

You Wouldn't Believe it Unless You Saw It... STRANGE LOCATIONS FOR ARCADE GAMES

By Kyle Snyder

Back in the early 80s, when the arcade gaming fad was at its zenith, you could find machines at nearly every business that welcomed traffic from the local community. You would be hard pressed to walk into a grocery store, restaurant, convenience store, movie theater, or hotel lobby and NOT see at least one quarter munching coin-op, calling to the video game player in all of us.

In fact, it was often not that big of a deal if you couldn't get to an actual arcade for weeks at a time, because all you'd have to do is ride down to the local strip mall, and select from the games placed in the various locations there. For instance, at a small shopping center near where I grew up, the pharmacy had Phoenix and Ms. Pac-Man, the restaurant had a cocktail table of Galaxian, the grocery store had Defender and Centipede, and the laundromat had such video luminaries

as Frogger, Asteroids, Donkey Kong, Breakout, and the original Pac-Man. Basically, that strip mall had an arcade and it didn't even know it!

This phenomena stemmed from arcade games becoming "cash cows". If you operated video games, you could put ANY game in nearly any location, and it would rake in tons of coin. (With the possible exception of a marine animal hatchery, but then again, I did say NEARLY any location!) This was clearly demonstrated by games found in slightly "illogical" locations. Not your standard Pizza Huts, Seven Elevens, or Howard Johnson's motel lobbies, but places you would never expect to see coin-ops, yet were pleasantly surprised when you did.

Here's some of my favorite recollections, spied in and around Southern Maryland, and the suburbs of Washington DC in the early 80s.

A Mobil gas station placed uprights of Pac-Man and Turbo in their lobby in the summer of '82. It was very crowded to begin with, but imagine two 300 pound video game cabinets squashing out the available space to sell Twin-kies and WD-40!

A year later, a self-service car wash had Asteroids and Space Duel at the end of the row of snack machines. This was in an enclosed portion where the public restrooms were located. So after scrubbing your car, you could hit the lavatory, get a bag of pretzels, and destroy some vector based space debris. AWESOME!!!

A Maryland state park with playgrounds, hiking trails, paddleboats, and lots more, also had a small "general store" where you could get camping supplies. The store owners also offered hikers and outdoorsy folks the chance to play uprights of Defender, Pac-Man, and Deluxe Space Invaders. This was in 1985. Even by 1985, these three games were taking on a



"classic" air, especially in respect to the black & white graphics of Invaders. Funnier still, was that this general store was built maybe a quarter mile back in the woods on a hiking trail. I can only imagine how bizarre it must have seemed when the games were installed. Imagine it: a beautiful forest landscape, birds singing, sunshine breaking through the tree branches, and here comes some big hefty dude, pulling a hand truck with a Defender machine tilted back on it. Crazy.

A deli/carry out on the ground floor of an office building had cocktails of Pac-Man and Galaga, and uprights of Ms. Pac-Man, Baby Pac-Man, and Stargate. Odder still was not their obvious love of all things "Pac," but the fact they also had an Asteroids Deluxe placed at the end of the hallway leading to the deli. It was just sitting against the wall between two office doors! At first I thought maybe it was in the process of being moved in or out of the deli, but as it was in that spot for several months, and plugged in the whole time, I tend to doubt it.

The Capitol Children's Museum had a Scramble upright in it's cafeteria back in 1981. No doubt this may have been the most interesting "exhibit" of it's day to many children.

A newly built Florida rest stop had Tempest, Defender, Donkey Kong, and Pac-Man lining the back wall of their cafeteria. Spaced rather far apart from one another (maybe 15 feet or so between each game), they were also wisely placed as far away as possible from the food line.

In 1987, I visited a trailer park laundromat that had several machines, among them Gyruss, Carnival, Frogger, Time Pilot, and Pac-Man. Ahhhh... you haven't lived 'til you've reached the 2001 stage on Time Pilot, with the

fragrant aromas of Tide and Bounce wafting into your nasal passages.

Sometimes coin-ops even turned up in upscale department stores. Back in '82, a store from the then-profitable, but now defunct Woodward & Lothrop chain featured one machine at each "corner" of the square where all four escalators came together on the second floor. So, as soon as you stepped off an escalator, you could play either Donkey Kong, Galaga, Ms. Pac-Man, or a cabaret model Pac-Man, depending on which escalator you used. Sure made shopping for school clothes more bearable.

Even Sears got in the act. In 1983, a back room (possibly donated space from the special orders & returns desk) appeared in our Sears with a truly great mini-arcade. About 20 upright machines, and a few cocktail tables at the entrance. Very cramped and dark, and the machines were LOUUUUUD!!! In

addition to such expected titles like Ms. Pac-Man and Dig Dug, this was also the first place I encountered and played Robotron:2084. Unfortunately, this magical game room lasted only about six months.

And possibly following that store's lead, in '84, a different Sears store added a Centipede and a Bump N Jump in its waiting room for the enjoyment of those customers that just bought a shiny new Kenmore appliance. Yet unlike the short lived game room, both of these machines remained in place until the mid 90s!

At a dentist's office in Maryland, there was a cocktail Burgertime set on "free play" in the waiting room. Seemed a little ironic. Burgers are usually lumped in with "junk food", and we all know what junk food does to your teeth... Heyyyyyy... maybe the dentist knew what he was subliminally implying ALL ALONG! Anyway, this classic was still there as of 1996, but I went back there last year, and the entire medical building (all 5 stories) was abandoned. Feh!

And an honorary mention, I remember seeing a photo in an 80s National Geographic showing two elderly men seated on opposite sides of a cocktail Ms. Pac-Man. Apparently, this scene was in an old folks home, which had added a few video games and found the grandpas and grandmas liked the competition the games sparked! Goodbye boring checkers cuz Gramps is up to the banana board!

Yes, gone are those days when it was difficult to NOT run into a coin-op game somewhere. These days, it's not a "sure thing" that even long time hold-outs such as pizza parlors or shopping malls will have games. But as long as we remember, we can keep those days alive.