.

The MSC receives a commission from the electronic games, Bowling and Games manager O.C. McCartney said, but he declined to say how much he gets.

"We (the MSC staff) can't give out any information on profits," he said.

Don Ganter, who co-owns the Dixie Chicken, Miranda's, the

Chicken Oil Company and the Texas Moon Tavern, said the machines in his establishments are owned by F&F Vending Company.

Video games do very well for a time, Ganter, said, but interest in a given game drops off very quickly. Video football was very popular last year, and this year Space Invaders is the top game, he said.

Both F&F and Todero vending companies agree that Space Invaders is the most popular electronic game right now.

Space Invaders is the game that asks the question: Can one person with a couple of laser bases defend his or her city against 55 alien ships and their bombs? The answer is no, unfortunately, because the skilled player who manages to shoot down all the invaders without losing a laser base will receive an extra base for his trouble, plus 55 new aliens to shoot at.

The alien ships move across the screen with an ominous, pulsing drone, and drop bombs in an attempt to knock out the laser base. The player can move the base around to avoid the bombs while shooting down aliens.

The player, no matter how skilled, can never "win" the game be-

cause he only gets three laser bases (or four if he gets a bonus), while the aliens are replaced every time they are shot down, and they start out lower in their attack run.

One reason the game is popular is that for one quarter the customer can play until all three laser bases are blown up, no matter how long that takes. As the player gets better, he will be able to play longer.

Todero said video games are either played by time, or by the number of times an action is repeated. The games played by time will usually be the first to die out, he said.

An exception to this rule is Space Wars, which is still popular after two years. Space Wars is a battle between two video starships. One ship will be operated by the computer, or by another player.

Todero thinks the game's continued popularity is due to the many possible variations of the game. By pressing the right buttons, the prospective combatant can determine the speed of the ships, the speed of the missiles, whether the ships will bounce off the sides of the screen or continue to maneuver off-screen, and what kind of gravity there will be.

Ganter said that video games may come and go, but "pinball is still the king."

Pinball was dead in 1975, Todero said, but it was given new life when the industry switched from electromechanical to digital machines. With the old machines there wasn't enough action to compete with the video games, he said.

Mike Patranella, an employee at Todero, said the games are set to allow 25 to 30 percent free games. The scores needed are set higher on-campus than off-campus, he said, because many students are very good players.

"A player who is not as good doesn't really have a chance at getting a bonus game, because the better players make us keep the scores up," Patranella said.

If too many people are beating a machine with the number of points required on it, the machine will be moved, Patranella said.

"People will get hot if you raise the number of points they need," he said.

Raymond Fickey, owner of F&F Vending Service, said that games become obsolete very quickly. Mata Hari is one of the longest lasting pinball machines; it is still popu-

lar after a year and games last between a year, Fickey said.

"The machines are expensive," Fickey said. "Pinball machines cost about \$1,900 and a space invaders is about \$1,000."

Someone wanting to get into the business capital, or just to save a Space Invaders Commons last semester of \$100 was off machine was not a bad idea. "We're hoping it will be again," Todero said. "They are expensive."



Roger Grace enjoys a game of pinball in the MSC Basement in between classes.



Quarter after quarter is put in electronic games in an effort to make a profit and win some free games.

Photos by Paul Childress