

Twilight of the seaside amusement arcade

Amusement arcades have been largely overlooked within the broader literature on tourism and leisure pursuits and attractions. Furthermore the contribution of the amusement arcade to the character and experience of British seaside resorts has not been considered. The amusement arcade industry is currently divided into a number of distinctive sectors, of which the family oriented arcades found at Britain's coastal resorts are one. Amusement arcades are generally considered to be a traditional and quintessential part of British seaside resorts. However, the seaside arcades are facing challenging times putting the amusements, and the buildings in which they are housed, increasingly at risk.

Amusement arcades originally developed from travelling fairs, with the first British examples appearing in the early 19th century in the form of games stalls and shows. The first automated machine of any kind is considered to be a stamp vendor patented in 1857 and by the end of the 19th century there was evidence of automated entertainment machines in the UK. During this period many former travelling showman decided to settle in seaside resorts and establish 'sports' arcades or 'gaff shops' and it is in this context that automated machines started to appear in funfairs and on piers along the British coast. These early machines included automated fortune-tellers, shooting ranges, strength-testers and kinematographs. During the early 20th century formal arcades featuring a collection of permanent automated machines such as mutoscopes, automated football, punchballs and mechanical clowns appeared in many resorts. They were usually situated along a resort's promenade, with the first purpose-built amusement arcade generally considered to be Barron's 'Paradium', located on Marine Parade in Great Yarmouth, which was opened in 1902. By the 1930s amusement arcades were firmly established as a core component of the seaside holiday. They now featured a broader range of fully automated machines that included cranes (also known as 'grabbers'); Allwin machines (a wall mounted machine of 'skill' that involves firing metal balls into winning cups); electric shockers; prize shooters; and the first form of automated gambling machine, commonly known as 'one armed bandits'. Of course, the amusement arcades were thoroughly modern attractions that warranted being housed in buildings that reflected this, such as the Wonderland building in Cleethorpes (which was originally built in 1911 but extensively refurbished in a modernist style during the 1930s) and the New Palace amusements in New Brighton which opened in 1939. For visitors to the coast, the amusement

arcades would have offered out of the ordinary experiences through their modern machines and buildings, and in this way the arcades helped to create the atmosphere of excitement, pleasure, escape and the extraordinary at British seaside resorts.

Nevertheless, the popularity of the British seaside resorts could not last forever and as the resorts began to decline during the 1960s many of the grand theatres, concert halls, pavilions and ballrooms closed due to reduced patronage. In many cases these buildings were swiftly transformed into amusement arcades, which was a relatively simple task as the arcades did not require the buildings to be extensively refurbished, nor did they need specialist fixtures and fittings. Among the many examples of seaside architecture that were converted in this way were Brighton West pier's concert hall; the 360 degree cinema at Blackpool Pleasure Beach; Southport pier pavilion; and Colwyn Bay pier theatre. By this point there were numerous automated machines on the market, including gambling machines, cranes, pushers (also called 'penny falls') and various forms of novelty games (such as horseracing, pinball, driving games etc). However, it was during the 1970s and 1980s that British amusement arcades underwent their most rapid expansion, with the introduction of 'video game' machines such as Space Invaders, Asteroids, Pong, and Pac Man. These machines had major appeal to the youth and family markets and the arcades offered many young people the only opportunity to experience this new, exciting technology. The buildings in which these machines were housed also underwent a radical overhaul, with extensive use of fluorescent lighting, music and PA systems, and fibre-glass frontages which created an almost Vegas-esque aesthetic at many British seaside resorts (for a classic early 1970s example see Shaw's Premier Amusements in Bridlington). Thus the colourful, illuminated, and noisy amusement arcades retained their reputation for spectacle and the extraordinary.

However, since the 1990s seaside amusement arcades have been in significant, and some might say, terminal decline. The reasons for this decline are four-fold. Firstly, the traditional seaside arcades have seen increased competition from within the amusement arcade industry, with the rise of the Family Entertainment Centre (FEC). FECs provide not only arcade machines, but also a range of other components such as tenpin bowling, pool halls, bars, restaurants, soft play areas, and rides such as dodgems. From the mid-1990s onwards a number of major national and multi-national companies established FECs in the UK, making significant investments in the machines and other facilities that featured within these Centres.

FECs represented a new form of competition for the traditional family seaside arcade. They were able to offer a secure, safe and clean environment for their customers, and were therefore more appealing to the family market. Furthermore, unlike the seaside arcades, the FECs were more likely to be located in city centres or in large-scale shopping centres (for example one of the most successful FECs, Namco's 'Funscape', is located in London's County Hall) leading to increased footfall on a year-round basis. Secondly, seaside amusement arcades were also facing the problem of a poor public image, and had gained a reputation for anti-social behaviour and low level criminality among young people with little else to do and nowhere else to go. A number of studies within the UK portrayed seaside arcades as dangerous and unsafe, venues for immoral or illegal activities, and encouraging problem gambling behaviour amongst children and adolescents. This negative perception has deterred the family market from visiting seaside arcades. Thirdly, the rise of the home games consoles also had a negative impact on amusement arcades. By the mid-1990s home games consoles were able to compete with the arcade video games in terms of the quality of graphics and game playing, resulting in young people no longer needing to visit amusement arcades to enjoy video gaming.

The final factor affecting seaside arcades has been recent changes in government legislation since the introduction of the 2005 Gambling Act. After the demise of the arcade video games a large proportion of the traditional seaside arcades had invested in reel based gambling (fruit) machines. Since its introduction, the Gambling Act has had negative impacts on the seaside amusements, with arcade owners complaining that the legislation made the arcades less competitive than other gambling establishments such as bingo halls, casinos and betting shops. More recently amusement arcade owners have been contesting another part of the 2005 Gambling Act: Machine Games Duty (MGD). The introduction of MGD in February 2013 implements a 'gross-profits tax' on all gaming-based arcade machines, and with profits already negligible for many arcades, operators claim that the MGD will result in job losses, reduced opening hours, and many seaside arcades going out of business.

The closure of amusement arcades will have a significant impact on the resortscape of many seaside towns. Almost 200 seaside amusement arcades closed their doors for good between 2007 and 2009 and it is estimated that up to half of the remaining 1000 arcades at British resorts are vulnerable. This presents a considerable dilemma in regards to what to do with

these sizeable and often architecturally significant buildings when amusement arcades do close. The value of arcade buildings has yet to be recognised; with currently no amusement arcades being granted listed status. Surprisingly, the UK's first purpose-built arcade is not listed, and in what is seen by many as a cruel twist of fate, the Paradium in Great Yarmouth closed in 2006 to be reopened the following year as 'Yesterday's World' heritage centre, featuring a section on seaside heritage, including old arcade machines! Great examples of the 1930s modernist style are also neglected, with arcades such as Manning's Amusements in Felixstowe (a former Butlins amusement park opened in 1933) and the New Palace in New Brighton yet to be noted for their social, cultural, or architectural interest. Many seaside piers have been granted listed status and some of the most iconic buildings on these structures house amusement arcades, including Brighton's Palace pier winter garden/pavilion (1910); Worthing pier's amusement pavilion (1937); Saltburn pier's entrance building (1925); or the music pavilion (1925) on Eastbourne pier. Furthermore, a recent addition to this list of iconic pier buildings has been the new pavilion on Weston-super-Mare which opened in 2010 and hosts a state-of-the-art amusement arcade, indoor rides and attractions, retail and catering facilities. Moreover, there are a number of coastal towns where the entire character of the resortscape would be fundamentally altered were the arcades to close: the promenades and seafronts of Blackpool, Rhyl, Mablethorpe, Scarborough, Margate, and Morecambe would certainly look a lot less extraordinary without the neon lights and striking facades of their amusement arcades.

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