

The Arcaded Shack

Can things be even more enjoyable when it's all homespun, shoddy and tacky? In the realities of the world today, a resounding "no!" is the answer. The realm of contemporary (popular) culture pushes exactly the opposite narrative. It's universally maintained that all goods must be high-tech, high-definition and high-quality, and that settling for low-def and substandard quality is pointless. However, for the retro gaming enthusiast, the value of interacting with a given (pop)cultural text lies precisely in its shortcomings. This notion becomes particularly palpable when nostalgia takes us back to the Polish amusement arcades of the 1990s.

There are plenty of such stories, and the setting of most is similar. Imagine a holiday trip in the distant 1990s. On the one hand, there are the beaches of Świnoujście, Kołobrzeg, Krynica Morska or Władysławowo and the obligatory fish dinners by the town promenade. On the other, the child's memory of an endless succession of stands and stalls right at the entrances to the beach, filled with sand toy sets, folding aeroplanes, kites and inflatable balls, and calls of the street vendor: "Bambino ice cream, doughnuts, blueberry scones!" And, somewhere there in the stream of colourful shop windows and tables is that one place, a barrack or corrugated steel hut from which come the mechanical sounds of fist strikes, the screech of virtual tires, the sound of frantically pressed buttons and, mixed in with this technological cacophony, the shouting of kids clustered around inconspicuous cabinets that emit the mesmerizing aura of sounds and images. Equally well, we could tell the story of a train journey to visit a distant family, with the inevitable time spent at the railway station in Poznań, Warsaw or Katowice. And so, you would pop in at the station's small parlour where the shapely machines stood, if only for a moment. Other stories may recall family Sundays, where immediately after the morning church service you took a brief detour on the way home where the traditional home-made chicken broth was waiting. It would take you to an establishment of apparently questionable appeal: a train car parked on a housing estate square, with a sign that pretentiously declared: "Games Arcade".

So-called arcade games—coin-operated game and entertainment machines—appeared in Polish restaurants and bars a little earlier, in the 1980s, but it was during the 1990s that they

proliferated the most. They were yet another instance of adaption from a Western source in the course of Poland's (pop)cultural transformation. In the West, the arcade boom began at the turn of the 1980s, when the peculiar aesthetics of such games took shape, with car racing, fighting, space shooters, flight simulators or pinballs as the predominant types. The venues where the games were devoted much time and effort (mainly by young people) were usually found at extensive, multi-storey shopping malls. The rows of arches or covered passages at those locations were to bring ancient arcades to mind.

In the case of our Polish gaming parlours of three decades ago, those "arcaded" structures were out of the question. Since noisy shopping malls were lacking, local animators of the scene were compelled to opt for more or less drastic adjustments. The spacious amusement arcades of the Western world found their equivalents in old-school portacabins, so-called Drzymała's wagons, steel huts, garages, cubbyholes at railway stations or seaside pavilions—all usually referred to as "gameshacks".

As an underage gamer, I had no objection to contemplating games in such a second-rate setting. What's more, the shoddiness of those "arcades" lends them a special aura years later. Much of the sentimental fondness of today's thirty- and forty-somethings is still firmly attached to the paint-peeling "gameshacks", crowded metal containers hastily converted into gaming parlours. We recall the countless hours standing uncomfortably at the machines, waiting for our turn and finally playing what would now be considered a thoroughly primitive game. At the same time, in our minds, it is the actual being in such places together with other adolescent gamers and sharing in the game that made "arcades" out of the Drzymała's wagons, the ancient bygones that we used to experience almost religiously.

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Thirty years ago, people could play games on big arcade machines. In Poland, arcades were often located in sheds, garages, or small buildings. People called them "grajbudy" (gameshacks). You could play car racing games, space shooting games, or fighting games. Often, you had to wait a long time to play. These games might not seem exciting today, but we remember them fondly.

