

## Many still enjoy blast of the past

**Amid changes and decline, a few game arcades retain allure - for young and old**



(Globe Staff / Bill Greene)

P.J. Roy of Marblehead studies the prize possibilities at the Salem Willows arcade.

By Taryn Plumb

Globe Correspondent / July 24, 2008

The quarter plinks in. Nine wooden balls rumble down the narrow slot, clunking one after another. A thin redhead in flannel gazes over the scuffed Skee-Ball lane, fluttering his fingers.

Then, ball gripped in his palm, he crouches, swings, pitches. The ball curves, bounces off a backboard, disappears. Twenty points.

Another wind-up, another pitch. This time, 30.

Seven more throws - and 220 total points - later, he plugs in a second nickel-plated George Washington. Another set of nine groans down.

"It's compulsive," says the Salem 21-year-old, Tim Rodgers, with a shrug. Crouching for another wind-up, he says of the game, "It's been ingrained in me since I was a kid. . . . It's nostalgia."

Once, this was a place where pinballs never stopped ping-pong. Where Pac-Man gorged and never got his fill; where aliens and ogres and enemy soldiers were repeatedly blasted into oblivion.

Today, digital bad guys with guns and testosterone-fueled drag racers beckon across empty, soda-splashed carpets. Donkey Kong stands idle with his barrels. Plastic rifles hunker in holsters, unfired.

Arcades, like drive-ins, roller rinks, and video stores, have become a fading symbol of Americana.

Yet, still, here in these booming, neon-drenched savannahs, a small, nimble-fingered and prize-seeking breed endures.

Today's avengers and conquerors are mostly teenagers, mostly male. Nostalgia draws the rest - moms and dads and grandparents who fondly recall the hours they spent squinting over Centipede and Space Invaders.

Step out of the sun into the arcade at Salem Willows, for starters, and you'll see Linda Heider amid the cacophony, a ream of pale yellow tickets nestled in her arms like a Miss America bouquet.

The Salem mother of four nods as she watches her son, Luke, engaged in a digital game of jump rope. The 10-year-old, with dark hair and big eyes, hops; leaps; sprints his feet. His goal is to jump "over" lines of orange and red rotating on an oval contraption.

And he's learned well, this one: The Jumpin' Jackpot spews out a continuous stream of tickets.

"Timing, it has to be timing," his mother, who grew up on Pac-Man, Space Invaders, (and at home, Atari), says of arcade skills. And the thrill? Besides accumulating tickets to cash in for prizes, it's challenging yourself, "trying to beat your last score."

Against a far wall, 9-year-old Kevin Holt feeds a batch of tickets into a voracious purple machine. A digital counter marks his progress: 67, 111, 124.

How did he rack up so many? Well, obviously: "I put in more than one coin."

As has freckled, blond Samantha Fazio - and Hammerhead gobbled most of them. (Imagine the old mole-bopping game, except with grinning sharks.)

"You get to whack things," says the blond pony-tailed 9-year-old from Melrose.

"Better here than at home," says her mother, Diane Fazio.

You'll get that same answer from those still operating the coin-and-token industry. They'll talk about the boom time in the late 1970s and early 1980s: Back then, there were 10,000 arcades across the country, according to Michael Rudowicz, president of the American Amusement Machine Association in Chicago.

Reigning pinball champion Bowen Kerins recalls the exciting and mysterious procession of games in those days: "You never knew when there might be a new machine. There was always this level of anticipation."

But then, doom: In the mid 1980s, Nintendo emerged, heralded by the princess-saving plumbers Super Mario Brothers. Around then, convenience stores - 80,000 of which once had at least a pair of video games - abandoned the consoles to make room for bigger moneymakers such as Pepsi displays, Rudowicz explained. High real estate prices drove many more out of malls.

Since, the number of arcades has fallen to about 3,000.

Around here, many survivors cluster along the seashore - there's Joey's Playland in Salisbury, Lucky 7

Arcade in Gloucester, and several more along the strip at Hampton Beach.

Still, manufacturers continue to produce between two and three new games a year, which devour quarters in movie theaters and family entertainment centers. Many vintage games, meanwhile, have migrated to the homes of collectors, says Kerins. Many more former arcade rats gawk at classic gaming conventions. In the end, home games can never fully replace the old boxy favorites, Kerins said. Bill Irwin is all for that simplicity.

Just peek over the 46-year-old's shoulder as he taps away at Ms. Pac-Man at Salem Willows. The hungry yellow circle with her red bow gobbles beads as a horde of skating ghosts gives chase.

Lined nearby in a tight procession: Space Invaders, Revenge From Mars, Star Wars pinball exploding to the famous John Williams score. "I can't play at home with the boys anymore - there's all the buttons," the Pelham, N.H., resident admits once his quarter runs out. "This is just a joystick. You can't get any easier than that."

Addictive, too. "Once you get into a rhythm, you want to keep going," notes hurler Amy Davin of Salem. The 21-year-old jiggles quarters in her hand, an ivory canvas bag - where her coins accumulate during the rest of the week - on the hardwood by her feet.

Across the floor, the Heiders were facing tough decisions. Having accumulated 1,246 points, they spent a half-hour gazing into fingerprint-splotched glass cases. Finally, they settled: three swords, four rubber poppers, a flute, a bouncy ball, a ring pop, and a pocketful of army figurines.

A resolute Synneva Elliot, 3, on the other hand, plucked her prize in less than a minute. Dressed in a bubblegum-pink bathing suit, she came away with a purple plastic flute. Immediately, the tooting started.

"She's going to drive her mother nuts with it," said her grandmother, Jodi Holmes, with a laugh.

With that, they strolled out into the sunlight, trailing fading squeaks and squawks.