



## **My Drift**

**Title: Pachinko**

**Written By: Jerry D. Petersen**

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If you have ever been to Japan, you have probably seen several Pachinko Parlors. They are all over the place – especially in Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka, and Nagoya. There are about 9 thousand Pachinko Parlors in Japan in 2022. This number is down from a high of 13 thousand in 2005. The number of parlors is declining due to the popularity of online gambling.



**Pachinko Parlors look something like the one above**

**If you are new to Japan, you are probably asking yourself, “What the heck is pachinko?”**

**Glad you asked. Pachinko is a sort of pinball, slot machine hybrid game that has been around Japan for almost a century. It is used as both a gambling device and a recreational game. Despite gambling being illegal in Japan, the insanely profitable pachinko industry has found ways around the rules.**

**Pachinko Parlors are hard to miss since they are large casino-looking establishments with bright flashing lights, loud noises, and lots of cigarette smoke pouring out the doors. Yes, smoking is allowed but drinking alcohol is not. There are approximately 2.4 million pachinko machines operating in pachinko parlors throughout Japan. If you do the arithmetic, the average number of pachinko machines in each establishment is well over 250. If you walk into one of these places, you will see rows and rows of machines with customers playing on most of them.**



**Pachinko is BIG business in Japan. It's estimated that 40 million people play Pachinko every year adding more than 30 trillion yen (\$270 billion dollars) into the economy. This amount is 30 times the annual gambling revenue of Vegas and double the amount that Japan's export car industry makes. One out of 11 Japanese adults play it at least once a week. The pachinko industry employs more people than the top 10 Japanese car manufacturers combined.**



## History of Pachinko

Pachinko (パチンコ) is a type of mechanical/digital/electrical game originating in Japan that is used as a form of recreational arcade game, and much more frequently as a gambling device, filling a niche in Japanese gambling comparable to that of the slot machine in Western gambling, as a form of low-stakes, low-strategy gambling.

Pachinko machines were first built during the 1920s as a children's toy called the "Corinth game" (コリントゲーム), based on and named after the American "Corinthian bagatelle" game.

The name “pachinko” came from “pachin pachin” - The clicking noise that small objects make on a crackling fire, not unlike the noise that these games make.

It first emerged as an adult pastime in Nagoya around 1930 and spread from there. All of Japan's pachinko parlors were closed down during World War II but re-emerged in the late 1940s. Pachinko has remained popular since. An estimated 80 percent of pachinko parlors in Japan are owned by ethnic Koreans.

## Pachinko Machines

In general, if a pachinko machine has a chrome lever that you ‘flip’ to shoot the balls, it is considered ‘vintage’ and was made before 1980. If a pachinko machine has a round knob that you turn to shoot the balls, it is considered ‘modern’ and was made after 1980.



**Vintage Pachinko Machine**



**Modern Pachinko Machine**

**Vintage pachinko machines are purely mechanical and do not need electricity to play. You can hook up lights that flash when you get a jackpot, but that is optional. The sound you hear when you get a jackpot is the balls falling down hitting a bell, there are no speakers.**

**Modern pachinko machines must have electricity to operate all the motors, LCD screens, reels, lights, and speakers. Most all pachinko machines you see in Japan today are modern. There are several different models and designs, but they all work on the same basic principle.**

### **How to Play Pachinko**

**(The following information is based on what I found out online and from my personal experience playing Pachinko in Japan.)**

**One of the first things I noticed while walking around in Tokyo were these massive, flamboyant, fun-looking buildings everywhere. It is difficult to explain, but you just look at these places and think, “Hmm, whatever is going on in there, it must be pretty fun.” So, what's the big, fun mystery? It’s called Pachinko!**

**Well, I decided to go in and have some fun.**



**One Tub of Pachinko Balls (250 of them) being dumped into the machine**

**Walking around a pachinko parlor you will see the more dedicated players with (literally) thousands of balls stacked in tubs behind their seats. What is the monetary equivalent of each of these small metal balls?**

Well, just as with slot machines ranging from the penny slots up to the ones I can't afford to play, each pachinko ball can be worth anywhere from one yen (~ 1/10 of a US cent) up to hundreds of yen (~ 100 yen equals about \$1 Dollar) depending on the machine. Each tub holds 250 balls and that is the minimum you need to buy in order to play. Most experienced players buy 3 or 4 tubs and spend hours playing. For example, cost of one tub at 100 yen a ball is 25,000 yen or about \$250 dollars.



**This player has 15 Tubs of balls plus whatever is in the machine.  
On a 100-yen machine, the value of 15 tubs is 375,000 yen or \$3,750 dollars.**

It is now time to choose the right machine. After aimlessly wandering the rows of pachinko players glued to the bright and flashing lights in front of them, I attempt to convince myself that my checking out the various machines will have some sort of positive impact on my pachinko playing experience. Finally, I bravely choose a machine adorned with characters, noises, and colors I can stand to look at.

I sit down in the chair, which is quite exciting: it swivels, slides back and forth, and is just the right height for optimal pachinko playing positioning. To my left I find a color touchscreen with options to call an attendant, order drinks (no beer or other alcoholic drinks allowed), track my play, and perform a slew of other options that I fail to decipher.

I stick ¥1,000 yen (about \$10) into the money slot on the side of the machine and nothing happens. Curious. I carefully examine the buttons, pressing them one at a time until finally the machine begins dispensing my 250 balls (I paid 4 yen per ball) into the tray in front of me. Great - Success.



The pachinko machine lights up like a Fourth of July fireworks show, and I reach for the knob, eagerly anticipating my first play. The knob? Yes, the knob, your physical connection into the world of pachinko.

The knob (located on the lower right-hand corner of the machine) controls how hard balls are fired up into the pachinko machine (like the spring-loaded plunger on a pinball machine). Too soft? The balls are lost forever. Too hard? Same result. The sweet spot is not too difficult to find, but you will burn a few balls trying to find it your first time.



**The “Red” Knob**

Unlike a pinball machine which requires you to re-engage the plunger each time you wish to fire a new ball, the pachinko machine takes care of reloading automatically. That silver lever behind the red knob allows you to control the general direction the balls will fly. Now, once you find what you think is the sweet spot, just hold the knob in place and sit back and watch your balls (and your money) fly away.

Sitting in front of the machine, watching the balls bounce their way down into vast uncertainty, I’m reminded of “The Price Is Right” game called “Plinko”, a game shockingly similar to pachinko. Players drop plinko chips from the top of a big board filled with pegs hoping it lands in one of the big money slots at the bottom.



**The basic principle of Pachinko is to fire these tiny metal balls up into the (pachinko) machine in the hopes of landing jackpots and thereby growing your collection of tiny metal balls.**

**I sit watching the madness on the screen unfold in front of me as I hold the knob, shooting balls with flawless precision. There appears to be some sort of animated show going on (none of which I can understand), and occasionally spinning slot reels will appear. When these slots align more things happen (I still have no idea what), and sometimes I get more balls. I think that is good!**

**I am completely lost. When I win more balls and when my balls are eaten, I do not know. What I do know is that my overall supply of balls is rapidly diminishing. I must be losing the pachinko game!**

**Then, all of a sudden a giant “PUSH” word appears in the middle of the screen. I panic. PUSH WHAT?! Oh. There is a button with “PUSH” written on it in the middle bottom of the machine. I push it and all while keeping the knob's sweet spot in check – maybe I am finally getting the hang of this.**

**Something happens on the screen, and I get a huge ball payout. I'm winning the pachinko game! I somehow hit a jackpot. Well, I have to keep playing now. That might happen again. Turns out that it was a one-time thing, and I am soon ball-less. The machine stops making noises and I'm done.**

**Well, that was fun! All 30 minutes of it!**

**To be honest, I was not that impressed with pachinko. Perhaps it was because I didn't understand the story unfolding on the machine's screen therefore failing to draw me in. Or maybe my meager ¥1,000 investment failed to meet the jackpot or rewards threshold to keep me playing longer. Regardless, I do not think I will be playing pachinko again any time soon.**

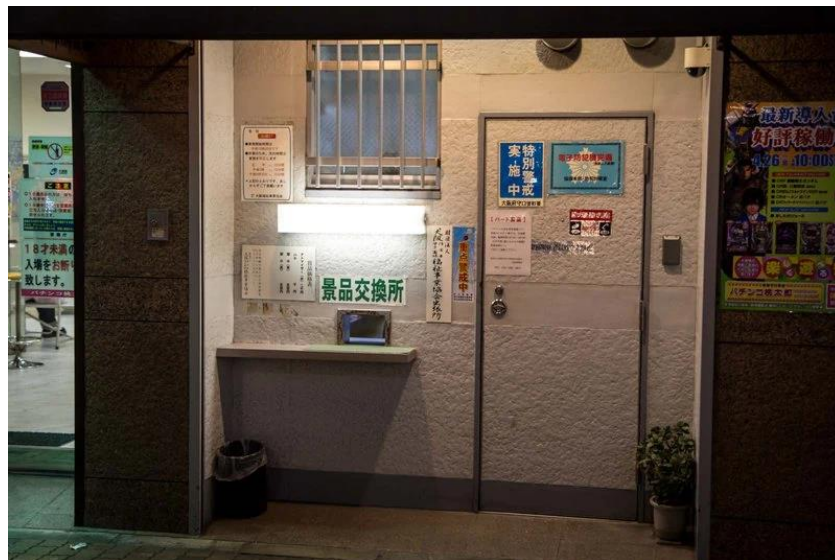
### **Gambling in Japan**

**Gambling in Japan is illegal, but police tolerate the level of gambling that goes on in pachinko parlors. So, how does pachinko, something that is very clearly gambling, and that is widely recognized and advertised as gambling across the country, get away with it? What makes pachinko legal when 9 out of 10 players in the parlor are there trying to win money. To win big at pachinko, you must play with a lot of balls on one of the more expensive machines and hit a lot of jackpots. Most of all, you must know what you are doing!**



## Jackpots

Well, when you hit a jackpot in pachinko you receive balls in return, not money. Yeah, but then don't you just exchange these balls for money? Nope. You trade in your balls for prizes! Prizes? Yes, prizes. These prizes can be anything from a bag of candy to other more valuable “prizes” (commonly made of some precious metal).



**Off-site place (usually in the alley next to the Pachinko Parlor) where you can Exchange your Prizes for Cash**

And what do you know? There just happens to be a separate building (typically a discrete window) immediately adjacent to the pachinko parlor that will pay



you money for your “prizes”. Wow, that is nice of them. Funny how the value of the balls and the prizes seem to be precisely in line with one another. Well, it's a good thing you got this money selling your prizes and not from gambling, because that would be illegal.

### **So, what do you need to know to win a lot of big jackpots playing pachinko?**

You need to understand how the pachinko machine you are playing works. Pachinko machines vary in several aspects—including decorative mechanics, sound, gimmicks, modes, gates, and how to get the most jackpots.

If the first two numbers, letters, or symbols of the spin match up, the digital program will display many animations before the third reel stops spinning, to give the player an added excitement. This is called a reach (or rīchi) and sometimes longer animations are played called super reaches. Pachinko machines offer different odds in hitting a jackpot; if the player manages to obtain a jackpot, the machine will enter into payout mode.

The payout mode lasts for a number of rounds. During each round, amidst more animations on the center screen, a large payout gate opens up at the bottom of the machine layout and the player must try to shoot balls into it. Each ball that successfully enters into this gate results in many balls being dropped into a separate tray at the bottom of the machine, which can then be placed into a ball tray.

Graphics in videos and light patterns can also give players a general idea of what these winning odds are. For example, a super reach may cause a change in animation, or show an introductory animation or picture. This adds excitement, with some changes having much more significance than others in terms of odds of winning on a given spin. Some machines feature instant wins. There are also second-chance wins, where a spin that appears to have lost, or to have a very low winning chance, gives the player three matching numbers and starts what is known as "fever mode".

After the payout mode has ended, the pachinko machine may do one of two things. Most Pachinko machines employ the kakuhē (確変) system, where some percentage of the possible jackpots on the digital slot machine result in the odds of hitting the next jackpot multiplying by a large amount, followed by another spin regardless of the outcome. The probability of a kakuhē occurring is determined by a random number generator.



### **FEVER MODE**

Hence, under this system, it is possible for a player to get a string of consecutive jackpots after the first "hard-earned" one, commonly referred to as "fever mode". Another type of kakuhens system is a special time. With these machines, every jackpot earned results in a kakuhens, but in order to earn a payout beyond the first jackpot, the player must hit a certain set of odds within a given number of spins.

When a jackpot does not result in a kakuhens combination, the pachinko machine will enter into jitan (時短 meaning time-reduction) mode, with a much larger number of spins than kakuhens. Under the original payout odds, the center gate widens to make it considerably easier for balls to fall into it; this system is also present in kakuhens.

Once no more jackpots have been made, the pachinko machine reverts to its original setting.

**Did you understand all that? Any of it? Me either! That is why good pachinko players will win money on a regular basis and me and you will lose almost every time.**

**Are there experienced pachinko players who make their living playing the game?**

Yes, there are a few but not many. Pachinko parlors don't like to lose money, so they keep track of people who win a lot of money. They find ways to keep these big winners from entering their establishment.



### **With all that said, is Pachinko mostly luck or skill?**

Pachinko is touted as a game of skill and most serious players attest to that position. However, players can only control the general direction and at what velocity the balls are launched onto the playing board. From there it is a game of luck. Most modern pachinko machines use random number generators to control if a machine pays out or not. The pachinko machines in Japan are programmed to make money just like the slot machines in Las Vegas. Japan's 40 million pachinko players lose an estimated \$1,200 each annually.

### **Can I bang the pachinko machine around to make the balls go where I want them to go?**

No. These machines “tilt” easily and stop working. Besides that, if you are caught banging or shaking a machine, a very large “sumo looking” parlor security person will escort you out and you can never return.

### **Is playing pachinko addictive?**

It can be. A recent study showed that pathological gambling tendencies among Japanese adults was 9% in men and 2% in women. 30% said they exceeded their budgets and borrowed money to play.

### **Why is Pachinko so popular in Japan?**

Pachinko serves as a blessed relief from the stress of the workplace, and the diminutive proportions of the typical Japanese home. In the repetitive clatter of thousands of shiny silver balls, fans find the mindless emptiness that Japanese society so rarely permits them.



Pachinko has had a wide appeal because the game is very simple and relatively cheap to play. It is always a good feeling when you (randomly) start winning as well-being lucky always makes you feel good. At the end of the day, you might win some pachinko balls and get some prizes in exchange. It's possible to convert the prizes into money as well.

### **Is Pachinko a movie?**

Adapted from the novel by Min Jin Lee, creator Soo Hugh's Apple TV+ series “Pachinko” is an emotional, expressive retracing though history that honors how Koreans were affected by Japanese colonization of Korea in the 20th century.

The reason that the Koreans ended up in Pachinko parlors is because they weren't able to get jobs anywhere else, so it became a place of employment, a safe haven for people who could not achieve regular goals like being a postal worker, or being a truck driver, or being a teacher.



### **In Conclusion**

If you ever get to Japan, go to a Pachinko Parlor and play the game. You might have fun and enjoy the atmosphere more than I did. And if you are lucky, you could hit a few jackpots and win a few prizes (that you can sell for money).

**[Bigdrifter44@gmail.com](mailto:Bigdrifter44@gmail.com)**

**[Bigdrifter.com](http://Bigdrifter.com)**