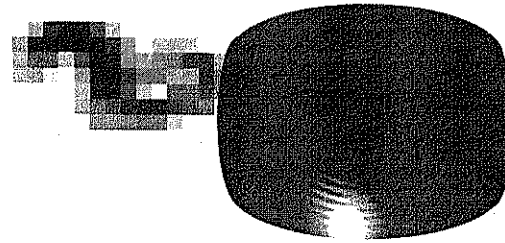


## Chapter 4 A la Recherche du Arcades Perdu



It's ironic that the skills that young people use in high-tech computerized jobs should have been honed in video arcades because video arcades in the 1980s were intensely unprofessional places filled with smelly teenage boys — places like Playland on Forty-seventh Street in Manhattan. Lodged in the warren of glitz and grime that is Times Square, Playland is a place where orange and blue linoleum tiles checker the floor twenty feet wide and a hundred feet deep into a lightless recess of pinup posters and wood veneer paneling. The posters (all for sale) mostly portray glossy-lipped softcore sex kittens straddling chairs or motorcycles. But the lunch hour hodgepodge of teenagers in baggy pants and midtown businessmen seems oblivious to the airbrushed cheesecake vixens looming overhead. They're too busy playing *Marvel Superheroes* and *Ultimate Mortal Kombat*.

Off to the side, a forlorn *Pac-Man* machine sits, looking woefully small and dinky next to the seven-foot cabinets that surround it. Against the back wall, a couple of pinball machines blink their incandescent lightbulbs in a fruitless bid for quarters. At twenty-five cents, the old machines are a bargain, especially when you stop to consider that their price has remained constant for fifteen years. In fact, adjusting for inflation, a game

of *Pac-Man* or *Frogger* will run you about twelve cents in 1981 dollars. All the new games cost fifty cents. Deluxe games like *Time Crisis* are a dollar. Nonetheless, the pumped-up martial arts games and networked Nascar races are clobbering the pinball machines and the *Pac-Mans*, just as Disney-style family entertainment centers are replacing seedy game rooms like Playland — just as Disney, for that matter, is reconfiguring Times Square itself. The dimly lit arcade of vidkid remembrance is going the way of the drive-in.

Videogame arcades have had a good twenty-year run — long enough to be taken for granted. But they aren't the first kind of coin-op play zone to flourish and then go extinct. Coin-op game rooms have existed in America, in various forms, for over a hundred years. Before videogames, there were pinball parlors, which provided a place for teenagers and deadbeats to hang out for considerable stretches of time without officially loitering. Pinball itself, like videogames, was relatively innocent. But it smelled like it might be dangerous. It was chaotic and vaguely aggressive, and there were girlies on some of the cabinets. Pinball was how James Dean or Marlon Brando might squander time while contemplating riskier pursuits. And it attracted people who at least dressed like juvenile delinquents. But more importantly, the pinball parlor was a place where sheltered suburban teens might actually come into contact with working-class kids, high school dropouts, down-and-out adults, cigarettes, and other corrupting influences, which made the place a breeding ground for parental paranoia, if not for crime. Although pinball machines themselves were hard to blame, in the public mind their milieu posed a threat to America's moral fiber.

Something about coin-operated amusements seems to inspire this kind of schizophrenic popular conception. Before pinball parlors, game rooms of the thirties and forties created the same stir in resorts and amusement parks. Before that, 1920s coin-op machines acquired notoriety as a frequent fixture in speakeasies. Prior to that, critics of turn-of-the-century penny arcades and nickelodeons argued that cheap, coin-operated

thrills like the dreaded kinetoscope would foster a sensationalistic carnival mentality and drive the arousable masses to riot and iniquity. Of course, it was the masses and not the machines that concerned them. But the machines were a convenient touchstone for class tension because they cropped up just as cities were accumulating a critical mass of blue collar workers. Suddenly, there were droves of machinists and shop girls, all of whom had money to spend on low-cost entertainment. And coin-op machines gave them a way to spend their leisure dollars, nickel by nickel. So if you wanted to point to a source of working-class dissipation, nickel-in-the-slot amusement machines were a nice, mute, nontaxpaying, nonvoting scapegoat with dubious ties to the underworld.

In the early 1890s, the big coin-op craze was phonograph machines, which gobbled people's pocket change while they stood around in lobbies, saloons, train stations, and fairgrounds. The high-tech cabinets of their time, coin-op phonograph machines played cylinder recordings of speeches and popular songs through a listening tube, which the patron would cradle to his or her ear after inserting a number of coins. In central business districts, banks of coin-op phonograph machines lined the walls of bustling penny arcades, providing the midday crowd with a quick mental vacation:

[Companies] found that by grouping several machines together in a downtown "parlor," with full-time attendants to service the machines and make change, they could attract large numbers of customers from the streams of pedestrians who passed by day and night. . . . To bolster their receipts, the parlor owners surrounded their graphophones and phonographs with other "automatic" amusement novelties, machines that dispensed gum, candy, fruit, and miracle medicinals such as "Roy's Positive Remedy Curing Headache and Neuralgia in 15 Minutes — 10¢ Per Package," and X-Ray machines and fluoroscopes that displayed the bones in your hands and were all the rage until experimenters, including

one of Edison's assistants, discovered that repeated exposure caused flesh to ulcerate, hair to fall out, and eventual death.\*

Coin-in-the-slot phonograph arcades boomed nationally in the early nineties (the 1890s, that is), before being superseded by the mid-nineties kinoscope craze — a flotilla of picture peephole machines featuring films of flexing strongmen, highland dancers, cockfights, trapeze artists, contortionists, and trained bears.†

Ultimately, as with early video arcades, the proprietors of coin-op phonograph and kinoscope parlors realized that their core customers were young males eager to play with the latest cutting-edge toys for five or ten minutes en route to work. After all, technological marvels like the phonograph and the kinoscope were far too expensive for home use. And even when the phonograph became an affordable piece of consumer gear, the audio arcades always had the flashiest and most advanced equipment, plus all the latest cylinders before they hit the stores, plus a meeting ground where guys could discuss the nuances of different phonograph models and compare the size and variety of their home cylinder collections. In some cases, the phonograph parlors even provided a place to buy, sell, and trade on the underground market for homemade pornographic audio cylinders (a much seedier prospect than the twentieth-century video arcade, which at least offers a standard set of products. Parents may hate *Mortal Kombat*, but they know there aren't any mutant home-brew versions floating around that increase the prurient appeal of Acclaim's version).

Despite their popularity, the phonograph parlors inexorably gave way to the next turn-of-the-century coin-op wundertechology, the mutoscope, which, unlike the earlier kinoscope, featured a mechanical crank allowing the customer to speed up, slow down, reverse, or stop the action. Much was made of this feature, curiously foreshadowing the tone of

\* David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 126–27.

† Ibid., 132.

CD-ROM box labels a hundred years later (“You’re in control. *You* turn the crank”). Back then, coin-op film machines were touted as emblems of the machine age, just as coin-op videogames would represent the bleeding edge of the digital era. Scores of amusement sites used “automatic” as a magic buzzword to attract novelty-crazed thrill seekers, exactly the same way the word “virtual” is used today. Everything was “automatic.” Regardless of the images and sounds they projected (what we in the information age call “content”), the mutoscope was supposed to be entertaining by definition, simply because it was “automatic.”

By the late nineties, phonographs and kinoscope parlors were obsolete. And the mutoscope arcade was on the wane, slowly edging over the shady/respectable divide to begin its second life as a peep show (pornography being the perennial novelty). But in the wake of their outdated machines, turn-of-the-century coin-op arcades left behind a new kind of gathering ground that revolved around high-end technology that anyone could casually consume for a nickel, a dime, or, a hundred years later, a quarter. “The arcades,” writes David Nasaw, “were casual institutions that required (and indeed sold) no advance tickets, had no assigned seats, and, as importantly, required no cultural capital of their audience. All viewers, regardless of social background or educational level, had equal access to the ‘meaning’ of the images viewed through the peephole or on the larger screen. One didn’t even have to speak English to understand the story.”\* A hundred years after the phonograph machine, *Pole Position* cut the same swath across ethnic and class lines. The 1980s video arcade was one of the few truly diverse hangouts in teendom. It catered equally to preppies and high school dropouts, geeks and jocks, Chicano kids and rednecks-in-training. And, videogames being a great leveler, the arcade was more or less a meritocracy. It didn’t matter what you drove to the arcade. If you sucked at *Asteroids*, you just sucked.

\* Ibid., 158.

But unlike phonograph machines or coin-op kinetoscopes, videogames didn't have to attract traffic from the street. They were sheltered from the vagaries of climate and real estate by a bovine symbiotic host: the American mall. Although the first enclosed two-level mall, Southdale Center, in Edina, Minnesota, opened in 1956, the real wildfire of mall construction raged in the late sixties and seventies. By 1974 there were 13,174 shopping centers in Canada and the United States. By 1982, there were 20,304, including over a thousand megamalls of 400,000 square feet or more.\* Fortuitously, these were concentrated in California, also the Tigris and Euphrates of the American videogame industry. In the cradle of military contractors and West Coast consumerism, the microchips that made videogames possible advanced in tandem with the mushrooming malls. As the malls landed, like retail mother ships, they carried coin-op game rooms into every metropolis, small city, large town, and suburban hamlet in North America.

In the first flush of 1960s mall-dom, there were no videogames per se. But there were some embryonic coin-op game machines that looked like TVs and worked by projecting film images off a series of mirrors. By the late 1960s these so-called "electromechanical projection games" were edging into retail stores along the eastern seaboard. The moment was ripe for someone to marry this new type of coin-op television game experience to the burgeoning phenomenon of shopping malls.

That individual was Tico Bonomo, an erstwhile candy manufacturer in upstate New York. Having just sold his stake in a successful confectionery, Bonomo Turkish Taffy, Tico was looking for a new startup venture when he spied a few of these electromechanical projection games and, with a growing sense of excitement, realized that a whole storeful of them in a shopping mall might be a good way to make money. So he opened the Time Out Family Amusement Center in the Northway Mall in Colonie, New York, in 1970. Amazingly, people seemed to

\* International Council of Shopping Centers, National Research Bureau statistics.

like electromechanical projection games even more than they liked Bonomo's Turkish Taffy. So the following year, Tico opened a few more game rooms. And then came *Pong*, which sent pocket change flying out of mall patrons' bell-bottom pockets into the coffers of the newly minted Bonomo coin-op empire. By 1975, there were a dozen Time Outs. By 1978, there were twenty, just in time for *Space Invaders*, a second flood of quarters, and another round of expansion. As videogames replaced the electromechanical game cabinets and pinball machines, Time Out rode the twin waves of mall construction and videogames through the seventies. New malls hatched more arcades, spurring manufacturers to create flashier machines. And as the machines got better, their audience ballooned, drawn by a string of hit games like *Asteroids*, *Battlezone*, *Defender*, and *Pac-Man*.

At the center of this circular feeding frenzy was the arcade customer. And, much to local merchants' chagrin, that audience consisted almost entirely of fifteen-year-old boys, who were lured to glowing videogames in darkened rooms like mosquitoes to a bug zapper. "In the beginning," says George McAuliffe, general manager of Time Out through a series of ownerships and president of the Family Entertainment Center trade association, "the philosophy was paint the stores black, and keep 'em dark, so that the TV screens stand out, and that was the atmosphere that customers wanted. But by 1979, we were trying to appeal to a wider age group. We wanted to open more stores, and shopping mall developers didn't want teenage hangouts. So we started to brighten them up, use more yellows and brighter colors. We were fighting this image that went all the way back to the twenties, associated with coin-operated games, that they were smoke-filled hangouts where nefarious characters did bad things. We had to brighten it up for the mall developer so that we could expand into more locations."

Thus began the arcade sanitation crusade, which meant, first off, that sometime around 1981, video arcades shifted their lighting scheme from black to a shade I like to call "clockwork

orange," which was the color of pizza grease, only much more intense. It made everyone look like a poster boy for jaundice. But apparently, this bizarre tangerine hue achieved its goal, which was to pacify mall developers and convince Mom that the arcade was a safe place to dump little Johnny while she went shopping. "It was definitely a conscious decision to appeal to more women," McAuliffe flatly admits. "Before two-income families and career women, that was the shopper in the mall. That's where the money was. Those were the primary shoppers, making decisions about where they were going to allow their children. And if you had a place that appealed to them, they were more likely to bring that child to the mall and to feel comfortable leaving them there. And then Mom could go off and do the shopping, and meet up with the child and then maybe go to a food court." Basically, it was in everyone's interest to make the video arcade look like a viable form of free, unsupervised day care.

By the end of 1981, the arcade had become a fixture of urban and suburban life and the after-school hangout of choice for millions of teenagers. And arcade machines, doubly entrenched in the video arcade and the mall, were sucking down 20 billion quarters and 75,000 man-years annually. For the arithmetically challenged, that is: Five. Billion. Dollars. Which, added to the billion-dollar home videogame market, meant that joystick entertainment was raking in more than the U.S. movie industry and Nevada gambling combined.\*

Inevitably, a fleet of speculators blew in to milk the craze. Many of them thought it would be a smart idea to open video arcades across the street from schools so that kids could run over at lunchtime. And after enough kids had been caught cutting class to spend their lunch money playing videogames, the backlash began. As with pinball, there was a shortage of credible arguments as to what, exactly, made videogames such a bad influence. But in the public perception, arcades smacked of

\* *Time*, January 18, 1982.

moral turpitude.\* Targeting videogame rooms as havens for delinquency, town fathers in communities like Snellville, Georgia, outlawed the games entirely, bringing their local ordinances into sync with the Philippines, where, half a world away, Ferdinand Marcos had banned coin-op videogames and given arcade owners two weeks to smash them.

Not only were video arcades becoming public enemy number one, but by the beginning of 1982, game manufacturers were getting sloppy, rushing machines into production with no technological innovation or improvements in game play or even marginally better graphics. By the end of the year, arcades were saturated with unexciting copycat machines, and the bubble burst. With the quality of games in a tailspin, high school videogamers got bored. And since every 7-Eleven had at least a couple arcade cabinets, you could cross the street to play videogames instead of cruising all the way over to the mall. As an escalating number of lukewarm games sparred for a jaded audience, the videogame industry began a painful freefall. And after a twelve-year sail, arcades followed suit. By 1983, thousands of game rooms had closed, leaving the survivors to stagnate in the lukewarm foot traffic of their malls, waiting for the new, shiny machines that would bring back the glory days.

Years went by. Layers of grime built up on the arcades' seldom-swept linoleum floors. Chewing gum collected on the roofs of old *Dig Dug* machines. But the new batch of miracle

\* In an academic study ("Video Arcades, Youth, and Trouble," *Youth and Society* 16, no. 1, September 1984, 47-65), Desmond Ellis found these perceptions to be largely baseless: "For every hour [kids] spent in a video arcade, they spent ten watching television, five hours reading, and two playing a team sport." Contrary to claims that arcades were breeding hooligans, Ellis found that arcade attendance was positively related to academic performance and that the link between arcades and stealing/vandalism/assault was negligible. "Video arcades per se were not, as those authorities allege, a major cause of deviant behavior. Instead, video arcade involvement tends to increase the likelihood of deviant behavior only when such involvement is itself associated with weak parental control." That is, the small group of kids who were in arcades after 10 P.M. accounted for half of the deviant acts, which had more to do with the fact that their parents were letting them run wild than with their chosen late-night stomping ground.

games never arrived, and the teenagers only got cockier. As arcades across the country withered on the vine, larger chains bought up the rubble of a once-thriving industry at fire sale prices. On the West Coast, Sega put its American arcade operation on the block and went back to Japan to lick its wounds. The thirteen-store franchise was eventually absorbed by Time Out.

It was in this secondhand arcade chain that McAuliffe, Time Out's general manager, saw the salvation of coin-op entertainment. And it wasn't a new, shiny machine at all. "They had a couple of stores in which they were running Skee-Balls," he says, referring to the bowling-cum-ball-toss machines lingering in Sega's defunct franchise. "Prior to that, we never thought of it. Skee-Ball was always something you did at the Jersey shore or in an amusement park — more of a tourist venue. We were getting ready to take all these Skee-Balls out when we realized that they make money, and they're very steady, as opposed to a videogame, which you buy, and the sales curve starts out high and then trickles down. Skee-Balls were just a nice steady investment. Not only that, but women liked them. It was something they could understand. It was a skill game. Parents were intimidated by the technology in the seventies. This was something they could do with smaller children. And an operator can buy a Skee-Ball and it remains popular for ten years. They buy a video machine, and in six months it's not popular anymore. Teenagers are harder to impress. The real growth area is in the little kid stuff."

With the realization that preschoolers were more profitable than adolescents, the toddling of video arcades began. In came the Skee-Balls. In came the crane machines, driving coin-op entertainment out of the dazed-and-confused teenage bunker onto the putting green of romper room profitability. Crane games, grasping small plush merchandise in steel hooks, allowed Time Out to claw its way back into mainstream relevance. "What really drove the late-eighties arcade success," says McAuliffe, "was four-to-six-inch-high plush animals. People just loved it. In 1987, we had seventy stores. Between then

and 1990, we had one [crane game] in damn near every store, and so did the rest of the industry, and they started to appear in supermarkets and other places. One of the things that kept it going was that you had this box, and the box stayed the same, but the merchandise changed all the time. You could do seasonal things with it to boost sales. So the people who got tired of little alligators, they could get hearts on Valentine's Day and rabbits on Easter and little flags on the Fourth of July."

Not only could you stuff this plush seasonal merchandise into claw machines, but it also fueled the other pillar of kiddie coin-op: redemption games. McAuliffe describes redemption games with a mixture of reverence and gosh-golly enthusiasm, brightening at the mere mention of them: "Redemptions are the ones that tickets come out of. It's the little kiddie games. That's the biggest part of our arcade. The whole industry has moved more towards redemption as a way to grow their business."

He invokes this term over and over. Redemption. Redemption. It's like he's trying to make good for all those years of playing REO Speedwagon over the Time Out sound system for legions of hormonal teenage boys. As if somehow, if only he could send enough tickets reeling out of Skee-Ball machines, arcades could return to the entrepreneurial Eden of Tico Bonomo. Install redemption games, and small plush merchandise shall set ye free.

Awash in pink bunnies and nylon froggy puppets, the arcade quickly lost its cachet for dissipated adolescents. The Skee-Ball machine was no place for any self-respecting teenager to strike a pose — it's kind of hard to be dangerous and cool when your five-year-old sister is lobbing Nerf balls twenty steps away. And after the high school heavy-metal crowd dispersed, arcades were safe for oncoming swarms of kindergartners screaming for the chance to win action figures and bouncy balls.

But what about the arcade from high school? What about nonsanitized places like Playland? McAuliffe turns grave. There's no turning back, he explains gently, pointing me forward to the shining future of kiddie coin-op. "The typical ar-

cade that's in your mind-set will probably cease to exist in the next five years, because the ones that are successful now are what the industry classifies as family entertainment centers. They're incorporating pizza birthday parties. They may have bumper cars. They may have miniature golf. The traditional arcade needs to be married with these other elements, or it just doesn't make sense anymore." Video killed the radio star, the old song goes. Well, Skee-Ball killed the video arcade.

But surely the cavellike game room of high school remembrance has survived the onslaught of claw machines and Skee-Ball.

No. At Memorial City, my dilapidated hometown mall, the teenage stoners in Poison T-shirts and Mexican urban cowboys in acid-washed jeans have given way to a herd of baby boomers en famille lined up outside the multiplex. The video arcade of yesteryear has vanished, long since replaced by a 46,000-square-foot family entertainment center called Exhilarama, conveniently located next to the food court.

Exhilarama is remarkable for its complete lack of corners. It is one cavernous, all-encompassing formal garden of centrifugal rides, carousels, crawl cages, choo-choo trains, bumper cars, and virtual reality motion simulators. The videogames are arranged at precise four-foot intervals in a circle, their raster monitors completely washed out by Exhilarama's flood of fluorescent light. The whole place smells like bubble gum, a scent no doubt concocted and piped in especially to mollify the miniskirted former-mall-rat moms lingering around the Jackpot redemption console and fussing with their nails, oblivious to their howling preschool kids; or the blond-ponytail-sensible-shoes moms lined up next to Exhilarama's bank of seven Skee-Ball machines. Watching a four-year-old girl in pink overalls take aim at the *Striker* mini-bowling alley — she's intent, too, quite the little pro — it is clear that Skee-Ball is the perfect diversion for these coddled baby boomer larvae. Swathed in the security of their parents' mutual funds and sport utility vehicles, these kids are growing up with the limited cognitive palette and glacial motor skills of scaled-down bowling simulators, rather

than, say, maneuvering for their lives against a ballistic arcade space monster screaming "Run, Coward! Run! Run!" In a crisis, no way is a Skee-Ball kid going to stack up against an arcade scrapper weaned on *Sinistar*.

And what does the Skee-Ball generation get for these so-called redemption tickets, anyway? Barney dolls from Taiwan, or some ersatz toy from the Exhilarama Prize Center: Frisbees, Slinkys, koosh balls, key chains, plush ducks, plastic back scratchers, and Barbie cameras, all hideously overvalued. Arcade games in their heyday were, at least, a straightforward transaction: you paid your quarter, you got to chase bits of light around for a few minutes, and it got your blood pumping. And then it was over. And if you did it repetitively, it was because the experience was thrilling enough to bear repetition. Redemption games, on the other hand, operate on the premise that this ostensibly pleasurable activity is merely a means to some greater material goal — in other words, Skee-Ball is a proxy for work. In the arcade, fun was something you paid for. In the family entertainment centers' redemption scheme, fun is your job, or rather, an unpaid internship that you take at your own expense so that you can *earn* all those fabulous plush prizes.

Basically, the redemption arcade is a giant, overpriced toy store housed in a high-tech, neo-Victorian circus, complete with putt-putt courses, downsized indoor Ferris wheels, and merry-go-rounds manufactured by Chance Rides, Inc., of Wichita, Kansas, which has supplied over a hundred North American malls with quarter-million-dollar carousels. Indoor theme parks, argue the industry bigwigs, are the future of coin-op entertainment.

In order to create this banana republic of family fun, the small, dingy arcade had to die. Its execution warrant was spelled out in the pages of *Shopping Center World*, in an article detailing the benefits of the "mini-anchor configuration." In this article, industry experts stressed the need to take arcade games out of the corners and back rooms, arguing that "out-of-the-way locations for games and other amusements often become prime teenager hangouts, and discourage visits from

families — a prime customer target group. . . . People are looking for controlled environments where they can feel safe. The safer they feel, the longer they will stay."<sup>\*</sup>

In the brave new world of family entertainment centers, videogames remain, but they have been hijacked from the shadow and skank of the arcade, which was everything Exhilarama is not. Arcades demanded alertness. They were dark. There was a whiff of challenge and danger and sweat in the air. You could be pissed off in an arcade — dissatisfaction was an acceptable frame of mind.

At Exhilarama, squeaky-clean fun is strictly enforced. Despite its funhouse references to the penny arcades and nickelodeons of a hundred years ago, this place does not cater to the type of people that dropped their change into phonograph machines and kinetoscopes. The patrons of family amusement centers are not latter-day machinists and shop girls. They are, according to a 1991 study by the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, affluent professionals with college degrees, Visa cards, and kids. Hence, the family entertainment center is stridently wholesome. The family entertainment center is relentlessly bright. The family entertainment center is under panoptic surveillance.

Whereas the arcade proprietor of ten years ago kept an eye on the place but generally left well enough alone, the family entertainment center employs a crack security force equipped with stylish *Mission Impossible* ear mikes. Private security guards, in constant contact with local police and mall sentries, patrol the amusement ground, closing in on any rogue activity detected by crowd spotters and video cameras. The management could easily be more discreet. But this would be counterproductive, since this flamboyant attention to safety is a major selling point. All those video cameras and the phalanx of security guards aren't necessary to enforce safety. They're there to enforce the perception of safety. It's the same reason armed

<sup>\*</sup> Jane Adler, "Amusement Tenants Come Out to Play," *Shopping Center World*, August 1994, 51-55.

guards stand outside banks in countries under military regimes — to ensure all passersby that the situation is firmly and irrevocably under control.

High above the fray at Exhilarama, middle-aged supervisors eye customers suspiciously from their sky box observation deck. Anyone obviously not Having Fun is suspect. On the wall, a giant slogan in yellow all-capital letters reads: MORE THAN JUST CAKE AND COFFEE IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM. HAVE AN OFFICE PARTY HERE. Jenny Holzer-type slogans are painted across the soaring teal and purple walls of the entire facility, from the bumper car arena to the Snack Zone. Amid the sensory overload, these mottoes barely register. They're almost subliminal. But they say things that are so insidious, you just have to laugh:

"HOW'S THE WEATHER? WHO CARES."

"THIS LITTLE PIGGY WENT EXHILARAMA."

"IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE. STAY HERE."

Stay here. Stay here until you run out of money. Stay here until your children become teenagers and start causing trouble. Then go home, go to work, and come back for your office party. This is the kind of all-enclosing entertainment cocoon where coin-op videogames now live. They are no longer part of a drop-in, five-minute, human-scale environment. They are part of a theme park deliberately designed to keep people from leaving. They have been taken hostage by ailing fin de siècle malls, which now face competition from catalogs, home shopping, factory outlets, and superstores like Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Garden Depot, Office Depot, Circuit City, Bed Bath & Beyond, Petland, and Barnes & Noble. From 1980 to 1993, America's mall time halved, while its entertainment budget (for things like consumer electronics, restaurants, and theme parks, preferably combined) doubled. And seeing the carpet slide underfoot, malls have desperately tried to reinvent themselves by digging arcades out of the shadows and bloating them with high-tech cinema, amusement park rides, and virtual reality. Whereas a typical Time Out was two thousand square feet and had forty arcade games, the supermall theme park is 50,000 square feet



and has 150 arcade games, plus a miniature golf course. At the end of the day, the family entertainment center is just another kind of superstore grafted onto a shopping mall, throwing the video arcade into the same economic ditch as the independent bookseller (anabolic retail makes strange bedfellows).

Now that gigantic Fisher-Price toygrounds have subsumed the old arcades, the sharp-edged camaraderie of Playland has lost its physical catch basin. But it hasn't evaporated. It has simply slipped out of the face-to-face world and into pockets of cyberspace, suffusing online game dens with the same anonymous, white-knuckled competition once found in the old arcades. It's the other side of the looking glass. The physical arcade was also a kind of virtual social space. People assembled and spoke to each other, but it was the same kind of glancing interaction that takes place in train stations and airports, where everyone is en route. In the arcades, everyone was en route from the physical world to cyberspace. Every videogame cabinet was a gate from one world to the other; the interface, a system of buttons and joysticks and coin slots instead of latches and handles and locks. And the arcade was a kind of borderland where you made all those transitions — from spectator to player, from a person standing around the cabinet to a character on the screen, from the ricochet of signals in your brain to discrete physical responses with fingers and wrists, from level to level, from game in progress to game over and back (spending five bucks in the process of jumping back and forth twenty times). The arcade was where you jumped from the holding pen of physical teenagers into a disembodied game world.

Dialing into networked *Doom* rooms and online game sites, you're going the other way — navigating virtual space to get back through to real people. You're playing videogames from the inside out against people whose real names and circumstances you may never know. In this sense, online game space is even hazier and more dubious than the old arcades. You may not be able to smell your opponents. But you know their login names. You know when they're online. And you know they're lurking around the next *Heaven* corridor waiting to blow you to a

bloody pulp. Somewhere on the other side of the virtual arcade is a real person who, in a friendly, schoolyard way, has it in for you.

This — and not the family entertainment center — is the true heir of the videogame arcade, the pinball parlor, the kinetoscope hall, and the phonograph saloon. A place like Exhilarama reeks of social mandate. Its technological centerpiece, the Skee-Ball, has been around for three generations. A networked *Doom* deathmatch, on the other hand, pushes the envelope of telecommunications, and Internet game servers spark all kinds of anxiety, because, you know, all sorts of unsavory people may be lurking online. And when any kid with a Sony Playstation can crash in with an X-Band modem — when it's not just white middle-upper-class suburban teens with \$2,000 computers — then things will *really* get interesting. Because if you suck at twenty-first-century pinball, it doesn't matter what kind of machine gets you to the virtual arcade.

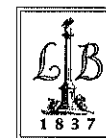
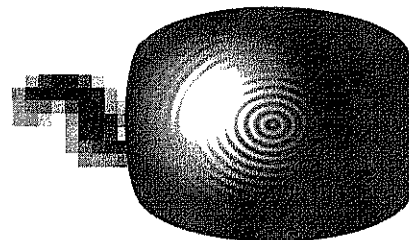


Also by J. C. Herz  
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# Joystick Nation

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How Videogames Ate Our Quarters,  
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