



THE GHOSTS OF ARCADES PAST

BY ROB O'HARA

Over the past twenty years I've been collecting games for multiple consoles and computers, but what I'm probably best known for is collecting arcade machines. Between 1994 and 2014 I purchased over a hundred arcade cabinets. The most I ever owned at once was thirty; that's the most my 500 square foot backyard arcade would hold (if you crammed them in there just right). Due to the finite amount of space I had to work with, whenever I found a new machine I wanted I was forced to part with an old one. For many years I was constantly moving machines in and out of my private arcade.

Collecting arcade games is a rewarding hobby in and of itself, but one of the things I enjoyed most about owning and acquiring those machines was that each one of them had a unique story. Videogame cartridges for the most part are identical, indistinguishable from one another. Arcade cabinets on the other hand are almost the complete opposite. Every arcade cabinet has a unique story.

Many of my machines had unique stories surrounding the way I obtained them. Every time I walked past my *Heavy Barrel* machine I thought about the six hour (each way) road trip I had made in the rain to go pick it up, and how surprised that young man's parents were when they discovered he had sold "his" game without telling them prior to my arrival. Then there was my Nintendo Vs. machine, a machine so large that once I got it home I discovered it wouldn't fit through my game room's doorway (it stayed in the garage the whole time I owned it). To pick that one up I had to back my trailer down a narrow, quarter-mile-long dirt road. The game had been described to me as working, but when I got there I learned that the couple's mentally handicapped son had tried to "fix" the machine by yanking out a bunch of wires moments before I arrived. Afraid of the consequences, the boy had run off and was "currently hiding somewhere out in the woods." I've experienced more than my share of awkwardness while buying and selling games, and those memories will always remain attached to those machines.

Many of the cabinets I owned had their own stories to tell. Several of the games I owned were "conversions," meaning at some point in time they had been converted from an older game to a newer one. Sometimes it was easy to tell what a machine had started life as simply by the shape of the cabinet. No amount of paint can disguise the shape of an old Atari or Namco cabinet. Often times to save time and money while converting a cabinet, arcade operators would simply paint over the old

side art and apply new decals on top of that. With enough chemicals and elbow grease it's possible to strip away those layers and restore the original artwork that lies beneath. New control panel overlays (the artwork that covers the area where joysticks and buttons are mounted) were often applied directly directly on top of older overlays. With a heat gun and enough time you can remove just about anything. I once acquired a *Mortal Kombat* arcade cabinet that arrived in what appeared to be an old Atari cabinet. After stripping off the paint I discovered a nearly complete set of *Black Widow* side art, which itself had been applied on top of a complete set of *Gravitar* sideart. It's amazing to me how resilient some of those cabinets were and how many different games some of them housed over the years. After a while it becomes second nature to look at an arcade game and try to figure out what game it used to be. My *RoboCop* cabinet used to be a *Ms. Pac-Man* machine, my *Rampart* began life as a *Gauntlet* cabinet, and my *Buster Bros.* cabinet was originally *Joust*. Occasionally inside the cabinets I found hints to their heritage—an old manual here, a broken circuit board there.

Some of the cabinets I purchased came with other surprises inside. For example, occasionally I found keys—not keys to arcade games, but simply random keys. I have no idea where they came from, what they went to, or how so many of them ended up inside arcade cabinets. My *Defender* cabinet came filled with children's toys. Apparently the machine had quit working long ago and a local daycare had simply propped the back door open and repurposed the cabinet as a large toy chest. Inside machines I've found adult magazines, toy guns, beer cans, and plenty of mouse poop. One of my favorite things to find in the bottom of machines were old arcade tokens. In fact, it was a handful of vintage tokens that led to one of my greatest arcade-related discoveries.

My friend Justin and I grew up playing *Karate Champ*, the Data East fighting game. For those who have never played it, *Karate Champ* was the first one-on-one fighting game. Each player used two joysticks to control their character's movement and attacks. Some of the movements were intuitive, but most were not. As a result, anyone who has played *Karate Champ* can usually beat anyone who hasn't played *Karate Champ*. And since Justin and I had both grown up playing the game, it was fun for us to play against one another. Unfortunately Justin lived about an hour away from me, so our *Karate Champ* battles were few and far between.

When the two of us turned sixteen, Justin and I began meeting and hanging out at Crossroads Mall and Malibu Grand Prix. Both places were almost exactly halfway between our houses and both had arcade games. Crossroads Mall had Aladdin's Castle, an upscale arcade with all the latest games. Most people referred to Malibu Grand Prix's as "that go-kart place," but it also had a sizable indoor arcade that the two of us spent plenty of time at. Malibu Grand Prix had a lot of new and expensive games like the laserdisc-based game *Cliff Hanger* and Sega's holographic game *Time Traveler*, but they also had plenty of classic machines including *Karate Champ*. It was on this middle ground, this neutral territory, that the two of us did battle. Every time I see a *Karate Champ* machine or even think about the game, that is the memory that is intertwined with it; the two of us hanging out at Malibu Grand Prix, karate-chopping one another until we were both out of quarters.



Karate Champ (arcade, 1984)

Fast forward almost twenty years. Through an ad on Craigslist I found a local seller parting with multiple arcade machines. I showed up at the guy's house the next day with a trailer behind my truck and cash in my pocket. If I remember correctly the seller was asking \$250 per machine, but the longer we talked and the more machines I loaded up on my trailer, the better the deals got. By the time I left I had purchased five games for a total of \$500: *RoboCop*, *Super Mario Bros.*, *Excitebike*, *Double Play Baseball*, and one of my holy grails, *Karate Champ*. I didn't tell Justin about the *Karate Champ* machine. Instead, my plan was to restore it and surprise him with a karate-choppin' challenge the next time he came to visit. Once I got it home, the first thing I did was open *Karate Champ's* back door and begin cleaning out the cabinet. In the bottom of the machine, I found a bunch of tokens.

Malibu Grand Prix tokens.

Chills went down my spine as I realized that this was, in fact, the very same cabinet Justin and I had played all those years ago. Although I have no definite proof of lineage, considering that there was only one Malibu Grand Prix in Oklahoma (the next closest one was 450 miles away in Houston, Texas), chances are pretty good that this is indeed the one that he and I used to play head-to-head on twenty-five years ago. It is the only game I own that I can definitively point at and say, "I used to play that machine as a kid."

Like I said, every arcade cabinet has a unique story. You just have to know how to hear them.