Nate Shivers: Stern Pinball has announced the Insider Connected platform. What is it? What does it mean? What will it do? We're going to talk all about that with George Gomez here on the *Stern Insiders Pinball Podcast*. Let's go.

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Welcome to the *Stern Insiders Pinball Podcast*. My name is Nate Shivers, coming to you not live from Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Hope everyone's doing well. It's a very special show. I really, really enjoy the show, and I think you will too. Insider Connected has been launched. It's an amazing platform. It's going to do a lot of different things to all the Stern Pinball machines that work on the SPIKE 2 platform, and George Gomez has been gracious enough to spend some time on the show here talking about not just that, but also what's going on in George's mind, how did he get to where he is with Insider Connected, what he thinks of his last game he designed, and where he sees the future of Stern going. It's a really open, candid interview with George. I had a great time talking to him. I think you're going to really enjoy this one. Let's get to the interview with George Gomez.

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All right, joining us on the *Stern Insider* podcast today, Mr. George Gomez, the chief creative officer at Stern Pinball. How are you, sir?

George Gomez: Hi, Nate. It's good to see you and talk to you.

Nate: Yes, great to see you. It's been a while since we've had a chance to talk anything pinball-related. This is a big one. This is interesting. We're not talking about a new game, we're talking about new technology that's going to affect lots of games, that's the Insider Connected. I don't know, is it a platform? Is it a--

George: We call it a platform. It really is-- We'll break it down here today on the show, but it's massive because it affects so many aspects of the game. It was really intended to extend every scenario. It's a two-pronged approach if you will. There's a player-focused element and then an operator-focused element and we can dive into that, but it's massive. It's hardly done. When you see it launch here in September, October timeframe, you're going to get a small glimpse of it, meaning that over the course of next year, we're going to be rolling out, we're going to be doing regular drops of features and code. It's pretty cool. I'm psyched for it because there's nothing like this now, and I've been working on it for a couple of years. It's good to finally see it come to light.

Nate: I was thinking back to a talk we had at the Texas Pinball Festival I believe years ago, and we were talking about connecting pinball machines to the internet back then. It was like, "Oh, are you going to connect them to the WiFi? Can we do that?" It was like, "Yes, of course, we're thinking about it." When I look at your career and your history, you've worked in pinball for a long time but also in the video game space, you were the first one to say, "Hey, I'm going to connect two NBA Fastbreak

Pinball Machines next to each other and let them play against each other." There's a big evolution, I think, here where now people are going to be able to track and play against themselves and against others across the whole globe with the Insider Connected platform.

George: Connecting the games always fascinated me. I'll tell you, the Fastbreak story is a good launching point because the Fastbreak story, people don't realize this, but it didn't really begin with Fastbreak. It actually began-- I was working on a novelty- I guess it was called a novelty because it wasn't traditional pinball, but it was called Armed and Dangerous, and there's **[unintelligible 00:04:21]** [white woods?] floating around out there somewhere. What Armed and Dangerous was, was the notion of- you have a playfield full of tanks and you have ultimate firepower. It used a little bit of video game rules in that there was a tank built out of inserts between the flippers, so to speak, and it represented your life.

Then there was another guy next to you and he had exactly the same rig. Every target that you killed on your playfield represented his life and vice versa and the two games are linked together so that you could play head-to-head, and basically, whoever killed the other guy first was the winner. I went through that. When I was developing Fastbreak, one of the problems that I had was the notion of ultimate firepower. I didn't want to use the Hyperball Rapid Fire cannon thing. I wanted to use flippers. One of the big challenges was always having pinballs back at the flippers. Since the game wasn't about draining, every drain to the bottom of the playfield fed that flipper set. There was just a bunch of challenges and always feeling like you had firepower.

Anyway, the company humored me for some amount of time. My team and I, after we finished Johnny Mnemonic, we went down the path of building Armed and Dangerous. I pitched it and everybody thought it was a good idea to try something new. I don't know if the audience will realize this, but in 1995, right around the time that I did Johnny, the pinball business was in a tremendous decline. The numbers were really compressing. We were making 2,000 game runs or something, 2,500 game runs. Prior to that- I mean, a year and a half later, game runs were 12,000, 15,000 games. [chuckles]

Anyway, one day, the company started feeling some heat from the standpoint that-- From a business standpoint, you analyze a game like NBA Fastbreak and the sales guys get a little squirmy because they can't put a number on what they're going to sell. Literally, the day they killed it, the CEO, Neil Nicastro came to see me and he said, "Hey, listen, I get this. It's a fantastic R&D project, amazing that you've gotten it this far, but the reality is that, no one in the sales department knows, has any confidence- they don't know if they're going to sell 500 or 1,000 or what they're going to sell. They said, 'If you get him started or redirected on a pinball machine, we know what we can sell off one of his pinball machines, so he should shift gears today.'"

They came down, they killed it on a Friday and they said, "You guys got to think and do **[unintelligible 00:07:42]**." I had in the back of my mind, I had it all along figured

out that we should do an NBA game because the guys across the street on the Midway side were having great success with Jam and stuff like that. I was a fan of the NBA. Literally, on Monday, I showed up, I had the notion of the basket, the defenders around the basket, the shot clock. I went to see Roger and I said, "Roger, pick up the phone, call the NBA, get me an NBA license." He was like, "Oh, that's easy."

We went down that path and then we actually started developing the pinball without the connected element, and late in the project, we were moving pretty rapidly on the development of the pinball, thank God because my launch schedule hadn't changed, [chuckles] so we're like, "Whenever we were going to launch Armed and Dangerous, we had to launch Fastbreak.

We were far enough along and we said, "Hey, what happens if we connect two of these things together?" It really played into the notion of- I wanted to score ones, twos, and threes like basketball. By the way, I've said this before, I've told this story before, there was a lot of drama on the development floor at Willi about that. A lot of the pinball guys thought that I was crazy. It was like, "Pinball machines don't score 50 points."

Nate: Fair enough, yes.

George: I was like, "Hey, it's basketball." [chuckles] Anyway, that's a story for another day. We connected Fastbreaks. If you ever see two Fastbreaks connected, and a couple of years ago, they were all the rage in the Barcades in this country. I can't tell you how many emails I got with photos of people operating Fastbreaks for the first time, linked Fastbreaks for the first time, and they draw a crowd when two people are playing head-to-head. They draw a crowd because the excitement- and it just is such a different experience from traditional pinball that-- If you think about it, connecting the games, and the notion of playing against another human being, and the things that you can do, the directions you can go in, the video game guys began exactly where I was with Fastbreak. If you look at an NBA JAM Cabinet, or Mortal Kombat Cabinet from that era, or an NBA Showtime, Showtime I think was the killer for a game coin-op at the time, and my buddy Mark Tamale, whom I would go on to do the NBA Ballers, Xbox and PlayStation Series with, and if you look at those games, that was essentially connecting humans head-to-head, but standing in front of a cabinet. That was the same notion.

Nate: Exactly.

George: A few years later, you put that in context, whatever that was, '99 that those games are happening, '98, '99, and now fast forward to the early 2000s- [crosstalk]

Nate: I connected a PS2 to the internet in '04, let's say.

George: Right. In '02, '03, I'm working on an Xbox PlayStation Video game, NBA Ballers, and it's the infancy of Xbox Live, PlayStation Network, so I'm having to make

my game work in those environments. We've seen what that's done for the gaming business. It's totally transformed it because you have all of these people playing connected in all these different environments. Think about that arc, NBA Fastbreak, it's certainly influenced by what the guys across the street at Midway were doing with the head-to-head play.

One of the things against Fastbreak is you've got to buy two pinball machines, and they got to be the same pinball machine. That really was the only thing in its way at the time because an operator said, "I don't know if I want to put two of the same in one location." That's a novelty for some amount of time, but it's a novelty for all times. Especially, if you have a location with six or seven games, do you want to dedicate two of the same to that-

Nate: That's tough, yes.

George: That's the reality. I didn't worry too much about it because I thought, "Well, okay, it's still a pinball machine, you can still use it, you still use one." Going back to that, now, here we are, some years ago, and really the thoughts of connecting the games, they go back to SPIKE and SPIKE 2 because when we were building that system, it just seemed like a natural thing to do- [crosstalk]

Nate: You've got to future proof yourself, what do we want down the road?

George: Right. I think that I can tell you that my Insider Connected, its vision was highly influenced by all of those places and all of those things. Sure, there's an achievement system, and there's all kinds of things. What's new, and really, I think novel for the businesses, some of the tools that we're giving, we're going to give to operators, ancestor, and pinball itself, to create challenge quests, to engage the community in new ways. I think new ways that the locations, to drive location play and build player loyalty at those locations, and also, it gives us a tremendous amount of power in terms of highlighting a product.

You can say, "Hey, there's an initiative to sell more stranger things. We can create things around that." We'll get into that a little bit more. This is a powerful, powerful toolset. When you see it in September, you're going to see a tiny little slice, and every month thereafter, you'll see drops that enhance it, grow it, extend it, but it was designed comprehensively. This is a thing that- it's really prevalent. Everybody's got hot hands, everybody wants to just run off and build a thing.

Before you build a thing, you have to design a thing. Designing a thing means thinking into all the different stuff that you can possibly imagine, and saying, "What do I want? What if this will work?" We're not geniuses. We know that the minute this drops, certain things are going to be better received than other things and we've made up our minds that-- I've been a broken record about when we have to shift gears, I need to be able to shift gears, so the backend technology is designed with the notion that, "Hey, these guys, they think this is where they're going and they have a lot of ideas about this, but when one particular element of the system

resonates, we may want to support that more. When something is less important, we may need to move that into the background."

Every product that has been connected, everything on the Internet of Things has in some way been transformed, and in some ways, the transformation has been one that you can predict that the designers envisioned, and in many other ways, the transformation has been one that they didn't envision that the users of the product influenced and that the users of the product drove by how they were using the product. You can say that for everything that's ever been connected, and I don't imagine we're going to be any different.

Nate: I just had a flashback to another conversation you and I had years ago when everybody was screaming at everybody else, "When is Stern going to put LCD screens on their games?" I remember you said, "Yes, we're working on it. We're going to get it right. We're going to make sure it works within the way we design and the way that we build things. We're not just going to slap the first screen-" [crosstalk]

George: That's a perfect example. Look, the science is not in selecting an LCD screen, designing the hardware to drive it, hanging it in the backbox, and making it serviceable, none of-- We do that best, by the way, but regardless, it wasn't that. It was the notion of the content. How do I support the content, and the story of Stern Pinball as you know it today, it begins with the phoenix rising from the ashes of '08. The reality is that when people started talking about sticking LCDs in games, I had 9, 10 guys working for me. The business of the company was, "Let's make games and survive." It wasn't, "Let's hang LCD screens and the backbox," because I can't generate the content that needs to go back there.

When I ran those Xbox and PlayStation teams, those things are massive, the effort to make those games is unbelievable. The **[unintelligible 00:18:06]** product was a relatively small effort. It wasn't Call of Duty. It wasn't EA Star Wars. It wasn't any of that stuff. It was much smaller, and yet it was massive. In working on those teams, and realizing, "Oh my God, I got modelers and I got texture guys, and I got storyboard guys, and I got animators, and I got lighters, and I got environment guys, and I got movie makers and I've got tools developers, and I've got kinematic developers, and I've got-"

Nate: It's like a movie's credit list.

George: It is. I even had a staff of guys that just helped me manage it, producers. I had system producers, associate producers, producers, all the way to the executive producer. It's like somebody just managing the licensing effort. It's just crazy how complex they are. What that taught me was, "Yes, you can't just hang a screen back there because even though it's a pinball machine, every time all the cause and effect stuff is going to need a wipe. It's going to need a splash, and you got storytelling elements and you got game progression stuff, and you got all kinds of stuff. It's not just displaying a score"

I said, "Why are we going to do this if we can't put anything back there?" When we finally got around to it, the company had grown. The company was self-funded, so that means that there's no sugar daddy, the business of the company is what allows you to grow the company. I can't just pick up the phone and say, "Hire another 30 guys," can't do it. As the company grew, we got more power, we managed to take and divert efforts into different things.

By the way, those diversion efforts that have made the Stern Pinball that you know today, were painful. They were painful because we shipped unfinished games, and it took us a long time to finish them. We had all these growing pains because of all the things that we were trying to do, but that's what a self-funded business does. That's the reality of life. We're not a publicly held company, can't just go to the bank for more.

Nate: It's been interesting to watch- as you've had successes over the years, I think, as far back as the TRON and the AC/DC era, when something would really click on a game, you didn't know it right away, it happened over time, you were still releasing games as these games were becoming successful. Happened with art, it happened with rules, it happened with different layout ideas. It would almost take you guys a cycle or two of the design to come back and go, "Okay, this really worked, this really worked, this really worked." Meanwhile, people are screaming at you, "Why didn't you do it just like that?" and you've got different teams. It's an interesting thing.

George: My opinion, this is not a slight in any way, it's just that in general, audiences tend to be retrospective, meaning that they can present to you what they know, they can present to you-- This is a thing they taught me in design school. They said that your job is to envision a future of some sort for a product or an environment or a device or a process, and your audience will feed you back what they know, which is the things they've seen already. If you want to invent and you want to develop new things, your job is to be thinking in those areas that are not comfortable to the audience because they don't know them. It's a fine line to walk. There's lots of products that have innovation but failed, so it's a fine line to walk.

I always try to reference things that people are comfortable with in some way when I'm pushing new tech. We connected the Pinball 2000 effort, but it was strictly a maintenance connection. It was meaning that we had visions of it, it was ethernet-connected Pinball 2000. We had visions of it allowing operators to understand what was wrong with the game and check their earnings and all that kind of stuff, that dates back to that product. Of course, the new system has all those tools, but I think that we wanted to download code to those Pinball 2000 games and all kinds of things like that. That was the infancy of the internet. At that point, nobody had figured out that there was all this other entertainment-focused stuff that you could do with the notion that you were connected.

Nate: Absolutely. With Insider Connected, I guess we should start with, what is this going to mean to a player who walks up to a game? What is going to be different about certain pinball machines going forward now?

George: By the way, let's talk about Insider and Insider Connected. For some amount of time, we've had this loyalty club called Insider, and we've had a paid version called All Access. You go to the Stern Pinball website, you click Insider and you go in. Insider is free, All Access is paid. All Access guys get previews and specials and all that kind of stuff.

Nate: They get to hear the show early.

George: They see the show early, right. When I was doing this, it occurred to me, why should I create two new buttons and two new platforms? Basically, the day we go live, when you go to Insider, we've rebranded Insider to be Insider Connected. Of course, there's going to be lots more behind the portal, but basically, that'll be the jump-off point. Insider Connected, and the operator version is called Insider Connected Pro, and of course, All Access will continue to exist as All Access Connected, and both in the case of Insider and All Access, you won't recognize them because there's so much more stuff back there than what you currently have, that I think people will really enjoy it. I lost the train of thought of your question when I went down this-

Nate: I think I'd love to be able to give everyone just the rundown on the game Itself. What are you-- [crosstalk]

George: Here's the magic. When I sat down to think about this, what is the component that's missing? The component that's missing is that we don't currently log in to pinball machines, and because we don't log in, I don't know who you are. So I needed a way to log you into the pinball machine pretty seamlessly. I didn't want you to typing stuff and I didn't want you trying to get Bluetooth to work and I didn't want any of this- I didn't want NFC things like in the cab when I'm trying to pay and the sensor can't read my phone and I'm moving it around on the glass, by the driver, and all this crazy stuff.

I needed to know who the player was. The coolest thing, and it became a portal to so many things, the notion of understanding precisely who the player is standing in front of the pinball machine. Think about that. What we did is we added a QR reader to the bottom arch on the pinball machines, and how this entire thing works is you sign up for a free Insider account and you can do that in a variety of ways. You can walk up to a Stern Pinball machine that's connected, and you can scan one of the QR codes, and it'll take you right to the website to sign up. You put in an email address and a password and you're in. Then that event automatically- now you have a profile page, you can select your avatar, look at your progress, check out your achievements, connect with your friends, go to forums, check out news, check out the events, eventually, promotions will show up. There are all kinds of amazing stuff.

Now I have a unique QR code that identifies me, and I can then take that QR code and scan it on the scanner on the pinball machine, and boom, right on the back glass, it'll put up your avatar, your initials, your name, whatever, and it recognizes that you're there. You are it. It'll prompt you to do all four guys. You can do it by

yourself or with your friends, whatever. Then as you play the game, all the cool stuff that happens in the game is tracked that shows up on your profile. You can check it when you come out of your ball, you can check it at the end of your game. You can check it on any device.

Basically, any connected device that gives you access to the internet is going to be able to get you into Connected. You can check out your profile, see what's going on in the world of pinball, in the world of Stern Pinball, et cetera, the games will have their own game pages with all kinds of game-specific stuff. The forums will be our own forums, meaning that every game will have a forum. There will be general forums. There will be stuff there. Think about this. It's a direct connection to Stern Pinball.

It's a direct connection in some ways to my developers, my engineers, my designers, they can interact with you. They can basically dispel nonsense when you're having some issues, and you can query somebody and you can say, "You know what? How's this work," or, "What's the problem with this?" They're monitored clearly, and of course, with a profile page, you get all the things you get in the rest of the world. You're going to get privacy controls, and if you want no one to see where you're playing, if you want no one to see what your progress is, that's okay. You can do whatever. You can shut it down as tight as you want, or you can open it up to be more interactive, but it all starts with the notion of, "I've got this QR code. It identifies me. I can go up to any Stern-connected to my machine anywhere in the world. I can scan in and the game knows what I've done, and it'll track it. It'll publish it to my profile. I can choose to display it or not display it. I can keep track of it."

Nate: Is the game connected via WiFi generally to the internet?

George: The game's connected via WiFi. You can also hardwire it in. You can basically- and honestly, in my house, I have two Xboxes and a PlayStation, and of course, my big workstation, my big high horsepower workstation that I do all my CAD stuff, all that stuff is hard wired because ethernet is so much faster, so much more reliable, but when you connect your game, you can either use WiFi. The game will-- There's a setup mode that comes with the games now, and basically, the setup mode just walks you through connecting your game, just like buying a new Sony TV, and where are you, how do you want to connect, and all this kind of stuff. It's exactly the same way.

Of course, and everybody's asking about code download. Code download is the least sexy thing that we're going to do with this, but yes, it's going to do it. You can tell your game to download code at 2:00 AM and it'll download your code, or you tell it to do automatic updates and it'll do automatic updates, which everybody should do because it just seems it's a very easy, simple thing to do, and you don't have to worry about maintaining your game, and there's no more--

Look, I hope everybody connects their games. I think we've made it- not only are all new games being built that way, but new issues, reissues of old previous titles that

are factory-built will come with the system, and we have kits available. You can take the entire universe. 17 SPIKE 2 LCD titles is today the universe of Stern games, and you can connect them. The connectivity kits are a piece of cake. If you have a premium **[unintelligible 00:31:45]** literally, it's a little module that replaces your right side plastic in a few special games where you have a funky bottom arch, like Star Wars, Batman, I think Elvira, we send you a bottom arch with all your stuff and you just install it.

Nate: How much do you expect a connectivity kit to run for a consumer?

George: I have no idea, not my area, but I'll tell you this. I'll tell you that I jumped up and down and said, "I want people to adopt this. I don't want the connectivity kits to be a profit center. Yes, you have to charge people. You can't give them away, I understand that, but don't mark them up ridiculously. The point is that we want everybody to connect, and there's so much cool stuff tied to this, and I've just scratched the surface on what we've talked about.

For example, if you have a Pro, the kit comes with a new bottom arch, and you tell us what game it is. Say, it's Guardians of the Galaxy. Great, you get a Guardians of the Galaxy decal set, and a new bottom arch. Basically, there's three decals that go on your bottom arch and the rest of the stuff comes installed on your bottom arch. As I've been pounding the drum for the modularity and the coolness of SPIKE 2 for some time now, when we do this, this is a classic example of why we designed the system-- The QR reader has essentially a custom node, and you're getting a RJ45 cable out of that node. You run it through an existing hole and every playfield at the bottom of the playfield, and you connect it to your Note 8, and you stick a WiFi dongle in the USB slot in your hardware in the backbox, and you're good to go.

Nate: Does the WiFi dongle come with the kit?

George: WiFi dongle comes with the kit. There's even available a super-duper WiFi antenna rig for challenging locations where WiFi may be a problem, and of course, if you can run ethernet to it, just because things are so much faster, a more reliable hardwired connection is always better. There's a variety of different ways. We have a kit that allows you to install it into just basically a coupler into the cabinet if you want, or if you really want to make it easy, pop the plug that's in every backbox SPIKE 2 game and run your cable through there and plug it into the RJ45 ports on hardware, and you are connected.

The kits are very simple. The QR reader module and the WiFi dongle, and you're good to go. On the Pro, slightly more complex, meaning that you're going to remove your existing bottom arch, install the new bottom arch. That's only because we took advantage of the plastic window on the right side of all of our premium LEs. Then of course, moving forward, games that are built from the factory, new games, like all of the releases this year, the bottom arch doesn't have that window. It has a specific-- First of all, it's got a cool new piece of art. It's even more finished and slicker than the kits. It's exciting.

Nate: When you have these opportunities ahead of you now, when you're connecting to the games, and there's going to obviously be some really good opportunity here to get people to keep playing, obviously, that's one of the big things operators are going to be wanting is, "Okay, well, can this drive sales in the moneymaking of a pinball machine on location?" You're going to have achievements, you're going to have things that go do this in the game. Where do those come from? Who's designing those? Who's going back-end to designing those?

George: Let's talk about achievement. Achievements are pretty cool because what achievements are going to do- first of all, it's like a new rule set on top of your existing rule set, and they're custom to every game. That means that the Deadpool achievement set is specific and custom-designed for Deadpool. It may have an achievement for defeating Juggernaut in a specific period of time. It may have an achievement for some combination of events in the game. In Ninja Turtles, Dwight's got some achievements for training up turtles and stuff. It's like taking the rules of the game and extending them into this whole new thing.

Now it's like, you've got all the stuff in the game to do, but you have these- all other things. When you score an achievement, you get this cool badge, which shows up on your profile page, and you get what we call experience points, but there's a trick. The full amount of experience points for every achievement can only be achieved on a game that you play on the street, in which case the achievement gets a verified check-mark. Commercial games that you paid money to play are basically a verified check-mark. The reason we did that is because, yes, it helps drive location play, but honestly- [crosstalk]

Nate: I can get the glass off my game **[unintelligible 00:37:48]**.

George: Yes. We said, "Hey, these are legitimate achievements because the guy did them with the glass on." There's going to be a guy that's going to take his finger and take the glass off a game. If you want to cheat yourself of fun, have a good time because honestly, that's all it is. We just handed you a bunch more fun. If you want to cheat yourself out of the fun, go ahead, cheat yourself out of the fun.

When we launch, there's going to be seven games that are achievement supported, so to speak. Those games, it's Led Zeppelin, Deadpool, and Avengers, and Turtles, I will come up with- I'll send you a list, but it's seven popular recently current titles. By December, we hope to have the entire universe of 17 LCD SPIKE 2 games supported with achievements. That means if you have a game that you've played through, say you've owned a Guardians, you've owned it for a long time, and you've played through it, you know everything about it, and when we drop achievements on the game, it's like a whole new- it's like now there's this other layer of things to do. It's going to refresh the play experience for every game in the SPIKE 2 universe.

Nate: Who inside Stern is designing these achievements and coming up with these?

George: The teams design them. It's a pretty cool system in that-- A guy that did a lot of heavy lifting on the achievement system on the technology side is my partner on Deadpool, Tanio Klyce, and my instructions to him was, "Listen, you can't have guys making up stuff every time in terms of the background tech." You got to give them some tech that plugs and plays with everybody's game, that they can go in there and design a variety of different things based on the uniqueness of their game, but yet it's got to be very modular so that it doesn't become this crazy development effort because it otherwise, we couldn't support it **[inaudible 00:40:26]**.

Yes, there's cool art. This really cool, unique, new art for all the achievement badges. Of course, we hope that there's going to be the guy that has to get full achievement sets on the entire universe of 17 games.

Nate: Well, I hope that it goes even-

George: The universe is growing since 17 games today. [crosstalk].

Nate: I hope it goes further where it becomes a thing that why I got all the achievements unlocked on Jurassic Park, but I got all the achievements unlocked at the Jurassic Park, at Jackbar in Brooklyn because he has his game set further. They're harder than the ones over Jersey.

George: Yes, they're verified.

Nate: Yes, that'll be interesting.

George: There's also other things like there's profile badges. Profile badges are generic agnostic achievements and what does that mean? It means that if you played 100 games or 100 days, you played 100 times on connected Stern Pinball machines, maybe we send you a century t-shirt or something that. These are agnostic. They play five distinct Stern connected games and you're going to get something. Those were very influenced by things like my experience with the Peloton.

My Peloton keeps me engaged by presenting all these things to me and I get these profile badges, so I thought, "Yes, these profile badges, that's a cool idea I should integrate that." I wanted achievements to be very game-specific because I wanted the coolness of extending the rule set of bringing new things in the universe of that game, to that party. You won't find it hard to imagine that the designers ate that up. It was like, "Oh, I get another bite at the apple, I get to invent more stuff?" Sure.

Nate: Do you think that system could influence future game design?

George: It will because people will be thinking about all of the different things that you can do with the system. We're talking about achievements like one little thing. There's so much stuff. You're gonna see extensions of the games that are at this point, there are some coolness is tied to, we're trying to add value to the all-access experience. The greatest value to the all-access experience is going to be things

like, let's give them some play stuff that the game is complete without it, but if you had it, it's going to allow you to play the game in a different way or something. There's going to be a lot of that and eventually, some of that stuff will migrate into the free experience for sure.

It's really about extending how you interact with the games in every environment that we can think of. We want you geeking out on your profile page. We want you looking at what you've done and analyzing your performance and looking at your trends. It's going to help you discover where games are and the state of games, on location and it's going to help you just interact with the community in new ways. There's just so much there. Eventually, the games will have treasure chests which are basically just content drops of cool stuff.

Sometimes it's random and it's not stuff about that's going to affect the performance of the game, it's not anything that. It's either going to be real cool fun stuff, here's a Stern hat shows up at your house and you got it for free, you did nothing. You should just happen to be playing a game. Here's some cool stuff that we're going to give you because we like you. Then some virtual stuff, we want collections to happen and we have plans on helping you build collections and then eventually giving you the power to trade some of that stuff, have fun with it. I got two little Deadpools. I only need one. I can trade that. There's treasure chest coming. Promotions are pretty cool. Basically, you think of the Deadpool Chimichanga card, punch card or not dissimilar from your coffee shop. You go to the coffee shop every morning. You get a stamp, and the 11th one is free. Some of the promotions are like that. Some of the promotions are random drawings.

Then there's a really cool thing called challenge quests. Challenge quests are things that can either be issued to the community by a location by an operator, or they can be issued to the community by Stern Pinball. An operator might say, "Play any three connected pinball machines at Joe's Bar and get a cheeseburger or get some popcorn or get some free plays." The QR reader, a lot of people ask me, "Why not just put a code on the game and go up to the internet and come back." We say, "Well, for a couple of reasons. One, I wanted the experience to be fast and seamless. I want the snap of-

Nate: Importance

George: -[unintelligible 00:46:21] and boom, you're in, and then the other thing is that you don't have to use your phone. Once you have that QR code, you can print that QR code, carry it around on a card in your wallet, walk up to any game anywhere in the world and then just scan your unique QR code." What that does is it also opens the world up to partner promotions because if we do a deal with McDonald's and there's a QR code on your McDonald's wrapper that gives you free plays at a game, you can walk up to the game and scan and play or an operator can create QR codes that he can give to his audience.

He can leave them with the bartender at a bar that he's got pinball machines at, and they're closing a free plays, and he can say, "Give me your best customers or whatever it is." The notion that the pinball machine is the point of redemption for this thing to some extent a validation, I should say, validation is incredibly powerful because there's lots of really cool things you can do.

Nate: Maybe I shouldn't even put this out in the world, but how long until somebody's tattoos their QR code on their hand or something so they **[unintelligible 00:47:39]** just go?

George: Just a matter of time.

Nate: Somebody is going to do it, right?

George: Absolutely. It's just a matter of time.

Nate: That's great.

George: [laughs]

Nate: From the operator's standpoint, did you source any feedback from operators? Did you talk to people?

George: Yes, we did.

Nate: What was the feedback you were getting from people out there who are making money?

George: What's very interesting is for a long time operators have asked for a lot of the business analytics tools and alert tools that exist in other products. An operator wants to know when is the game up and running. An operator wants to understand the trend of a location. The trend of a location is when are my games being played? How deep are people playing into the games? It affects things like the difficulty settings on a game. Of course, the most obvious thing is I just want to see what the games are earning and I want to see which games are hot.

I can tell you that there's this huge data mining effort that's going to be happening post-launch on our end. It's happening outside of my studio with the real data-mining company, I should say, a real data analytics company, and what that effort's about is about there is no more anecdotal, I think games in Oregon do this, I think games in Paris do that because now I'm going to have this wealth of data of connected games from all around the world. We ship games into something like-- It's insane, like 70 countries around the world even to this day, even in COVID, and so I am dying to understand.

You talked about will it impact how games are designed? Absolutely, because think about what I'm going to learn about a game performance in a geography and think about the things that an operator can take away by simply going to his Insider pro

account. It will show every location he's got. It'll show the machines he's got at those locations, what they're doing, what they're making, the state of the machine, when they're being played, when they're not being played. Eventually, we're going to give them trending tools, some of the same trending tools that we're developing to allow us to analyze our audits of the machine, which we've always used to tune the games. Right now we do it in such a crude fashion. I've got a network of 20 trusted operators around the world that send me, when we did that pool, right, we set up a special, Wade Wilson account, and email account, I had guys sending me audits to Wade Wilson that, it's from kamala.com, and that's a pretty crude way of tuning my Deadpools, but I did it.

That's how all the game designers do it in our existing universe, and in the new universe, I will be able to look into it and see what those games are really doing. Are people getting to the feature? What percentage of the people are getting to the feature and how is the feature? How often is the feature happening? All the stuff that we currently analyze in a very crude way is going to be available to us. A lot of the analytics tools are going to get passed right into the operator toolset and they can do as little or as much with them as that. Gary services to me. He's got to remember to change his games when he moves him from location.

Yes, he does. The tool might complain, the tool might say, "Hey, I'm in a different geography but the portal, it's going to continue to show the game but, you're going to want to tell it, "I'm at Joe's Bar. I used to be at Three Eagle Tavern. [laughs]

Nate: Exactly, that's funny. When I'm playing a game, and I'm logged in, and I'm connected, and I'm aiming for achievements, will there be any feedback from the system during normal gameplay or is it all going to be in the background?

George: Here's what we said. We felt that the games are pretty compelling. We don't want it to be any kind of obnoxious new thing that's in your face. We created a unique sound effect that will always be associated a little bit of Pavlov's dog. They will always be associated with our achievements, will not be used for anything else and when an achievement happens, you get the little sound effect and then add bonus count, you'll see what you got but that's it. If you're staring at the screen, you're playing with a buddy, he's going to tell you, "Hey, dude, you just got the juggernaut. You beat juggernaut in 15 achievements," but because he's going to see a pop up on screen, but to you, as the player focused on the ball.

Nate: Before he already built a story for the game. You don't need to interrupt, if necessary.

George: You're fine. It's not that and, the achievement badges. It's funny because, for a long time, I kept calling them merit badges. I don't know if this, but I'm an Eagle Scout and when I was in scouts, you know you get these merit badges and it's a little embroidered, cool, little round thing in full color that goes on your merit badge sash. You get a merit badge, you sew it on your sash. Merit badge are like taking a course in scouts. You take a course in something and you pass the course, you get the

badge. I kept saying, "They're like merit badges," and everybody's like, "What the hell is a merit badge?

Nate: To long lost term to some, I guess.

George: I'm going to send you guys a picture of my merit badge sash when I was 13.

Nate: I think it does play really well though, achievements and just, playing on an Xbox today or playing on a PlayStation or getting trophies or achievements and platinum a game, people talk about all the time like, "Oh, have you ever Platinum that game?" I think that's great.

George: We're going to track scores, we're going to track all kinds of things. Eventually, there's an effort to create your own specific analytics portal to help you if you want, about how you play your games. There's some stuff designed to help you deconstruct strategies and games. There's just much stuff, but you're going to see it. Everybody calm down, when we launch it all, it's not all going to be there. It's going to come out in bits and pieces but look, the company has made such an incredible commitment. They've given me so much running room with this that it's here to stay. It's going to be supported. Eventually, my hope is- I tell the sales and marketing guys and they look on me like I'm from Mars. I said, "Hey, one day, there's going to be guys running around the building with Insider Connected business cards. This entire thing's going to be a fricking division.

Nate: No doubt.

George: Anyway, for players, it's just about, have more fun and engage with the games in new ways. For operators, it's I hope that I can impact your earnings. I hope that I can drive location play. I hope that I'm giving you a toolset to build loyalty at your locations. I'm giving you a toolset that's going to help you maintain your pinball machines. Meaning you're going to know when things are broken, you're going to get notifications about different things. You can enable or turn off as much of it as you want.

If you don't want to be notified when your Vox stops working, it's okay, tell it not to, but if you want, I want to know that the pinball machine went down on Friday night, normally, this guy might not hear about it until he collects the game four days later. Now he'll know, "Hey, I'm going into the weekend, my game's down." He can make a decision. He can say, I'm driving out to the location, but better he can say I'm driving out to the location and the game says that this is what it thinks is broken so I have it at least in the toolbox when I show up.

It's complaining it hasn't seen this device in a while and **[unintelligible 00:56:43]**. What are all the things that could make that device go wrong? I can't say it enough, it's been a massive effort, and it's an effort that I've tried to isolate wherever possible, the technology development and all of the design has been isolated from the teams

from the standpoint that I've kept the teams focused on building games and building cool games.

I've involved them as slightly as possible in the things that I think that they needed to participate in, in terms of how the games interact with the system, how cool. The brainstorming sessions for this thing, which involved a lot of the developers and stuff generated all these ideas. The ideas went on the board and I keep them, I maintain them, I prioritize them. I said I need to do this in stages, and I need to be able to support it in some logical way that doesn't break the company and helps me develop something that is what, A, operators want and players want.

Nate: It's fantastic. I'm looking forward to seeing it. I'm looking forward to upgrading games that I own. That's going to be great. While we have you here on the Insider podcast, I wanted to just touch base on what's the state of Stern Pinball from George Gomez's eyes right now in late summer, 2021. We've been in this pandemic for a year and a half and all I read is everybody's waiting on games that you guys are trying to get built. There's a backlog. The business seems really good.

George: The good news is business is amazing. That's the good news. The bad news is we're suffering from a lot of the problems that the rest of the world is suffering from due to COVID, meaning that the cost of raw materials has gone up and also there is a scarcity--

Nate: Supply chain issues.

George: Yes, supply chain. There's a scarcity of materials and stuff. I'll tell you what, there's a bunch of really unsung heroes in our company on the operation side of the world. Those people, they're responsible for manufacturing the product, getting it in boxes, pushing it out, and all of the related things. All the related things means having the material to build the product. The planners, the guys that plan production and plan buys and things like that, procurement guys, have done an amazing effort at anticipating. We didn't come to this party late. We saw this coming and it's the only reason that as we've been successful in manufacturing during COVID as we have been. Amazingly enough, COVID found us a bunch of efficiencies in manufacturing and what do I mean by that? It means that when COVID happened and we had that two and a half months shut down we had to A, reanalyze the factory and reanalyze all of the efforts to A, focus on keeping people safe, and B, how do we catch up because we knew there was going to be a backlog. In our day-to-day today, we actually manufacture larger day numbers than we did going into COVID and we're doing it with fewer people and we're doing it in spite of the material shortages.

That is amazing. Those guys, nobody interviews them, nobody calls them on podcasts. Nobody asks them for signatures. They won't even recognize them when they're walking around the show. That's a reality, but the management team, we used to meet once a week during COVID, it became twice a week and it's just strictly a high level. This is what we're doing to run the company. It's the operations guy, the finance guy, myself, the sales and marketing guys, the strategy guys, the CEO. The

COVID thing, now we're doing it twice a week. Then there's all these meetings related to procurement, and how do we get this? What do we buy? We've had to spend a bunch of money. It's a good thing the war chest was in a good state because we've had to do buys that we wouldn't- normally we would buy chips or whatever, as we needed them. To guarantee that we were going to get them, we've had to spend a bunch of money and just say, "Okay, here's a million bucks just buy these things."

Nate: I think it was an interesting test of business in manufacturing because, for years, we had all gone through these lean initiatives and how do we get the company lean? We want just-in-time delivery, we don't want anything on the shelf that we don't need today. I think this has kind of made everybody look at it and go, "Man, maybe we need more of these, these, and these just for days."

George: Inventory turns is a standard business practice and you want but this situation has turned all that stuff upside down. I've said it before and I don't- every audience is a little different, so I'm going to say it again, but I can tell you that we proactively work our business 24/7. It's the only reason we've been as successful as we've been, there's so much of this that, people don't see. They only see the finished product and they don't realize it's not just licensing and design and engineering and reliability and playfields. There's so much more to it and honestly, that's why some of the folks that I've from the outside, we make it look easy and they look at this and they go, "Oh yes, we can do that." It's proven that, yes, not too many people can

Nate: It's really hard. We were chatting before we started and I sensed a very genuine and outward enthusiasm from you about the near future of products and games and the design coming down. I guess there's always turnover. There's always change in the industry and Stern's no different on that front, but I really get the sense from you that you're very excited about the future at Stern.

George: I am. I think that I have my studios. It's a young, talented, motivated studio. I think that those guys are making the games they want to make and there's a lot of- I see it in the energy they bring to it. The September game is going to knock you on your ass. The September game, which is a no-win game is just, I haven't seen anything like this in a while. It's pretty cool. I think that the passion, energy, and excitement that these guys put into these things is going to be really clear and certainly the next two products are I'm jazzed. I think that they're going to show, I'm even more excited that they're going to ship connected. There's even less drama. You just get your game out of the box and part of your setup is join Insider and connect and have a good time. I'm psyched.

Nate: I'm excited to see it and while we talked about Insider connect, you referenced Deadpool a lot. I think it's an interesting game especially, I think as we start doing a little bit of a look back on the LCD era and your career, I remember when we first talked about Deadpool, it felt to me like you really knew it was a good game and it was- I don't want to say there was any reluctance, but I felt like it came out of a different design playbook than normal through circumstance. Then as people played

the game- certainly when I play the game, I was like, "Wait a minute, this is really good. It's interesting. It's different. It has these cool rules and a very unique layout." I see more and more people now, as we get a little bit away from that game saying, "That's my favorite game all time, that's the best Stern game I've ever played." What does that mean to you?

George: I'm very proud of it you know that. I'm very, very proud of the game. I think that difficult situations bring out the best in people and I think that game is a perfect example of my team and what they put into it and it's no secret, we had a tough scenario there. The game, the original project, it was somebody else's game and that person got in trouble, did some horrible things and the company as a whole we had to take a step back and I wanted right away. I went into those executive meetings to discuss that problem with a really clear mindset that we had to shut the door, ball up all whatever had been done, set it on fire. It just draw it out.

I didn't want any connection. I wanted zero connection. I wanted a clean break. It was such an in essence, horrific. I think that I had to get the studio back together and say, "All right, we're going to throw this out." The company had invested a fair amount of money in the development of that title at that point. I said, "No I don't care." Gary and Dave allowed it and said, "Yes, we understand." I called everybody together. I tried to focus the studio on put it behind us, get going.

Then I had to take this team that was very demoralized and try to get them back on track and do this thing. I said this is day one. They want us today and we had a very short period of time to do it. I couldn't focus on very complex stuff. I said, "Look, we need to do simple things. We need to make something that's just focused on fun," and Marvel was great. They gave us a lot of freedom in terms of every creator that's touched, the Deadpool character has been allowed to bring their own vision to it. They gave us that level of freedom and respect. That was enormous because it allowed us to go in directions **[unintelligible 01:09:33]** we invented disco multi ball and you're at the disco with vampires and ninja multiball, where are these ninjas?

Nate: It's a modern classic. It's really **[unintelligible 01:09:48]** that. I really think it's an interesting thing and I know, I don't know, it's hard to look back when you're still in the middle of it, but I just think when people do the rundown of George Gomez games. There's the obvious, but I really think it's going to be, man, Deadpool is the game and that's cool.

George: I'm proud of it, but-

Nate: It is cool.

George: I'm very proud of it. I think that you're lucky if you get one of those in your portfolio, I'm really blessed, I've got a couple [crosstalk].

Nate: Definitely.

George: I've got a few.

Nate: Absolutely.

George: I've got a Bash, I've got a Lord, I've got a Deadpool and I think that-

Nate: Absolutely, it's right there with those too, I really think that.

George: I think it's very different, it's really fun. We focused a lot on-- I'm a big fan of, do five things great, don't do-- You got 18 things in the game and there're all mediocre or you got three great things, that doesn't do it for me. It's like, yes, you got to put a lot in these games and stuff, but what is there should be as polished and as great as we can make it. I'm looking forward to the Deadpool achievement set hitting the Deadpool community because it's going to wake it up again. I've cryptically referenced it on some of the other podcasts. A couple of months back, people asked me, "We want more of this, we want more of that," and I was like "Yes, you never know what you're going to get, you might actually guess something". [laughs]

Nate: It's great. Do you want to design another game?

George: I'd love to, but I-

Nate: Time.

George: When I take on these projects, Insider connected has consumed me for a couple of years in the midst of running the studio and a great thing about the studio is that as we've developed it, the structure in the studio and the discipline which we run it, helps it run smoother. My right-hand guy, Marc Reina, another unsung hero. He's my executive producer and he runs those teams, he drives those teams. Danielle Siebert, his partner. She's the program manager and again, unsung heroes, their job is thankless in that they have to make sense of the chaos and control it and get it to a place.

They have to have tough decisions or tough conversations with teams about timing or cost or function. Sometimes we have great ideas that maybe aren't- every once in a while we have a great idea that makes it out and it was unpolished and we shouldn't have shipped it and we say, "What were we thinking?" We kept hoping that it was going to get to a place. You know we are not perfect, we make mistakes but I think that sometimes teams have to be told, "You know what, if you don't have it working flawlessly by such-and-such a time, you got to pull it out." Those are real-world constraints and things that- but they're part of it.

Running the games this way doesn't seem to have hurt them, as a matter of fact, it's helped them and I'm very proud of the work on *Mandalorian.* I'm very proud of some of the changes and things that we had to do to Led Zeppelin. A lot of the games go through this, my own games have gone through it. I'm very good at- I'll tell you the one thing and my teams will tell you this, I don't fall in love with ideas.

If one of my things is struggling, I take a good hard look at it and I say, "You know what, **[unintelligible 01:14:16]** I have a finite amount of time, clock's running, I'm not

going to be able to make it cost what it cost, what it needs to cost, or I'm not going to be able to get it working as reliably as I want it to, I'm going to get the hell out of it because it's only going to come and bite me in the ass and I'm not going to impress anyone".

There's a lot of stuff, I go to shows and I see lots of stuff that are so impressive on the show floor and not a lot of attention paid to how's that thing work in the real world or day-to-day and I don't want that, I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in trying to get you something you can bank on. You know why operators like Deadpool, beside the fact that it's a pretty good earner?

George: It's pretty reliable because it's so damn simple. There's not much in it. I get these Deadpool love emails all the time from operators saying, "Dude, I can't believe this game." They send me the lifetime earnings snapshot from the LCD screen.

Nate: Played for itself three times.

George: Yes, look at this thing. I love their stocks. That's their world. It's a little bit different than the throw the kitchen sink in it, and make it cost $1 million, and it's going to work sometimes. [laughs]

Nate: Fantastic. George, we've got to do this again. I really love talking to you about the world of Stern Pinball and everything going on. I'm excited to see Insider connected rollout, I wish you guys the best of luck. Thanks so much for all the time and all the great stories.

George: Thanks, Nate. It's definitely it's been fun, for sure.

Nate: Absolutely.

George: Let's do it again.

[01:16:11] [END OF AUDIO]