

Lucky Ju Ju

By Raphael Rosen

We almost missed it.

My girlfriend and I were prowling the streets of Oakland, heads craned out the windows of her VW, trying to find signs directing us to the Webster St. tunnel and onward to Lucky Ju Ju Pinball, a fabled parlor in Alameda that houses vintage pinball machines.

I met Michael Schiess, Lucky Ju Ju's founder, at the front door. He was sitting on the tailgate of a pick-up truck parked near the door, wearing a cowboy hat and swinging his feet like a little boy. He led me inside, where I finally glimpsed the two rooms of bleeps, boops, and sirens.

Lucky Ju Ju Pinball opened its doors on New Year's Eve of 2002. I asked Michael how it began, and he told me that, at first, he had just wanted to create kinetic art. But the epitome of kinetic art -- the pinball machine -- already existed. What to do? He then dabbled in "re-theming" an existing pinball machine, building a Last Supper game, complete with halo's and a "resurrection gate."

Then, as if struck by a careening pinball, Schiess realized that pinball machines were not only "gems of Americana," but also particularly suited to teaching physics. Schiess knew that it was easier to teach the concepts behind electricity using an object that "does something." He believes that it's harder to explain electricity using a digital computer, like an Apple or Dell, because the student does not get a feel for what electricity *is*. On the other hand, electromagnetic machines like the classic pinball machines at Lucky Ju Ju are like *analog* computers, and, with flippers that snap up and down, wires that run hither and yon beneath the brightly painted playing fields, and lights that wink and blink, they convey the underlying principles of electricity better than any laptop from Silicon Valley could.

Recently, Schiess has begun planning to make Lucky Ju Ju the core of a larger enterprise: the creation of the Neptune Beach Amusement Museum (NBAM). Located at Alameda's former Naval Air Station, NBAM would showcase clanking machinery, antique games, and, of course, pinball machines, both to demonstrate their beauty, and also show how analog, tactile objects can be fantastic science teaching aids. Visitors would also have the option of further pursuing their interests in classrooms located inside NBAM.

Imagine if high school physics classes went on field trips to play 1970's-era pinball classics like *Captain Fantastic* or *Gulfstream*. That is Michael Schiess' vision: a sort of Exploratorium located in the middle of the San Francisco bay, a place where science teachers, gear-heads, tourists, and geeks of all stripes could converge, and by pressing a few buttons, begin to comprehend the basic physical principles that govern the world.