



PINBALL WIZARDS

Zen Studios continues its domination of the digital silver ball

by Jeff Marchiafava

Pinball is one of the oft-forgotten casualties of the death of arcades. After suffering its share of ups and downs over the decades (caused in part by the rising popularity of video games), the expense and inconvenience of creating, shipping, and maintaining traditional pinball tables caused the production of new tables to all but cease by the end of the last century.

Just a little over a decade after the final two major pinball companies (Sega and Williams) bowed out of the market, Pinball FX 2 became the number one downloaded game on XBLA of 2011, propelling Zen Studios to a level of success few indie developers reach. We recently sat down with Zen Studios to play its newest batch of tables, learn how designers create a table from scratch, and to find out what 2012 holds in store for digital pinball.



Origin Story

Despite the popularity of Pinball FX 2, Zen Studios is still far from being a household name. Based in Budapest, Hungary, the developer started as a four-man group. The company's first foray into pinball was Pac-Man Pinball, a project chosen based on CEO Zsolt Kigyossy's love of pinball and a recognized lack of competition on the marketplace. Namco killed the project before it was released, so the studio turned it into an original title called Flipper Critters. It released on DS in 2005 with little fanfare. "It was a budget of like \$40,000," Zen's creative director Neil Sorens recalls. "The characters were ugly, the tables weren't realistic... I don't know how many copies it sold, but it was off the radar, not a very good game... but it was a stepping stone for us to get onto Xbox Live Arcade."

Its first console pinball title was Pinball FX, which caught a lucky break early on in development. "The only reason Microsoft approved us on Pinball FX for Xbox Live Arcade was because we had support for the Xbox Live Vision camera - you could use your arms for flippers," Sorens tells us. "So we went through the Xbox Live Vision team rather than going through the standard approval process. So, you know, if Totemball could make it onto the Arcade, so could we." As it turns out, Zen's newest pinball game proved much more popular with players than Microsoft's free XBLA offering.

A Winning Formula

Pinball FX was a surprise success for Zen, tapping into a neglected market of old-school pinball fans.

"One of the reasons pinball failed was because it wasn't a good value proposition for people," Sorens says. "You had to pay 50 to 75 cents per game and go all the way to the arcade, or buy a multi-thousand dollar toy for your house. But a game at \$10 for four tables that you could download onto your Xbox is very convenient,

and turned out to be a value proposition that people were looking for."

Through DLC and new titles like Zen Pinball and Pinball FX 2, the studio honed its addictive formula into a business model that's hard to resist for gamers. Downloadable tables are cheap and offered a la carte; in-game score alerts and automated friends list messages encourage rivalries and keep players coming back for more; and regular online tournaments foster the developer's large and dedicated community. These aspects, along with a complex physics simulation that reproduces over a dozen different materials to capture the feeling and replayability of real pinball, have resulted in success on every platform Zen has released on. In addition to Pinball FX 2 topping the XBLA charts, Zen Pinball was the number four indie title on PSN last year, Zen Pinball 3D has been one of the most successful games on the 3DS eShop, and the iOS and Android versions are set to break two million downloads combined in the next few months.

The Marvel Connection

Zen Studios created a few licensed tables based on IPs like Rocky & Bullwinkle and Street Fighter with the original Pinball FX (though Zen is the first to admit they're not nearly as good as the tables the company is creating today). Sensing a great opportunity, at the end of 2009, the company made its biggest and riskiest partnership by creating a series of tables based on Marvel's iconic comic book characters. Zen Studios had already worked with Marvel on the overlooked PlayStation 3 FPS The Punisher: No Mercy, and Zen Pinball had just released to good ratings.

"We knew internally that pinball was kind of a low-hanging fruit to begin with," says Chris Baker, Marvel's licensed games manager. "It just made sense to go to the people that were making the best pinball game, and we already had a really good relationship based on The

Punisher game that we did." The two companies struck a deal to release Marvel-themed tables as DLC for Pinball FX 2, and as a standalone Marvel Pinball game on PSN.

The first four-pack was based on some of Marvel's heavy hitters. Wolverine, Spider-Man, Iron Man, and Blade all received their own tables, each featuring various confrontations with characters from their rogues galleries. Zen then released standalone Captain America and Fantastic Four tables, followed by a second four-pack entitled Vengeance and Virtue, featuring Thor, Ghost Rider, Moon Knight, and an X-Men table. Zen proved it wasn't afraid to tap lesser-known characters, sometimes to the surprise of Marvel.

"In the case of Blade and Moon Knight, our initial reaction was, 'Really?!'" Baker says. "But that's where their passion for what they feel would make a great table comes through. I think if you go play either of those, Blade definitely feels like the Blade character and has a great vampire motif going on, and then Moon Knight was my personal favorite of the Vengeance and Virtue tables, which I would not have predicted."

The themes for the next round of tables, another four-pack entitled Avengers Chronicles, were chosen the same way as the previous ones: through a back-and-forth dialogue between Zen's designers and Marvel, as well as input from the fans.

"The customers liked the tables based on characters, but they wanted to see some variety," Sorens says. "The storylines are a way of providing that." As such, the next four tables are not based solely on Marvel characters, but rather popular comic book events. The pack will be available this May, and contain tables based on The Infinity Gauntlet, World War Hulk, and Fear Itself, along with a fourth based on the upcoming film version of The Avengers. Zen is also working on Doctor Strange and Civil War tables, which will be released later down the road.

Intelligent Design

Many of Zen's tables are so complex it's hard to tell where a designer starts. As part of the debut of the new tables, Zen walked us through the design of World War Hulk from concept to final product, while Marvel's Chris Baker provided insight on the comic book company's influence.

First Playable: Every table starts on paper with a design document. The first step is choosing key features and modes for the table. "The main components can be geometry, the way the table flows, the number of ramps it has, the dimensions - the playfield toys are always a big thing," says Zen Studio creative director Neil Sorens. "[These features] are how we make the table unique, but also how we connect the table to the theme."

Zen then consults with Marvel. For World War Hulk, Marvel suggested changing a boss fight between Hulk and Cyclops to Hulk and Wolverine, as it was the more classic matchup. After tweaking the design document, the basic geometry is created and tested to make sure the flow of the table is fun. Marvel doesn't even look at the first playable build. "In our heads," Baker says, "every other table they've ever done serves that purpose. They know what they're doing."

Alpha Build: By this phase, an early version of the table art has been implemented, as well as background geometry. Some 3D character models are in place, but animations are still rudimentary. All of the table's modes can be played in alpha, though the table logic, music, and dot matrix messages are still placeholders from other tables. While Marvel plays the alpha build, its feedback is still minimal. "We just basically want to see that the game is functioning," Baker says. "There's still not a lot for us to specifically comment on, but we get a good sense of the feel of the table. That's all we really need to see at alpha."

Beta Build: The beta phase features the actual music of the table, along with 90 percent of the final art. By beta, the character models have been approved by Marvel and feature better animations. Marvel makes the majority of its suggestions during beta. For example, Zen originally had Hulk always facing his adversaries in the same order as he did in the comics, but Marvel suggested forgoing the chronology for enjoyment purposes. "This is where I think it helps to have an outside perspective," Baker says. "We know most people probably aren't good enough to beat everybody... so we suggested to have it so you can pick who you fight. I think that makes it a little more fun, to have your options."

Final Build: The final build is where everything comes together. All of the voice samples have been added, along with the final lighting and special effects. For World War Hulk, there were still a few last minute art changes that needed to be made before the table is ready for consumers. During this build, Baker also shared with us news of World War Hulk's wizard mode. "At the end of the comic, Hulk is beaten," he says. "That's kind of a crappy way to win if you're playing from Hulk's perspective. So we do have that - if you're beaten in the wizard mode, it ends like the story ends, but if you win, then it's kind of an alternate, what-if ending."



First Playable



Alpha Build



Beta Build



Final Build

The Future of Pinball

Despite Zen's massive success in the pinball realm, the studio shows no signs of resting on its laurels. Zen's vice president of marketing Mel Kirk told us they are currently working on versions of Zen Pinball for Vita, Windows Mobile 7, PC, and Wii U. On the DLC front, the company just struck a deal with PopCap for a table based on one of the company's most popular games, and Kirk told us of two other major deals they have in the works based on huge entertainment franchises. In the meantime, Zen's latest original table, Epic Quest, gives a glimpse of one direction the developer plans to take with new tables, by providing a pervasive XP system that carries over from one game to the next.

Kirk told us the company is also working on Pinball FX 3. Although he estimates the game is still at least a year from being finished, Pinball FX 3 will provide improved tutorials and table guides, new tournament structures, a deeper level of social interactivity, and a meta-game progression system that will hopefully give players an incentive to keep playing after a lousy first ball. Best of all, Kirk says the game will import your previously purchased content in the same way as Pinball FX 2. This ensures that you don't have to rebuild your library, and keeps the community from splitting amongst different titles.

Once a four-man team, Zen Studios now has 40 employees, 25 of whom are working on pinball. The others are working on new downloadable projects that you can expect to hear more about later this year, but Kirk ensures the company isn't looking to abandon its bread and butter. "I think we've proven that we can do things outside of pinball," he says. "Our next projects will take that to the next level, but we're happy being known as the pinball guys." ♦

Living The Fantasy

Although Zen takes pride in its complex physics simulation, the developer hasn't been afraid to forgo realism in favor of fun. The new tables won't change that formula, and include a variety of far-fetched but entertaining features.

Fear Itself (seen on page 52 and 53) contains a secondary outline with player-controlled magnets that allow you to propel the ball in consecutive loops for huge points.

For Infinity Gauntlet, each of the story's iconic Infinity Gems causes a new mind-bending effect. The Soul Gem causes the player to travel through a wormhole to a different play area for a magna-save minigame. The Mind Gem causes the flippers to default to the up position, requiring you to hold in the triggers to bring them down. The Reality Gem caused the most radical change: it turns the entire table upside down for a brain-breaking multiball mode.

While these features may alienate pinball purists, Zen stresses the need to continue providing new and entertaining experiences. One of the reasons traditional pinball died was because players ignored newer tables in favor of the legendary Addams Family and Twilight Zone tables. When arcade owners realized they could continue making money on the classics, they stopped buying new tables, which caused manufacturers to go out of business. Something tells us Zen won't have that problem.



Infinity Gauntlet



Strange



Civil War