

INVADING SPACES

A Beginner's Guide to Collecting Arcade Games

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ROB O'HARA

Thanks to Mom, Dad and Linda for all your support throughout the years. Thanks to Susan, for understanding my need to write and encouraging me to do so. Thanks to Mason and Morgan, for being the two best kids a guy could ask for.

Thanks to all my online friends, including but not limited to all of my friends at Digital Press, Atari Age, Particles, Cult of the Dead Cow, and the Oklahoma Coin-Op Collecting Forum. You guys are my virtual family. Special thanks to: Phosphor Dot Fossils, Icbkr, 98Pacecar, k8track, Gapporin, Ubikuberalles, Pantechnicon, Kid Ice, Dire 51, Vectorman, Berserker, Jumpman Jr., RetroYoungen, BrickTop, Witchboard, ToplessZ, NewKillerGenius, Jaysun, Josh Risner, Kevin Mullins, Myles Long, Grandmaster Ratte', and Joe "Digital Press" Santulli.

Thanks to all my friends who have supported me and played games with me over the years. Special thanks to Andy Willrath, Jason Scott, Jeff Martin, Justin Mason, Scott Cowan and Stephen Alba. You guys are the best.

Thanks to Emily, Johnny, Paula, Vince, Clint, Tim-Dog, Carol, and all my other buddies at work who put up with my geek talk on a regular basis.

Thanks to Kelly Rupp, Mrs. Leatherwood, Mrs. Thionett, and every other teacher who recognized my talent and encouraged me to write.

Extra special thanks to Stephen, Jason, Earl, Brian, Susan, Dad, and everyone else who gave me feedback and helped me proofread.

And finally, thanks to the owners of Cactus Jack's, Funspot, Star*Cade, the 1984 Arcade, and every other arcade I've ever had the pleasure of dropping a quarter in.

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Cover, Layout, Design, Content, and all non-cited Photos

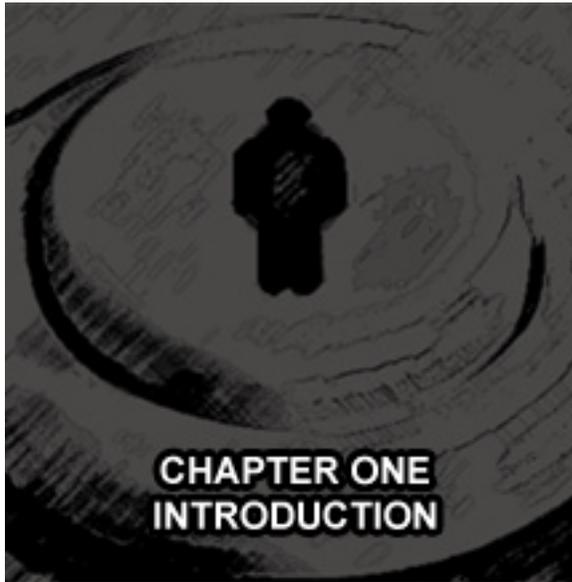
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First Edition

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Nine hours into my six-hour road trip, I decided MapQuest had lied to me.

This particular quest had led me south from Oklahoma City to Austin, Texas in search of yet another arcade game. Despite the massive amount of processing power MapQuest must surely harness, the popular trip-planning website neglected to inform me that October 11th, 2003 also happened to be OU/Texas weekend. The Red River Rivalry, one of the most heated contests in college football, takes place each fall in the Dallas Cotton Bowl Arena – which, for the uninformed, lies directly between Oklahoma City and Austin. The Cotton Bowl seats approximately 79,000 rabid college football fans, which (as you might imagine) causes massive traffic congestion in and around the Dallas area. In fact, I can tell you first hand that it does. My buddy Justin and I spent around two hours immobilized on the Dallas freeway that morning.

Waiting for me in Austin was the Data East arcade game Heavy Barrel. The irony of this particular adventure was that Heavy Barrel was never one of my favorite games. But, as sometimes happens with this hobby, I was offered a deal I couldn't refuse. Not only was the machine in good working condition, but it came with a brand new pair of rotating joysticks (also used on games like Ikari Warriors, Time Soldiers and Gondomania), and the seller was tossing in a couple of additional game boards and marquees as well.

Ten hours into the trip, Justin and I were completely lost. The directions the seller had e-mailed me were so awful that I had soaked up a

spilled Coke with them hours earlier. The housing addition we were looking for was too new to appear on MapQuest, and my GPS was so confused by our route by that point that it was asking me to drive across empty fields to reach our destination.

And then, it began to rain.

It was the kind of storm that meteorologists get excited about. Texas weathermen began interrupting radio stations to inform listeners that it was raining – hard. The streets filled with water so quickly that it became impossible to read curbside addresses. At some point along the way we stopped at a Home Depot and picked up a couple of large weatherproof tarps. We were going to need them to keep a game dry in this downpour.

Eleven hours after leaving Oklahoma, and five hours later than expected, we arrived at the seller's house. Justin and I, soaking from head to toe, ran quickly to the front porch and rang the doorbell. Moments later a middle aged man opened the front door and asked if he could help us.

“We're here to pick up the videogame,” I said.

After an awkward pause, the man slowly turned and yelled, “YOU SOLD OUR VIDEOGAME?”

“IT'S MINE AND I CAN DO WHAT I WANT WITH IT,” a voice yelled back.

Justin and I exchanged glances. Why can't it ever be easy? Soon we were met at the door by a teenager who whisked the two of us back to his bedroom.

Normally I would have liked to inspect a machine before purchasing it, but not this time. All I wanted to do at this point was get out of the house with the game before Mom and Dad nixed my good deal.

Removing the game from the seller's home was, at best, awkward. The kid's none-too-pleased father supervised the extraction with arms crossed and a scowl across his face. After strapping the game to my dolly I pushed the heavy machine as quickly as I could down a narrow hallway, banging into the wall repeatedly and knocking off family photos in the process. My wall-banging was amplified by the uncomfortable silence that had overcome the house, the only audible sound being our soaking wet tennis shoes squishing across the family's (previously) white carpet.

By now the rain was coming down in sheets – and instead of seeking shelter like a sane person might, Justin and I were standing in it, loading a three hundred pound chunk of wood filled with electronics onto a trailer. As quickly as possible we laid the game down, threw the newly purchased tarps over it, and got the heck out of there before anyone involved in the transaction could change their mind.

In our haste, my tarp-covering job had somehow become a parachute. At around thirty miles-per-hour the tarps filled with air and inflated, completely blocking my rear view. I pulled off the road to rewrap the game, and realized we had stopped in the parking lot of a local pizza buffet. The two of us, completely drenched and getting wetter, decided to take a break, get some dinner and dry off before making the trek back to Oklahoma. We spent the remainder of our evening shivering in a cold pizza joint, eating dinner and watching the rest of the OU/Texas game on television as the rain continued to pour.

Welcome to the glamorous world of arcade collecting.

Like millions of other kids born in the 70s and 80s, I spent a significant portion of my youth (and allowance) in local arcades. Arcades were so popular during that time that my home town of Yukon, Oklahoma (population 20,000) had no less than four arcades where my friends and I used to hang out.

The first arcades to spring up in town were what I call co-located – arcades residing inside other businesses. For a couple of years the two largest arcades in Yukon could be found inside the skating rink and the bowling alley. Jeff, my primary arcade-playing partner in crime, lived within walking distance of the bowling alley. The two of us spent many summer days hanging out there, our pockets filled with quarters either donated by or pilfered from Jeff's mom. The bowling alley's arcade always had an impressive assortment of games; it was the first place I ever played Karate Champ, Gyruus, Commando and Shinobi. For a while they even had the cockpit version of Mach 3, a laserdisc-based flying game.

A few miles further down Main Street was Yukon on Wheels, the local skating rink. Like the bowling alley, Yukon on Wheels also owned an impressive collection of arcade classics. It was there I first saw Yie Ar Kung-Fu, and began mastering Galaga. It's also the first place I ever played Crossbow – which, I might add, is infinitely more difficult to play while wearing roller skates. The more you lean forward to shoot, the further back your feet roll. The first time Jeff and I went to the skating rink together, he didn't even bother to get skates. With a roll of quarters in his pocket, Jeff dominated the foosball table and Galaga machine the entire night.

Once people realized kids were visiting these locations just for the arcade games, dedicated arcades began springing up around town. One opened up right down the street from the middle school I was attending. Not only was this arcade brand new, but so were all of its games. It's the first place I ever saw the Atari classics Paperboy and 720. This arcade was too far for me and Jeff to walk to, but occasionally we rode our bikes there.

When Jeff and I were in tenth grade, one of Jeff's parents' friends opened Fun Spot, another local arcade. (Note that this "Fun Spot" was not related to any other "Fun Spot" arcade across the nation. "Fun Spot" may be the single-most most used arcade name of all time.) Located a block or two behind the bowling alley, Fun Spot was by far the nicest arcade in town. More than just games, this arcade had pool tables, couches, and a well-stocked snack bar, making it the perfect after-school hangout. Before the arcade opened Jeff and I were "hired" as consultants by the owners, which meant we got to play all the games for free in exchange for our feedback and opinions. We played every game in the place, letting the owners know what we liked, what we didn't, and which buttons, joysticks and coin doors had issues. I distinctly recall beating Double Dragon for the first time at this arcade, a fact I still occasionally point out when I drive by the now vacated building. It's all about the elbow technique, baby.

We didn't spend a lot of time hanging out at the Fun Spot, not because it wasn't nice, but because shortly after it opened Jeff and I got our driver's licenses. Yukon borders Oklahoma City, and a set of wheels meant access to bigger and better arcades. While there were many to choose from, our two favorites quickly became Bally Le Mans and the infamous Cactus Jack's.

Le Mans, located inside Crossroads Mall, was one of the biggest and nicest arcades in the city. Whenever a new game was released, Le Mans was the first to get it. I saw Gauntlet there for the first time. A mutual friend of Jeff and mine had his birthday party at Le Mans; the three of us spent hours dominating that Gauntlet machine. Le Mans was also the first place I ever saw Dragon's Lair, housed in one of those big, dual-monitor cabinets that allowed crowds to gather around and watch. I remember being amazed at the graphics and appalled that the game cost 50 cents to play.

Cactus Jack's was much closer to my house, and the opposite of Le Mans in every way imaginable. While Le Mans had new casino-like red carpet, floor lighting, bright lights and a video jukebox playing the latest dance tunes, Cactus Jack's was dark and dingy. This arcade had dark brown concrete floors, with ceiling rafters and metal pipes covered in some sort of spray-on insulation that the older kids told us was asbestos. We believed them. The arcade's only source of light was the glow from the arcade monitors – even the windows had been blacked out. The jukebox was old and cranky, filled with Whitesnake, Led Zeppelin and Motley Crue records. It's the only arcade I recall having a separate smoking section in the rear, and I'm pretty sure the cigarette machine took tokens. At least once a week Cactus Jack's held pool tournaments that brought in an older and rougher crowd. There were fights in the parking lot every weekend. It was like a tough country and western bar, but for teenagers. Younger hoodlums begged older

hoodlums nightly to walk across the street and buy them six-packs of beer, which most of them would gladly do for either a buck or one of the beers. Before long we (I mean, the hoodlums) discovered that the convenience store next door was owned by an old Vietnamese man with no concept of checking IDs. The Cactus Jack's parking lot was perpetually filled with beer cans, partying teenagers, and fender benders. The back door of the arcade, which was always propped open, led to a giant unlit field out back. I never went back there; I was too afraid

There were other arcades around town of course, dozens in fact, but those were the ones I frequented most. All the local malls (Penn Square Mall, Quail Springs Mall, and Heritage Park Mall) had sizable arcades in them. And then there were entertainment centers, like Malibu Grand Prix and Showbiz Pizza. And games weren't just available in arcades; laundromats, grocery stores, and convenience stores had them too. In fact, my neighborhood convenience store had Mat Mania, Joust, and Track & Field machines for many years. Snyder's (our local grocery store) had Moon Patrol and Zoo Keeper machines next to their magazine rack. It seems like no matter where you turned there was an arcade machine standing there ready to accept your quarter.

During these same years, arcades and arcade games happily co-existed with videogame consoles and home computers. However, as anyone who has played those older arcade ports can tell you, playing arcade games at home was never the same as playing them in an arcade. The most obvious difference was that the arcade versions had much better sound and graphics than their home counterparts. Not even my grandmother could have confused the boxy, flickering version of Pac-Man for the Atari 2600 with the arcade version. Likewise, the Atari version of Donkey Kong only included two of the arcade version's four levels and had greatly reduced graphics – so bad that one of my friends thought the fire barrels were actually magic genie lamps.

But arcades thrived for more than just technical reasons. Arcades were a social gathering place, a secret clubhouse away from adults where kids met and hung out with their friends. There was no feeling quite like being so awesome at a game that a crowd would form around you and watch you play. If you did well enough to get a high score you would be honored with your name in lights. And by “your name in lights,” I mean “your initials in pixels,” but it was still pretty cool. And having your name displayed wasn't the only incentive for practicing and playing your hardest – at twenty-five cents per play, you tended to take game playing a lot more seriously. Especially at that age, quarters were valuable.

Over the next few years, the majority of these arcades closed their doors. The two independent Yukon arcades I mentioned were the first to go, with many of the mall-based arcades following suit. Some of the co-located arcades closed down; others scaled back. Le Mans, one of the few mall versions that remain open today, is a shell of its former self. Even the few that did survive have changed drastically, making a massive shift toward redemption games. The obvious question becomes, if arcades were such awesome places, why did they all go out of business?

There are a multitude of factors and theories. One obvious one is that, on a technical level, videogame consoles and home computers eventually caught up with and surpassed their arcade counterparts. Early systems like the Atari 2600 and Mattel's Intellivision simply didn't have the power to match the graphics of arcade games; before long, it was the other way around. By the time the Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis hit the market, console videogames looked almost indistinguishable from their big brothers. No longer did you have to beg your parents for a ride to the arcade to play Joust; instead you could play it on your Gameboy, anywhere and anytime you wanted.

Another reason arcades began losing popularity was due to a shift in gamers' tastes. Role-playing games and other adventures games delivered lengthy, detailed experiences on home computers that arcade games couldn't and were never designed to duplicate. Arcade games were designed to take your money and then kill you (figuratively speaking), not to let you play for hours or months on end. This disparity was eventually exponentially multiplied by the introduction of online gaming via the Internet. Now not only could you play these great new games at home, but you could play them with other people without ever leaving the couch.

The final nail in the coffin was the cultural shift that began during that time and continues to this day. In the 80s, dropping your children off at the local arcade for a few hours or letting your kids hang out at the bowling alley all day unsupervised wasn't a big deal. These days, letting young kids hang out unsupervised even in a relatively public area such as an arcade is virtually unheard of. Slowly, stories of kids being abducted, kidnapped and murdered began making the nightly news; one in particular that comes to mind was the kidnapping (and beheading) of Adam Walsh (whose father John Walsh subsequently started the TV Show "America's Most Wanted"). I don't know that any single incident caused this change across society, but the change was palpable. As a little kid I can remember my mother leaving me alone to play the arcade games located directly next to the exit door of our local supermarket while she shopped for groceries. The thought of letting my own son do the same today terrifies me. What caused this? Maybe I've watched too many after school specials and episodes of Unsolved Mysteries.

Without kids showing up with quarters, the industry caved in upon itself. In an attempt to bring in more income, arcades added more and more ticket dispensing games. Redemption games were and are a great way for arcades to make money, with children slamming quarter after quarter into the machines in order to earn tickets that can be exchanged for various prominently displayed prizes. Anyone with even the most rudimentary grasp of money or mathematics can see that the prizes are overpriced junk. It could take a thousand dollars worth of tickets to purchase a hundred dollar prize – which is, of course, the basic formula that allows many arcades to keep their doors open. I once had a local arcade owner tell me 90% of his income came from redemption games.

The reason arcades flourished in the first place is because they delivered an experience not easily reproduced at home. Once home gaming systems advanced to a point where they performed side-by-side with arcade games, arcades had to change. The most popular non-redemption games today are the ones you cannot easily or inexpensively reproduce at home: big dance pad games, sit-down multiplayer racing games, and big-screen light gun shooting games. The reason there's not a Pac-Man machine on every corner these days is because kids can play it for free on their cell phones, if they even want to, that is.

MY COLLECTION

Believe it or not, I never set out to collect arcade games. I realize this in an odd statement coming from someone who owns more than twenty-five machines, but it's true.

Like all collections, mine started with a single purchase: Elevator Action. At the time of the purchase I had no aspirations of purchasing a second game; heck, back then I didn't even have a place for *one*, much less an

entire collection! At the time of that purchase my wife and I were living in a mobile home, working in retail and saving up money to buy a house. After sneaking the game home while the wife was out shopping, I maneuvered the mammoth into the back corner of our dining room and placed a plant on top of it, hoping Susan wouldn't notice the giant beeping addition to our home

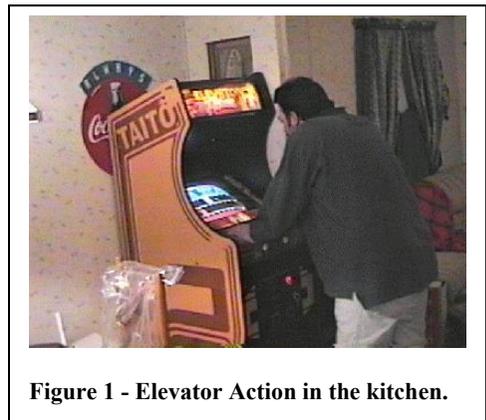


Figure 1 - Elevator Action in the kitchen.

décor. She did, and although she allowed me to keep that game, I was instructed not to buy any more until we had more room.

That room came in the form of our first house, a monster of a home built in the 1880s (approximately twenty-five years before Oklahoma became a state). Previous owners had divided the home up into multiple rental units. When we moved in, the house had had been separated into four living rooms, four kitchens, four dining rooms, four bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a fifth studio apartment. Not only was the house gigantic, but also extremely affordable due to the fact that it was quite literally falling apart. Not a single floor in the house was level, the walls were insulated with newspaper and hay, and the nearest three-prong electrical outlet was at the convenience store, two blocks away. Of course as kids we didn't care about any of those things. With space no longer an issue I began once again looking at purchasing arcade games. As those of you who already have them know, and those of you who don't will discover shortly, arcade machines have a way of attracting one another. One game turned into two, which soon turned into four. I designated one of the spare kitchens as "the arcade," although most people just saw it as "a kitchen with arcade games in it for some odd reason."

It was during this time that I discovered arcade auctions, and how inexpensively games could be purchased at them. Over the next few months I built up a small collection of inexpensive games. I paid \$25 for Mat Mania, \$25 for Shinobi, and \$25 for Street Fighter II – Champion Edition. I learned a few expensive lessons during this buying period; when things went right for me, it was generally due to luck. By the time I had six or seven machines I took a job transfer to Spokane, Washington. With no way to transport the games across country and nowhere to put them once I got there, I ended up selling – liquidating, actually – my entire collection. I even gave away a beautiful but non-working Star Wars cabinet during that time, a decision I still kick myself for.

I didn't own any cabinets over the next few years and I sure missed them. The more I played the retro game compilations released for the Nintendo 64 and Sony PlayStation the more I realized how much I had enjoyed owning real machines. I missed the way real cabinets looked; I missed the way real machines felt; heck, I even missed the way real machines smelled, that unique aroma of wood and metal with just a hint of electrical fire (at least in some of my games). While away from home I decided that once we found our way back to Oklahoma, I would once again begin collecting arcade games ... but only one or two.

The next few years were a whirlwind. Susan and I moved back to Oklahoma, bought our first real home (one built in this century), had our first child (Mason), and moved to a larger home in the spring of 2003. Not only

did this new home have lots of space, but it also had a 14'x40' workshop in the backyard.

Had it been left up to me, the workshop would probably still be sitting empty (or worse, full of junk). Rarely do I have the vision my wife has. Unbeknownst to me, for weeks prior to my 30th birthday my wife, my family, and my friends spent hours upon hours converting that old workshop into a dream arcade. Walls were painted, carpet was laid, and decorations were hung. When I finally saw the arcade on my birthday, I was blown away. I finally had my very own arcade!

“Now all you have to do is fill it,” my wife said. To get me started, my wife bought me an air hockey table and my dad bought me a slot machine.

Today, my arcade is bursting at the seams, completely packed full of machines. For a year or two I went crazy, buying every cheap game I could find, ultimately leaving me with a large collection of games that I didn't particularly care to play. After I reached that point I changed strategies and began paying slightly more for games I was more interested in, games like Karate Champ, Q*Bert, and Gauntlet.

Over the past fifteen years I've done a lot of things wrong and learned a lot of lessons the hard way. One of my main goals in writing this book is to spare you much of the time, money and pain I wasted due to ignorance. In the following pages I plan on sharing everything I know, and pointing you to places that know more than I do.

SO YOU WANNA COLLECT ARCADE GAMES?

When people step into my game room for the first time and see my collection of 25 or so arcade games, the question I get more often than any other is, “Why?” I wish I had a good answer to that question. I have actually told people (only half-jokingly) that collecting arcade games may be the most ridiculous hobby on the face of the planet. There are several reasons for this.

One reason is simply the physical mass of these machines. There are logistics involved in owning, displaying, and moving these beasts. For moving them, you'll need a truck. If this is a one-time event you can probably borrow one – if you plan on doing this full time as a hobby, you'll probably end up buying one. You'll also need a dolly, tie-down straps, blankets, tarps, and various other accessories. Every time I move an arcade game I swear my next hobby is going to involve collecting thimbles, feathers, or some other extremely small and light object. Sometimes I tell that joke while popping Doan's Back Pills after moving a few games.

These cabinets aren't just heavy; they're also large. That makes owning more than one or two of them a challenge without some planning and dedicated space. Just like living room furniture, games always look bigger once you get them into your home. The average arcade cabinet is around three feet wide, three feet deep, and six feet tall. You are not going to be able to hide this from your significant other. (Remember, I tried.) My current game room has almost 600 square feet of space and I've basically filled it. If you are planning on collecting games you will need both space and a forgiving spouse.

Here's another reason why collecting arcade games is a dumb idea. Most people collect arcade games because they liked playing them. That's fine, until yours breaks down – then you will become one of three people: the guy who both collects and fixes arcade games, the guy who pays people to fix his arcade games, or the guy who has a collection of broken arcade games. I can honestly say that over the past fifteen years I have been each of those guys at different times. Most of us can't afford to have people constantly working on our games and none of us got into this hobby to collect broken machines, which means sooner or later you (or your buddy, or your dad, or someone you know) are going to have to learn how to work on these things. It's not as scary as it sounds, and later on I'll be covering some repair basics in this book. If you have no intention of ever working on your game just know now that someday it will break and someday you will be paying some nerd a lot of money to come out and fix your machine.

The most ridiculous thing about collecting arcade games is the money involved. Don't get me wrong – by shopping around you can get some really great deals on games, and if you know how to work on them sometimes you can even get them for free! Regardless of the occasional good deal, collecting arcade games will inevitably cut into your pocketbook. The silliest thing of all is, the vast majority of these games can be played for free, right now, on your home computer. There exists a free computer program called MAME (Multi-Arcade Machine Emulator) that allows you to play an arcade ROM on your home computer. I don't want to make this too technical because I'll be getting into it deeper in a later chapter, but suffice it to say that almost any arcade game released in the past 25 years can be played on your home computer for free. It kind of makes spending tons of money collecting arcade games seem somewhat foolish.

To summarize, arcade games are big, giant, heavy, expensive chunks of wood and electronics that need regular repairs, lots of space to be displayed, and can be emulated for free on your home computer with little to no effort.

If owning an arcade game still sounds like a good idea, well then, lead on adventurer – your quest awaits! Maybe you feel a calling to preserve

a classic game. Maybe you've been waiting all these years to own your favorite game of all time. Maybe you're desperately trying to relive your youth. Maybe you have a fetish for back pain. Whatever your reason may be, welcome to the club. You're in good company.



Figure 2 – Shall we play a game? My backyard arcade (March, 2007)