

ASI 2003: Turning a Crucial Corner

I think the ASI show was a great show, pure and simple! Why? Because I saw more good new products on the floor in every single category than I have at any recent coin-op trade show. There was something there for everyone in our industry, and it was all very interesting. That's one of the major reasons that you go to a trade show, isn't it? Also from a selfish point of view, with a dearth of attendees, there was plenty of time to get down to serious business and really study the products, talk about them with the engineers, and suggest possible modifications and new marketing opportunities.



FRANK TALK
BY FRANK "THE CRANK" SENINSKY

Perhaps my enthusiasm for the show had something to do with how I started my trade show week. The first thing I did to get into the mood was to go down to the Nightclub & Bar Show for a photo shoot. I was dressed in my blue boxing robe and shorts and boxing gloves for a press release "weigh-in" to promote the upcoming AMOA seminar titled "The Battle of the Titans," featuring myself and Brad Brown of Worldwide Video Entertainment. I was a little cold walking around barefoot, but it was the perfect setting for that outfit, and a few quick "shots" helped warm up my system in more ways than one.

For the photo shoot itself, we had two Penthouse Pets (Kyli Ryan, February 2002, and Alexis Winston, Runner-up Pet of the Year) assigned to keep both fighters warm. I think with one of those Pets standing behind me and three drinks in my belly, I could take just about anything Brad Brown has to throw at me. Anyway, the Nightclub & Bar Show is a great attitude-adjuster to get ready for the ASI show. But you have to be careful because just about anything you consume there contains alcohol, so you have to make sure you walk very slowly as you head up to ASI and get something regular to eat so you don't throw up on one of the ASI pool table exhibits. (At least that's what I heard happened to one exhibitor - sorry, but that comes with the territory.) By the way, I want to give a special thanks to Allen Weisberg of Apple Industries and the Penthouse Pets for helping us stage the AMOA promotional photo opportunity.

To show you how cruel my fellow AMOA board members and staff are, the moment I arrived at ASI they gave me the job of selling a directory ad to Brad Brown's Worldwide Video. Unfortunately, as confident as I was feeling, I still wasn't up to the task. Maybe after we exchange a few jabs at AMOA I'll bring up the subject.

In all seriousness, I thought the mood of ASI was professional, upbeat and, interestingly, very product-oriented. It was an extremely pleasant surprise, especially considering that a lot of product debut in recent years has taken place at IAAPA. However, the fact that several companies had booths at both ASI and Nightclub & Bar made it difficult to catch up with key contacts who always seemed to be "at the other show."

Obviously, the ASI show didn't see nearly the crossover attendance they expected, and many of the Nightclub show attendees didn't really cover the ASI show in a comprehensive way. It was more a curiosity thing, so I don't think it had a major impact except to add another thousand bodies to the attendance count. All in all, it was not an informed class of buyers, but it produced the bodies that exhibitors are always seeking at conventions. On the other hand, for those ASI attendees who paid to go to the bar show, once there, there was little chance that they would return to the ASI because all of the fun downstairs.

Now, let's get down to business of our own and talk about a few of the games I really liked:

Parker Bohn III Pro Bowler: What a terrific idea. That's really the way an old game is supposed to be remade for the modern age. The feel of it was super, and that's what I would expect out of Jack Guarnieri of Pinballsales.com. I have really great hopes for this both as a street piece and as a future redemption game for arcades and FECs. Now you can run competitions and promotions with what has already proven to be a popular attraction for players for fifty or more years. And it is priced right!

Ping Pong: I first saw this piece in London, and Bromley has really done a good job tweaking it for play here in the U.S. The technology certainly has a future in our industry. I saw people really playing this game intently and having a great time doing it! This is a sports game with a monitor, much like the aforementioned shuffle alley, just more active because you put your whole body into the action. You will most likely have to purchase two units so players can compete against one another rather than against the machine. I am hoping that the price comes down.

Time Crisis 3 (Namco): This is the number one video, if you are going to buy a game with some violence. It will certainly make a lot of money. I had one make \$1,600 the other week. It has been a long time since one of my videos made that kind of money.

Warzaid (Betson): I picked up a few of these in the currently available two-player, even though my companies don't buy much in the area of videos that include violent content. But we certainly have some locations that demand these kinds of games, and they do make money.

Ten Strike Classic (Benchmark): This game is really fun to play, no doubt. But you have to be cognizant about how much it costs and what it can earn on location. I would love to have one for my home. Benchmark has done a great job and now has to figure out a way to have it sell for twenty times what it can earn in a week. We will have to wait and see.

Ratz: A video redemption piece from P&E that I am looking to test before making a purchase decision. It was very attractive both from the standpoint of story-line and the combination of video play and redemption dynamics. The combination is often hard to do, and I think this game really overcomes many of those hurdles. My only suggestion would be to right-size the cabinet a little so it's not so bulky.

Monopoly 3 Player (Stern): This redemption game is another version of Titanic, and it will be interesting to see if the popular board-game name and features will increase the cashbox.

DPS: Apple Industries unveiled their new Digital Photos System in London and showed it at NAB. It is not necessarily a coin-op product, but it certainly can be. A roving photographer goes around and takes pictures and hands out bar-coded receipts. The digital signals are instantaneously broadcast back to a digital photo kiosk, which can be located up to 300 feet away. The customer can go to the kiosk, swipe their receipt, and see and print their pictures. This new technology opens up many doors that have been traditionally closed to coin-up.

Skittle Ball (O.K. Manufacturing): It's a good application in its category. The game is really designed to drive prize merchandising, but it's got good play appeal for both kids and adults.

Special Forces (ICE): This is a category winner as well, and it's not necessarily so only because the game is timely. The theme of combat is always popular with a certain segment of players.

The Simpson Pinball Party: This is one of Stern's best efforts. We are still putting pins only in our best locations, and quite honestly selling them as soon as the earnings start to drop off. We are not operating that many pinballs these days, but hopefully the new tournament system will help bring pinball to the next level.

Other new games that I will be following closely are Shuffle Shack by Baytek/ Seidel, new update kits from Tsunami, Tokyo Cop by Namco, Sport Shooting by Sammy USA, the new prize redemption center by Smart, and the Joust/Robotron combo by Team Play.

That's a nice lineup, all right, and plenty enough to make sure that all of your locations get a little excitement, something new to fill the bill. The show is really a chance for distributors to make serious investment decisions, and there were plenty to be made at this show. So you don't necessarily need to have an army of operators there, although it helps distribution to have a certain amount present in order to help them make wise ordering decisions.

It's hard to say why this show seemed to produce so many good new games. Maybe the factories finally realize that this show marked some kind of fundamental deadline to get some quality product out in the marketplace if this industry expects to maintain its foothold on leisure real estate. If it follows that many manufacturers are realizing that any sale is a sale and were more than willing to market directly to the location market, they may have also worked a little harder to bring their best efforts to market.

Maybe a lot of operations have also finally gone crossed the line into "limbo-decay" where they are facing a huge updating cost to re-energize their routes, and the process is beginning. Meanwhile, the manufacturers are in the same position, thus both vital segments of the industry are at this point at the same place on the evolutionary map. The ingenuity in our

industry has always been there, and maybe this is the beginning of the two sides of the industry working together for something good. Isn't it interesting that such a potentially momentous occasion - of two sectors' timelines meeting - took place during war?

We have already spent significant amounts of money on new game purchases coming off this show, more than we have after other recent shows. We have sped up the process in terms of our equipment investment, which had been hovering in helicopter mode, because there is good new product to buy. Of late, we have also been able to lower our debt levels giving us a little more leeway to buy. You certainly don't want to get to the "rotten wood" stage. The current time is very exciting, and I think our industry has turned a crucial corner in terms of getting a glimpse of where we are heading.

Now, we can just hope it's not a blip. Many of the manufacturers we have visited with are trying new things and have learned a tremendous amount about how to successfully develop product for this market, product that earns and is finally available at the right price. It's taken many years, but many have finally woken up to what the rubber-band ratio is all about, namely, what a game earns in a week divided by its current market value. My company uses a 5% ratio as our benchmark guideline, but it's different for every company. It's the closest thing to analyzing a stock we have in this business. In many ways, this is probably the end of the old model of over-investing in the development of a game because there was not enough communication between the front office and the engineering department, and little if any input from the operating community.

So what does all this mean? It means, as I have written many times in this column, we still have a very viable industry. There are great opportunities, but like all opportunities, it's going to take time, money, risk and work. But when you are ready, the money is still there to be made.

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