

Retro Gaming – A Marathon



Every evening around nine in Chicago, its streets empty from the daytime rush, eager pairs, their eyes lit with anticipation—and a hint of nervousness—are spotted venturing into dim establishments that seem to hum with an electric energy associated with a bygone era. These are hardly typical late-night haunts but rather places to go for pixelated nostalgia—vintage arcades, that have become the unexpected backdrop for a new wave of first dates.

There’s an undeniable allure to the tactile, immediate gratification of arcade gaming, given that AI, virtual reality, and smartphone apps continue to insert itself into basic human connection. Gaming is a sensory experience that even the most advanced VR headset cannot replicate – the weight of a joystick in your palm, the satisfying click of real buttons, and the noise of 8-bit soundtracks blending into a weirdly familiar version of nostalgia.

Take, for instance, [Ground Kontrol Classic Arcade](#) in Portland, Oregon. This two-story temple to retro gaming has become a beacon for those looking for an alternative to the tired old dinner-’n-drinks routine. On a recent Friday evening, Sarah and Alex, both 28, were navigating their first date over a heated game of Street Fighter II. “I suggested the arcade because I wanted something different,” Sarah tells me on Zoom a few days later when we meet, “plus, it was a great way to see how competitive he gets without resorting to awkward conversation starters and, for a part of the conversation, his eyes never left the screen as he executed a perfect Shoryuken.”

Indeed, the arcade setting provides a natural icebreaker, allowing couples to ease into conversation through shared experiences rather than forced small talk. It was at [Barcade](#) in Brooklyn, New York, that Javier and Emma, both in their early thirties, bonded over their mutual ineptitude at Galaga. “I’m terrible at this,” Emma laughs when we Zoom, her shoulder brushing against Javier’s next to her as he reaches for the controls. “But it’s so much more fun than trying to impress each other with our resumes over cocktails.” They were a match in heaven—and an arcade—but heaven no less, fostering a sense of connection and shared experiences.

The appeal of retro gaming havens extends beyond nostalgia, however. For countless millennials and Gen Z daters, who may have missed the heyday of OG arcade culture, these spaces offer a glimpse into a world they’ve only experienced through pop culture references or their parents’ reminiscences. Top them, it’s an opportunity to enter a living museum of sorts, where the exhibits are interactive, fueled by quarters, and offer an authentic experience that’s hard to find elsewhere.

At the [Heart of Gaming](#) in London’s Croydon borough, owner Mark Starkey has noticed an uptick in couples choosing his arcade for first dates. “There’s something disarming about these old games,” he muses when we FaceTime, gesturing to a row of cabinets behind him housing classics like Donkey Kong and Asteroids. “They’re not trying to be anything other than what they are – simple, fun, and a bit silly. It allows people to let their guard down in a way that’s harder to do in more traditional date settings.”

This sentiment is echoed by Rob Kimmons, a counselor based in Chicago. “The arcade environment taps into our innate desire for play,” he explains. “When we engage in playful activities, we release oxytocin and dopamine – the same neurochemicals associated with bonding and attraction. It’s a perfect cocktail for making connection, especially in the early stages of dating.”

But it’s not just the games themselves that create this special atmosphere. Many modern arcade bars have carefully curated their spaces to evoke a sense of timelessness. At [Coin-Op Game Room](#) in San Diego, the exposed brick walls are adorned with vintage game posters and neon signs, while the bar serves up craft cocktails with names like “Pac-Man Punch” and “Donkey Kong’s Barrel of Rum.” It’s a seamless blend of nostalgia and contemporary that appeals to a wide range of daters, and the space feels familiar yet exciting. Something that would spark conversation and a little friendly competition. On any night, you find couples huddled around the four-player Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles cabinet, their laughter interrupted by the game’s iconic theme song.

At [Emporium Arcade Bar](#) in Chicago’s super trendy Fulton Market, I meet with Tom and Rachel, both 29, engaged in an intense air hockey match. “I’m usually pretty reserved on first dates,” Tom admits during a brief break in the action. “But something about this environment, I don’t know, it brings out a more playful side—I guess—plus, it’s a great way to gauge compatibility.” He smiles. “If she can’t handle losing gracefully, that’s kinda good to know upfront.” Rachel, for her part, seems equally enthused by this rather unconventional date choice. “I’ve been on so many coffee dates where the conversation feels forced,” she says. “Here, even if there’s a little lull in talking, we’re still engaged in something. We’re still in it. Together. It takes the pressure off in a way that I really appreciate.”

Many couples I spoke with across various arcade venues echo this sentiment. The shared activity provides a buffer against awkward silences while offering natural opportunities for physical proximity and touch—a nudge as you squeeze past each other to reach for a game or the brush of hands as you both reach for the same joystick.

This shift towards activity-based dating is a more significant trend of millennials and Gen Z seeking out experiences over material possessions. In an age where digital interactions often feel hollow there’s a craving for authentic experiences that can’t be replicated online.

“There’s something deeply satisfying about the physicality of arcade games,” says Rachel later over cocktails at the bar. She admits to being a regular at the Emporium Arcade in Wicker Park just up the road, and this is not her first time on a gaming first date. “You’re not just tapping a screen or moving a mouse. You’re using your whole body, leaning into the machine, feeling the game. It’s a full sensory experience that you can share with someone else.”

This shared sensory experience creates a powerful bond, even in a single evening. A short while later, I watch Tom and Rachel tackle some perhaps unintentionally assertive [Foosbal](#), their initial awkwardness now having melted away as they worked mock-oppositionally to defeat the other, their bodies unconsciously mirroring each other’s movements. “I was nervous about suggesting an arcade for our first date,” Tom confessed later. “I thought it might seem childish or weird. But it’s been amazing. And turns out she’s been so cool and we’ve learned so much about each other just by playing these games together.”

Indeed, the game choice reveals a lot about a person’s character. Are they a strategic thinker who excels at puzzle games like Tetris? A quick-reflexed sharpshooter dominating at Time Crisis? Or perhaps they’re drawn to the collaborative nature of beat-em-ups like X-Men or The Simpsons. Each preference offers a window into their personality, providing talking points far beyond the usual first-date small talk.

So, the next time you plan a first date, consider skipping the trendy cocktail bar or overpriced restaurant. Instead, seek out a local arcade, where romance may well bloom among the flickering screens and joysticks. After all, nothing says “I like you” quite like sacrificing your last quarter so your date may have one more shot at beating you at Donkey Kong.

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 September 10, 2024

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WORDS

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South African-born Henrik J. Klijn has been writing since childhood when his mother handed him a stack of notebooks to fill with his stories. Years later, she admitted it had more to do with keeping him quiet “because everyone needs a break, now and then.” After completing studies in musicology at Johannesburg’s University of the Witwatersrand and Stellenbosch University, Henrik pivoted back to creative and writing while working in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany.

As Creative Director (Copy), Henrik delivered concept, strategy, and creative for luxury and lifestyle brands as diverse as Levi’s, DKNY, and Emporio Armani while also working on high-profile campaigns for real estate, petroleum, food and beverage, as well as pharma brands. As a writer, he has contributed to various outlets, including Sourced Fact Media, Cosmopolitan, Men’s Health, The Big Issue, and considerable Afrikaans—his home language—publications.

Currently, Henrik is pursuing a Master’s in Journalism and Sociocultural Anthropology at Harvard. He is authoring a pre-doctoral dissertation on the |xam people of South Africa and the role of storytelling—told in resignation at their imminent extinction at the end of the 19th Century—as oral history and collective memory.

In his spare time, he attends music events, ranging from classical to jazz and electronica. Henrik is an avid cook and a voracious reader who tries never to complain about Chicago winters, a city he has called home since 2017.

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