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PlayStation 3 and the Nintendo Wii — vintage arcade games are where

sgow (Contact)

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I tried the Nintendo Wii. The wand controller seemed like a good idea, but it felt like something it would take weeks to really figure out how to use. I attempted to steer a truck with it, and I ended up in the water every time.

I thought briefly about a PlayStation 3, but I don't have thousands of dollars to spend to buy it on eBay from a guy who camped out for a week to get one. Plus, to be honest, I was never a PlayStation guy.

I went home and started another round of "The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time" on my Nintendo 64, but my desire for a new video-gaming experience was far from satiated.

So I jumped in my car and headed for Oskar Blues in Lyons, and there I found a time machine that took me right back to playing Galaga and Elevator Action in Aladdin's Castle at Boulder's old Crossroads Mall in the mid-'80s.

Lyons Classic Video, located in Oskar Blues' basement, was opened six months ago by Kevin Carroll, who owns the nearby Lyons Classic Pinball.

A black-lit, subterranean room filled with more than 25 classic games, it's a blast from the past for anyone who came of age in the '80s. There's Frogger and Q*Bert and Super Mario Brothers; there's a tiny black and white Asteroids machine from the '70s; there's even a Williams Multi-cade machine with eight games in one cabinet, including Joust, Moon Patrol and Defender.

And it only costs a quarter to play each one.

Sure, you can play most of these games on "Arcade Classics" compilations for Xbox or PlayStation, but they just can't compare to the feeling of standing in the midst of the actual games with a pocketful of quarters, trying to figure out what you want to play next.

"There's something about standing at the original game with the original controls," Carroll says. "Missile Command has a big track ball. And if you don't have that and you have some little left and right key — a lot of people tell me, 'Oh yeah, I've played that pinball, on the computer.' And I go, 'You didn't play the pinball.'"

"There's something about holding the pinball and shaking it, pushing the buttons, where you're involved, rather than, 'Oh, this button shakes the machine.' Simulating it doesn't cut it. ... It's funny to see a guy come in who hasn't played his Robotron or whatever in forever, and watch the way their hands fall on the console. They're used to that."

I forgot about the controls for some of these games. Robotron, for instance, uses two joysticks. Tron has a joystick with a trigger on it, plus a little wheel that lets you aim various guns. Tempest has a spinning knob, Paperboy a set of actual handlebars.

And Carroll's right — there is something satisfying about slamming a real, heavy joystick around when you're trying to box in those evil Tron cars.

There's also something about looking at the intricate cabinet and marquee art, hearing the booming and chirping of empty games vying for your attention, and listening to the sounds of frustration from your fellow gamers the next aisle over.

Plus, at Oskar's, you can drink beer while you play, something I never got to do at Aladdin's Castle. The one-handers — Q*bert, Frogger, Ms. Pac-Man — are best for this, but there are plenty of cup-holders built into the walls.

The new Nintendo and PlayStation systems may be getting all the ink right now, but retro gaming has never been hotter.

Actual arcades like Lyons Classic Video are rare, but a variety of plug-and-play joysticks let you play classic arcade games on your TV set, and a computer program called MAME — available for free on the Internet — is an emulator that plays vintage games exactly as they appeared in the arcade. The latest craze among MAMERs is building your own cabinet (or retrofitting an actual cabinet from the 80s) to house a PC screen and joystick for the real arcade experience.

In Lyons, though, you can get that same experience — complete with black-light posters and Zeppelin songs on the stereo — for a handful of quarters.

"It's amazing. I haven't played these games since I was 15 years old," says Adam Johnson, 30, of Boulder, who visited Lyons Classic Video last week. "I came here a couple of weeks ago with my girlfriend and saw Tron through the door in the blacklit room, and thought, 'I want to put on a tight pair of denim pants and get high and play Q*bert all day.'"

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