

MISTER GIMMICK

BY MORT WEISINGER



Most of the machines in this penny arcade in Playland, at Rye, New York, cost anywhere from a nickel to a quarter. This is not believed to be due to inflation. There is a variety of over 50 different machines available. Rabkin

William Rabkin works on the basic principle that people love to beat a machine. His coin games take 400 million nickels a year from fascinated Americans

SHORTLY after the AAF scrambled a pair of atomic eggs over Japan, a physical scientist from Columbia University went quietly to work for William Rabkin, a Long Island City gadgeteer. For two weeks the scientist labored behind sound-proof doors, pledged to secrecy. Three months later the result of his hush-hush activity exploded in thousands of hotel lobbies, corner drugstores, bus terminals, railroad-station waiting rooms and even Death Valley trading posts—in the form of a Rube Goldberg device almost as intricate as the monster calculating machine at MIT. The gimmick, tagged the "Atomic Bomber," operated for a nickel—but thus far it has grossed Bill Rabkin thousands of dollars in profits.

William Rabkin, a placid gentleman with imaginative brown eyes, is the

Thomas Alva Edison of the amusement device industry. In the trade, he is famous for having patented some forty-nine infernal machines, among them "Holiday Hits," "Shoot-O-Matic," "Bang-A-Way," "Bowl-A-Game," the "Old Mill" and "Pikes Peak." Next to transportation turnstiles, juke boxes and automat slots, Rabkin's ingenious mechanized games swallow more American nickels than any other five-cent repository. Thirty million people a year, small fry and big fry, scowl, whoop and gee whizz over the frustration or triumph they experience by playing with his novel creations.

"The basic principle of a successful gimmick," Rabkin explains, "is that it should challenge the player's ability to synchronize brain, eye and hand reactions. The instrument should be

conquerable, for it is a psychological truth that human beings exult in triumphing over a machine."

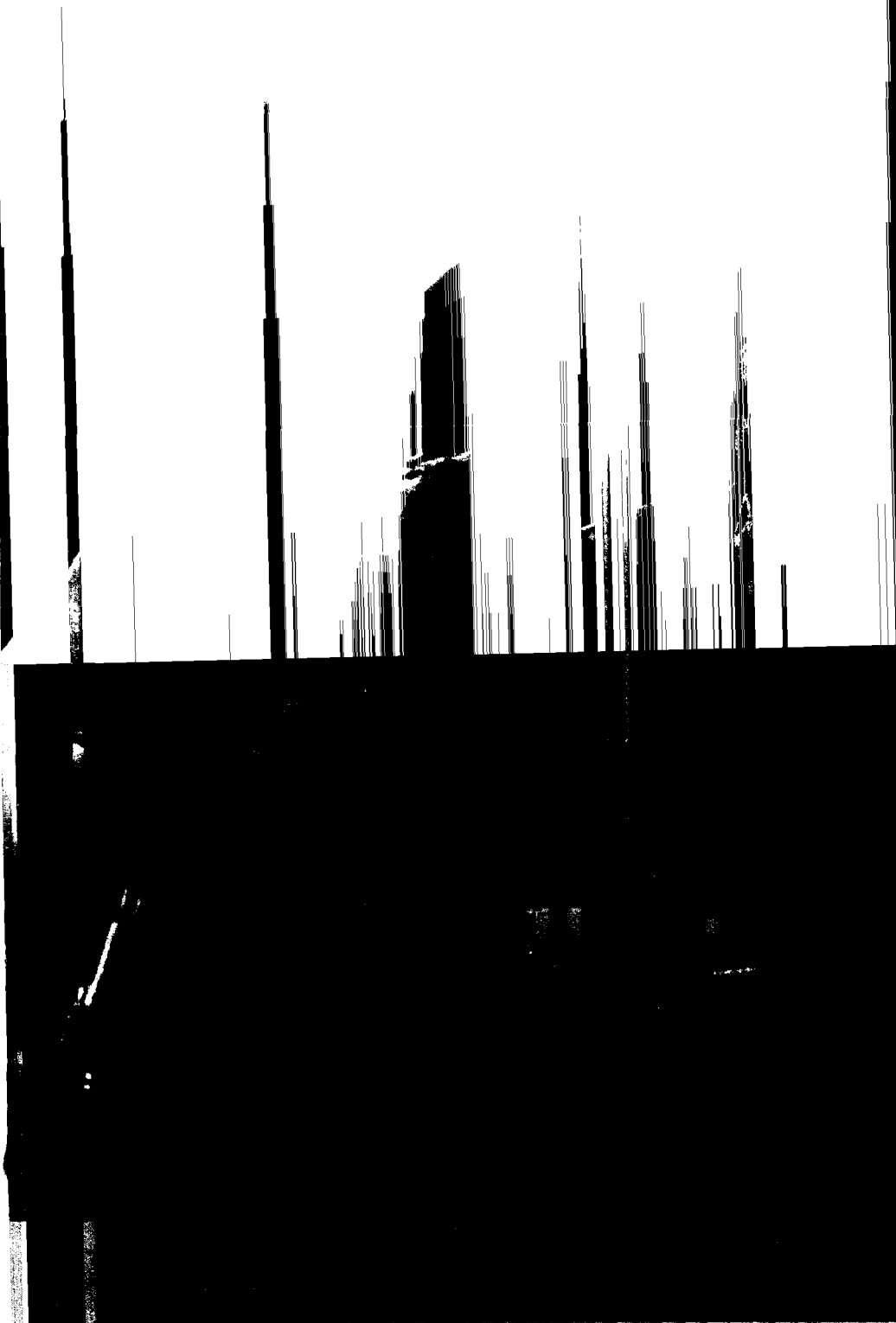
His "Drive-Mobile" fits this definition perfectly. This is an ingenious contraption wherein the player controls an actual steering wheel and tries to pilot a model car across a transcontinental highway. Offhand this would seem as simple as dialing your favorite radio station. What puts it in the snake-pit class, however, is the added Rabkin twist: The highway dips, curves abruptly and offers the proxy motorist all the hazards of a coast-to-coast trip. The player's score depends entirely upon his accurate driving skill, for every time he goes off the road he sacrifices points.

Although millions of penny arcade fans regard the "Drive-Mobile" as a mechanical brain teaser, a few pro-

fessional groups have seen fit to declare it of scientific value. Traffic safety engineers in several cities use the gadget to drill home to amateur drivers the need for hair-trigger control of a vehicle. During the war Navy officials lend-leased a dozen "Drive-Mobiles" from Rabkin, used them to test the reflex actions of air crews at various elevations. Even today, Army physicians at Halloran and other veterans' hospitals employ the device as a therapeutic measure in restoring the manual dexterity of servicemen whose hands have been injured.

Rabkin snags ideas for games fresh out of the headlines. When he read how England's anti-aircraft defense was decimating the *Luftwaffe*, it inspired his "Sky Fighter." This was a mechanical facsimile of the real thing.

Collier's for November 1, 1947



Mr. Gimmick himself—William Rabkin—spends up to \$50,000 in developing some of his machines



A Westchester County policeman takes a busman's holiday by showing off his crack marksmanship

The player aimed his antiaircraft machine gun at a moving stream of enemy planes. Then—rat-a-tat-tat—300 shots in 30 seconds, to the accompaniment of vivid sound effects. Every time a plane was hit, a bell rang, and down nose-dived the craft in flames.

The "Sky Fighter" won immediate acclaim from thousands of shooting-gallery addicts with a trigger-finger itch, as well as from G.I. Joes. Rabkin will never forget the R.A.F. pilot he met whose voice registered more pride in speaking of the 290 score he had chalked up on the "Sky Fighter" than when discussing the three Nazi bombers he had shot down.

Rabkin's "Atomic Bomber," which is also derived from the front pages, with lethal mushroom clouds ascending on a view plate every time the player scores a chain reaction, proved more realistic than he had ever dreamed. The chain reaction culminated all the way to Russia, resulting in this editorial blast by Pravda: "The barbarism of the Americans has reached new heights . . . to boast to the world of their monopoly of the atom bomb they have invented a machine . . . for five cents even a

child can enjoy the thrill of dropping an atomic bomb . . ."

Almost everyone who has ever visited a fair or frequented an arcade from Atlantic City to the Barbary Coast has fed at least one nickel into Rabkin's first and most famous invention—the "Digger." When only a young apprentice in a machine shop, Rabkin toyed with the idea of capitalizing upon the simple fact that nothing attracts a crowd as easily as a steam shovel in operation. Finally, many years later, his ambition was realized when the "Digger" went into action at Coney Island.

"Digger" to Go Down the Ages

A miniature steam shovel in a glass case, it scooped gravel when the customer manipulated the controls properly. Later, candies were substituted for pebbles to reward the player for his skill. More than 15,000 "Diggers" are still in circulation; an Indian raja recently purchased one for a favorite grandson; Oglethorpe University sealed one within its "Crypt of Civilization," to be opened in 7940 A.D.

Today, none of Rabkin's coin-operated devices offers the player any

payola, no matter how high a score is rolled up. Skill and luck determine a perfect score; his top-flight engineers work constantly to make each game as scientific as possible, enabling the player with superior sleight of mind to achieve the only jack pot possible—a feeling of self-satisfaction for having beaten a brain of steel, solenoids and springs.

How tough should a game be, or how easy? To find the answer, Rabkin recruits special testing crews of teenagers who give each new gimmick a dry run. Through exhaustive studies, Rabkin's engineers have found that boys and girls in the 13-18 age group have more quick-as-a-flash alertness than their elders. Consequently, whenever it becomes too difficult for this young set to register a high score on some new game, technicians eliminate some of the obstacles. By the same token, if it rains high scores, "bumpers" and "bafflers" are incorporated into the field of action to give the player added headaches.

Some 1,300 delicate parts go into the average Rabkin gewgaw, and it costs him at least \$16,000 to lubricate the transition from blueprint stage to pilot model. Rabkin's newest brain

storm, a complicated game based on the current wide interest in television, will require an experimental budget of \$50,000. Another, in which the player pilots a rocket ship toward a distant planet while the planets shift in their orbits, has already cost him \$25,000.

Because piracy of ideas in the amusement device industry is as common a practice as design borrowing in the fashion world, these projects will remain locked in Rabkin's safe until patented. Many of Rabkin's technicians hold Phi Beta Kappa keys; during the war it was duck soup for them to help him convert his plant into an assembly line grinding out high-precision elevation quadrants for the Army.

Rabkin's tantalizing contrivances coax about 400 million nickels from the American public every year. Much of this revenue is due to the vanity of man, he believes.

"Most coin-game fans play to a gallery," he explains. "Human nature makes them want to pour nickels into the gimmick until they roll up a high score. You wouldn't let a mechanical nemesis lick you in front of your best girl, would you?" ★★★

BLOW ME BLUE



THE car pulled off the road and parked on the sunburned grass at the top of the bank. Ed took one look at the young man who got out, and said to himself: No sale. The car was wide and low and the top was down. No customers for fish bait out of a car like that.

The young man fooled around in the back of the car for a minute and then came up with a big leather-covered case of some kind. Under his other arm he had something in a canvas sack.

"Mama," Ed called softly, without turning his head, "get out your overalls. Fella's comin' to take pictures."

Every so often, in the summertime, people would come to take pictures of Ed and his wife and the houseboat. They'd fuss around the deck, fooling with their cameras, and when they were through they'd give Ed a dollar.

"Nope," she said. "Too hot to wear those old overalls. I'm comfortable."

Mama was really a neat woman; she dressed better than most that lived along the river, and she kept her hair in a net and her face scrubbed. But the tourists always liked it when she put on the filthy overalls and pulled the straw hat down on the back of her head, sitting beside Ed while the two of them looked solemnly at the round glass eye of the camera.

"Well, we could use a dollar," Ed said. "We sure could."

"Then you just seine some more minnies," Mama said comfortably. "I'm too easy to go fussing around."

The young man seemed doubtful about the plank that connected the bank and the boat; he walked across practically on tiptoe, holding the leather case carefully in front of him.

"You Edward Baussier?" he said. Ed nodded, looking him over. He wore glasses with heavy black rims; he wore sand-colored pants and a coat the color of a claybank, two-tone shoes, a yellow shirt, and a blue satin necktie tied in a bow. The man was chubby, but it seemed to Ed that his coat was a little too big—but it looked too nifty to be a hand-me-down.

The young man took off his hat and held it against his chest and looked at Ed with wide round eyes.

"The Bifty," he said. "The blowin' man himself, amen." He put his hat back on, put down the case, and grabbed Ed with both hands. "You know I been looking for you for four months? I'm Joey Kelp. Shake hands, shake hands."

Mama stood in the door of the houseboat, looking curious. It was a narrow door and she was a comfortably wide woman; she filled it.

"The missus," Ed said, disentangling his hand. "Man here says his name is Kelp. Kelp, is that right?"

"People thought you were *dead*, man," the young man said. He was grinning with excitement. "Mrs. Baussier, it's a gracious thing to meet you." He grabbed the case again. "Listen, lis-ten, have I got something for you!"

"We don't want to buy anything," Mama said warningly.

Joey Kelp laughed.

"Listen," he said, "I didn't come to take your money away; I'm bringing you money. By the hat-ful."

He unsnapped the case and lifted the lid, and Ed saw that it was a phonograph. Joey arranged it on an upended box. From a folder in the top of the lid he took a record, turned it lovingly in his hands, and blew dust from it. He wound the machine.

Hazel had a terrific case of the shakes. She fluffed some of the words and finally, in her desperation, she turned and sent the chorus right to Ed

Collier's for November 1, 1947