



WELCOME TO XENON

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Xenon is a cyborg—a pinball machine that speaks.

When you put a coin in the slot the machine releases an audible “ahhhhhh,” as if to say, “Thank you, that felt good.”

This is the work of electronic composer, renown Buchla player, and new age musician Suzanne Ciani. In 1979, composing an electronic score for a pinball machine was a new kind of sound object for Ciani—for which she was later entered into the Pinball Hall of Fame.

Bally, the game company, probably reached Ciani through Joel Rosenman, one of the co-creators of Woodstock, who’d asked to represent her. Ciani notes, “I was probably the first person to ever have a chip agent!” Rosenman worked out a deal with DARPA where Ciani engineered jet sounds for air force flight simulators. Although, it’s not documented if this “commission” came before or after the rocket sound effect Ciani produced for Starland Vocal Band’s hit single “Afternoon Delight.” She is also responsible for Coca Cola’s logo sound known as “pop and pour” and was almost the registered voice for AT&T. Unfortunately that plan fell through and our daily interactions with the telecommunications company would never match the silky voice that met Xenon players.

Visual components for Xenon developed without Ciani’s involvement. Paul Faris’s fantasy graphics centered around a blue-faced woman with a curvy silhouette, flowing with tubes, dials, and blinky buttons, populated by alien astronauts and big-breasted women in unitards. The structure of the game, designed by Greg Kmiec, enforced pleasure-seeking behaviors: an instrument of affect. Xenon was designed around rewards and punishments enforced by audio-visual stimuli.

Bally marketed Xenon as the first game with a female voice. Ciani gave her voice in every sense to one of the first pinball games with a “vocalizer” board and computer chip for voice recordings. Some of this is explained in a quick segment from the 1981 Omni Magazine television show where Ciani is heard recording the words: “Welcome to Xenon, Weeeelcome to Xeeeeenon, Welllllcome tooo Xennnnon.”

To start the project, Ciani went to an arcade to play pinball and watch people play. There’s a physical connection between human and machine: both hands grasping the sides of the cabinet; pressing buttons; pulling the knob to launch the ball down the shoot; locking eyes with the board of ramps, bumpers, and colorful graphics as silver balls dart around, triggering lights and sounds, racking up points. Players’ bodies lined up: pelvis to cabinet, rocking in excitement, hunched in concentration...

While watching (mostly) boys playing pinball, Ciani noticed how they emoted and lusted over the apparatus. “I had fallen in love with a machine too,” said Ciani. Her obsession with the Buchla allowed Ciani to read the dialogue happening between pinball player and machine, both emotionally and physically. Playing the Buchla synthesizer live is like a choreography of patching cables, which she related to pinball’s own scripted movements.

Suzanne Ciani and Xenon, c. 1979
(Image courtesy Suzanne Ciani).

The instruments of synthesizer, pinball, and cyborg speak to the self-arousing systems of synthetic intelligence and cyber feminism. “The computer, like woman, is both the appearance and the possibility of simulation,” wrote philosopher Sadie Plant, and “is already more than that which she imitates.” Xenon’s vocal sounds simulate physical responses to being played and imitate vocal responses of players.

Ciani’s synthesizer wizardry was more real than any life-like qualities imparted to Xenon. “I had a high-tech mentality,” said Ciani, “I liked to live at the forefront.” She had studied computer-generated music at Stanford University’s Artificial Intelligence Labs in the early ’70s. Ciani was uniquely overqualified for a game’s mimicry of a world in which she had fluency.

The poet Anne Carson wrote that Aphrodite’s seductive voice is “so concrete an aspect of her power that she can wear it on her belt as a physical object or lend it to other women.” In Ciani’s case, five seconds of her voice could fit on a chip, reproduced for 11,000 cyborg pinball women. Feminine sound—being higher in frequency than a low, male voice—is more dense with information, taking up more space on a chip’s memory. Ciani had the technical expertise and expensive equipment to work with such limits.

Speaking with Ciani, no origin myth or fantasy emerged around the character of Xenon. Rather than going toward narrative, Ciani was interested in what she calls an “architecture of emotion.” Certain actions set off groans and grunts, meant “to meet the emotion of the player.” She pushed how sexy the game could be and had wanted the flippers (labeled “thrusters” on the cabinet graphics) to make a whipping sound as they swat the ball. But technical limitations of the time constrained how many parts could make noise.

The cyborg sounds enhance the action, taking on directional shapes, going up or down like the balls in the game. The nature of pinball meant there were infinite variations in the composition. Ciani chose sounds that worked together in any combination, but also built upon each other, to add excitement for the player. The atmosphere is represented by an unstable undertone that accelerates as the player advances levels, building to crescendos activating an emotional “let go.”

Men have told Ciani that as boys they’d “cut their teeth” on Xenon. In a way she’d been part of their teenage sexual awakening. I wondered if Ciani’s reception as a musician differed from her pinball experience. It’s been said that mostly men listen to her music. This was surprising and makes Ciani a bit uncomfortable and doubtful of the information. Her art offers a very different experience than pinball. Like Xenon, it’s physically expressive and emotional, but it envelopes listeners in gentle waves and textures. It’s an atmosphere, making no demands. Her music is soothing and romantic, in rhythm with her tranquil life on the cliffs of the Pacific—a far cry from the controlled, fast-paced stakes of Xenon.

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A fully operable Xenon machine stands steps from the Atlantic, on a Jersey shore boardwalk. The Silverball Pinball Museum in Asbury Park lines up hundreds of game cabinets in chronological order, creating a

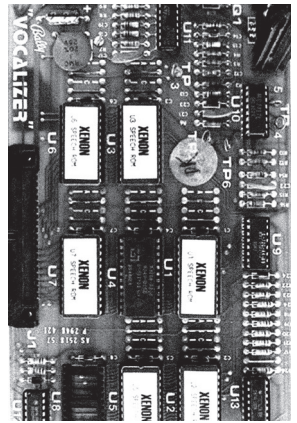
labyrinthine space of fun house sounds. I paid for a timed wristband that grants access to all games, and made my way through aisles of machines, listening for the beckon I'd heard in the documentary and seen headlining Xenon marketing materials and manuals: "Welcome to Xenon." But as I approached the red-eyed cyborg, listening for Ciani—I was dumbfounded. The first thing I heard was not "Welcome to Xenon" in a come-hither coo.

I heard a man's voice: "Enter Xenon."

Who was this intruder? Why a command rather than the warm greeting? What market reasoning led to the call to insert, to penetrate? Why would anyone defile this celebrated soundscape? Could it be Xenon's voice and the cyborg simulation exceeded the men's intentions and fed their paranoia? Luce Irigaray, the feminist philosopher, threatened that science, machine, and woman would swallow up man! Did men need to hear the male voice to restore an illusion of domination?

At Pinball Expo 2013, Ciani inquired publicly about the masculine voice. It was not authored nor authorized by her. She was never consulted. The panel of men she sat with dodged all accusations. To this day, no one takes responsibility or has offered a clue. Given the level of expertise required to add the male voice, I imagine there's a limited number of suspects, but Ciani didn't speculate. For thirty-six years Xenon has borne this blemish. Ciani dreams a concerned contingency might form to eliminate the stranger and restore Xenon to the composer's intention. Imagining each machine located, visited, and the vocal violation erased is an action worthy of Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto!

Back at the expo, Ciani went on to demonstrate her synthesizer equipment, speaking through a vocoder, lowering the frequency of her speech, "Yes, I know, it's hard to be in a man's world. Sometimes I just don't feel they understand me."



Refurbished Xenon Vocalizer found on ksarcade.net.



Xenon "Features" sticker from machine at Silverball Pinball Museum in Asbury Park, NJ highlighting the game's female voice.