

According to legend, Taito's 1978 coin-op classic Space Invaders was so popular in Japan that it actually caused nationwide coin shortages. Beginning in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, arcade games exploded in popularity as a major form of entertainment among teens and young adults across America. And while no one specific game was responsible for causing quarter shortages here in the US, I can tell you arcades in general were draining of millions of teenagers' piggy banks across the country, mine included.

For several years, arcade games began appearing a couple at a time at various shops and stores around town. While many kid-friendly businesses such as bowling alleys and skating rinks added small arcades to increase their draw, adult-oriented businesses like dry-cleaners and supermarkets added machines as well in order to supplement their income (and give children something to do, I suspect). The laundromat near my house still has a faded Ms. Pac-Man cabinet standing in the front window of their shop to this day.

Before long, arcades began springing up across town. Although a few of them were well lit (and clean), the majority of the arcades I remember hanging out in were quite the opposite. Most had dim lighting, which made the glowing arcade machines seem almost magical. Floors were often sticky, due to spilled sodas, old chewing gum, or God knows what. One of the arcades I frequented had a cigarette machine in the back that took tokens. The tingling in my stomach I remember from hanging out at the arcade was a mixture of excitement and fear. Achieving a high score and entering your initials for the entire world to see was a great feeling! Having older kids bum your last quarter wasn't.

For years, arcades experimented with different business models in attempts to stay afloat. Some arcades added go-kart tracks and mini-putt courses. Others, like Chuck E. Cheese (and Showbiz Pizza before them), lowered the age demographic they were shooting for and added food (for the kids) and beer (for the parents) to draw in customers. Some of these attempts worked; others didn't. One business model that worked (loathed by parents everywhere) was the addition of redemption games, those ticket-dispensing games that kids love and adults see as a waste of time and money. Often seen as a necessary evil within the business, many coin-op vendors claim that the only profit they see is through redemption machines.

There were many factors involved in the decline of arcades, one of which was the rise in popularity (and increase in processing power) of home videogame consoles. As systems such as the Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis gained popularity, gamers' tastes began to change, moving away from shorter, arcade-style games and moving more toward longer, more involved gaming experiences that home systems and computers were more designed to deliver. All of this combined with a general social climate change left parents feeling unsafe about leaving their children alone at arcades – and without kids pumping quarters into machines, arcades began closing down.

So, what's a retro-loving guy from the 80s to do? Fortunately for us there are many ways to play those games once again. Here are four ways to relive those alien-blasting, pellet-chomping days from your youth.

The first is through arcade compilation games. Available for both videogame consoles and home computers, several classic game makers have released classic game bundles for many modern systems. Just a few of the compilations recently released include Capcom Classics Collection, Midway Arcade Treasures 1-3, Namco Museum, Sega Classics Collection, Atari Anthology, Taito Legends, Tecmo Classic Arcade, and more. Almost all of these collections are available for all the major last-generation consoles (Xbox/Playstation 2/GameCube), and can often be found for \$10 or less.

A second way to play some of those classic arcade games in the comfort of your own living room is through those Plug-and-Play games. Units run anywhere from \$10-\$20, and are dedicated to a single set of games. If you don't own a home videogame console, these are an inexpensive alternative – simply plug the joystick into the front of your television, and you're ready to play! A recent stroll through our local Wal-Mart's toy aisle turned up Plug-and-Play versions of Space Invaders, Tetris, Mortal Kombat, Ms. Pac-Man (which also includes Galaga and Pole Position), and others.

A third (and free) way to play classic arcade games on your home computer is by downloading MAME, the Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator. MAME is a free program written for computers that emulates the hardware inside arcade machines. The more powerful your machine is the more games you'll be able to play, but even the slowest of modern machines should be able to play all the classics. To play your favorite games you'll need to track down the corresponding ROM files (zip files that contain the actual arcade games' code – a few minutes with Google should turn up what you're looking for), but once you get everything up and running you'll be able to play your favorite games any time you want. Some enterprising individuals have even incorporated MAME-based PCs into real arcade cabinets!

The last (and far from free) way to play those classic arcade games is to buy them. Yes, I'm talking about the real deal here, those 6' tall wooden monsters you remember from your childhood. For the ultimate in authenticity, there's nothing quite like owning the real thing. One caveat to fellow videogame fans; buying arcade machines is not only somewhat expensive, it's also quite addictive. That explains the twenty-two machines I currently own.

Although the classic era of arcades is behind us, the memories (and games) continue to live on.

-- Rob O'Hara