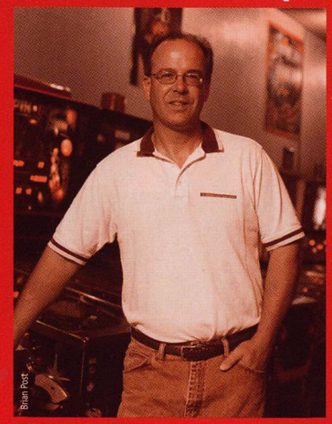
Over 160 gamers turned out for this year's tournament at The American Classic Arcade Museum, and logged 4,043 high scores over the course of the competition on specially selected arcade cabinets. To qualify, they had to log a high score on all 15 titles

SURROUNDED BY THE gutted shells of arcade cabinets and racks crammed with circuit boards and monitors, **Gary Vincent** hurriedly prepares for the weekend. The bespectacled 50-year-old moves quickly through the workshop, deftly stepping over toolboxes and pinball backboards. Taking a moment to gesture to the opened machine behind him, he explains: "They tend to break down a lot. They're old. You can go through them all you want, cap the monitors, put new power supplies in them and cart them out to the floor. Next day, they're out of order. It's just the nature of the beast."

For Vincent, the maintenance and upkeep of the 300 functioning games in the American Classic Arcade Museum is an ongoing concern. Completely open to the public to play, the collection of well-weathered machines has to withstand the annual flood of tourists that arrive in Laconia, New Hampshire, every summer. Year after year, spilled drinks, abusive preteens and the slow grind of time itself wear the machines down. This, says Vincent, is expected. But in a little under 48 hours, gamers from all corners of the United States and beyond will converge in Laconia to compete on these antique electronics in a four-day-long high-score showdown: the International Video Game Tournament. In a contest of precision and reflexes, Vincent says, mechanical failure is unacceptable.

Maintenance considerations are only a part of the logistics underpinning the tournament. Months before the competition begins, the museum selects 15 titles from the hundreds of machines on the floor. "We have to pay attention to everything, really do research into the games we pick," says **Mike Stulir**, a board member of the museum. Games are selected on the basis of their obscurity, challenge and susceptibility to exploits. The board's selections are kept secret up until the day the tournament begins. Vincent explains that this precaution allows for a level playing field for contestants. Even with two more days to go before the event kicks off, competitors have been trying to pry information from the museum's employees. "There's only three of us that know what the games are going to be for the tournament because, just as you saw, people will come in and pump employees for information to see if they can get the tournament list."




Gary Vincent (above) began his 30-year tenure at Funspot as temporary summer help, but signed on full-time the very next year. Since then, he's helped to collect and maintain the 300 coin-op cabinets that make up the American Classic Arcade Museum

One of the early arrivals to the tournament is 40-year-old **Robert Macauley**. The softly-spoken Australian has flown over 9,000 miles to compete in this year's competition. "There's not a lot of places like this where I'm from," he says. This is Macauley's fourth trip to the tournament, but only his second time competing. When asked if it was worth it to him to fly this far, he doesn't hesitate to respond: "Absolutely. This is the Super Bowl of classic gaming. There's nothing else like it."

Now in its 13th year, the tournament has become a revered destination among circles of classic gamers. Often referred to as the Mecca of gaming, the museum was born out of Vincent's love of the arcades that shaped his childhood. With barely disguised reverence, Vincent says: "The goal is to recreate that feel of the old '80s arcade. If somebody comes to the tournament and has a good time, if they feel 16 years old again – even for a day, even if they have a wife, kids, two full-time jobs – then we've accomplished our goal."

Four days later, the tournament is in full swing. Funspot's parking lot is packed with cars, some sporting out-of-state licence plates that reference *Pac-Man* or *Centipede*. Inside, a section of the arcade is cordoned off with yellow chains, behind which are assembled the 15 chosen titles. Droves of gamers mingle near the cabinets, some closely watching over the shoulders of their opponents, others talking shop about the best way to max out their scores on *Satan's Hollow*.

"IF THE PLAYERS FEEL 16 YEARS OLD AGAIN – EVEN FOR A DAY – THEN WE'VE ACCOMPLISHED OUR GOAL"

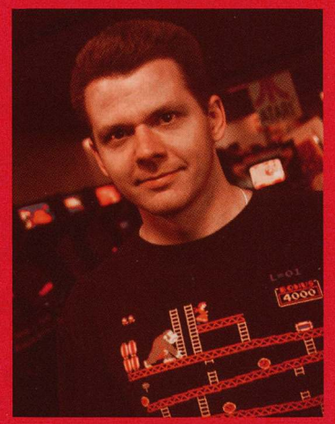
While Hank Chien (left) makes his living as a plastic surgeon, his passion is *Donkey Kong*. Chien took the world record from The King Of Kong star Steve Wiebe in January of this year, with a score of 1,068,000

HELD THE FILM generated media exposure for the classic gaming scene and the tournament, it exposed the hardcore, unfriendly side of professional gaming. One participant in the tournament, **Isaiah 'Triforce' Johnson**, dually subscribes to this mentality: "I don't have any particular genres I specialise in. I play classic, I play modern. I have records in both." As of this writing, Johnson holds the world records for *Super Mario Bros*, *Mercs*, *Black Tiger*, *Street Fighter II* and *Tiger Road*.

Johnson describes his life as a professional gamer as a wild blur of intense competition and travel. In the three weeks before the tournament, he went to Chicago to promote the Council of Gaming Legends, New Jersey to defend his *Street Fighter II* title, and San Francisco to test the new *Ocarina Of Time* on Nintendo 3DS. "Keep in mind, this is all on the weekends," says Johnson. "Monday through Thursday I have a nine-to-five job. There isn't a day I'm not working." The tournament, he says, is just another opportunity to set new gaming records, or defend his current titles.

While Johnson and his ever-present NES Power Glove fashion accessory represent the flamboyant fringe of gamers at this year's tournament, **Hank Chien** serves as his down-to-earth antithesis. The 33-year-old plastic surgeon and gamer is one of the most grounded competitors in attendance. "In the beginning, I didn't like people watching me," he admits. "I would get nervous. But it's become unavoidable. People want to see me play, so I've gotten used to it." Chien recently attained Internet fame after capturing the *Donkey Kong* world record from both Mitchell and Wiebe. He too will soon have a documentary about his world record, Doctor Kong, slated to be released later in 2011.

While he proudly carries his title as world champion of *Donkey Kong*, Chien doesn't see the tournament so much as a forum for competition as much as he does a warm social gathering. "I see people here that I haven't seen in a year, and I've become good friends with them. It's like a reunion, almost." Chien cites his friendship with Ben Falls, another classic gamer, as an example: "At first, we just talked about *Donkey Kong*. After a few weeks, though, we became friends. We hang out, we help each other – there's a bond there, and it started with games."



Tom Votava (above) has been attending the tournament for the past six years. The 33-year-old programmer from Arizona faced stiff competition this year but eventually eked out a victory of five points over John McAllister

As the final day of the tournament winds down, the rankings reveal a struggle for first place between Tom Votava and John McAllister. Competitors crowd around the score screen as Vincent issue a call for the last five minutes of the tournament. At five o'clock, the remaining contestants step away from the machines as referees input their scores.

At a competitive event such as this, you expect winners and finalists to possess over-the-top personalities in line with 'Triforce' Johnson and Billy Mitchell. This year's champion doesn't remotely fit that profile. **Tom Votava**, a 33-year-old programmer from Arizona, is well-mannered, with an unimposing demeanor. When asked if he's pleased with his victory, Votava says he is, but that "quite honestly I don't even come up here just for the tournament. It's more because I know my friends are going to be in one place at one time." Echoing Chien's take on the event, Votava sees the tournament as an opportunity to socialise with people that share similar interests. All of the competitors, he tells us, share a bond through their love of classic gaming.

Discerning the tournament's role in the increasingly fractured amalgam that is gaming culture is difficult. Through a cynical lens, Vincent's arcade cabinets are laughably primitive compared to modern games' online leaderboards and integrated voice communication. Why bother wasting the time and fuel to travel to rural New Hampshire to play against friends when you can just message someone on your Xbox Live friends list?

From another angle, the persistence of a competitive arcade scene turns the mirror back on modern gaming. Watching skilled gamers square off in person over nothing more than two buttons and a joystick makes listening to racial slurs being screamed by a 12-year-old over voice chat seem petty and absurd. Besting a faceless gamertag with a 31-hit combo will never measure up to inputting your initials over your rival's on a high-score screen.

If nothing else, this antiquated gathering acts as a direct conduit to that raw sense of competition and one-upmanship that defined arcades in their prime, and serves as a reminder of how impersonal and even clinical multiplayer gaming has become. ■

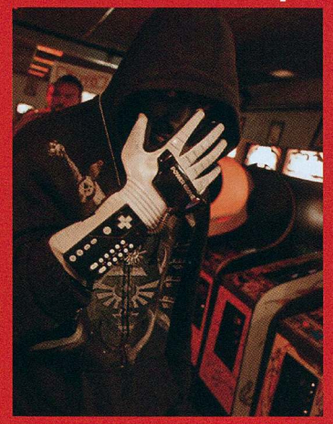
Twenty-five-year-old Dan Garofalo (left) drove from Somerville, NJ to compete against other classic gamers. Younger than most of the other contestants, he developed an affection for classic arcade games at Richie Knucklez, a retro arcade close to his home town

EVERY ONCE IN a while, a competitor raises his or her hand, and an ACAM referee rushes over with an iPad to log the score. By way of a large LCD projector, the overall tournament rankings dominate the far wall of the arcade. In twos and threes, contestants study the screen, ribbing each other for falling in rank, or congratulating others on advancing. This system is a recent addition to the tournament, says Vincent. "Before this we were logging scores with paper and pencils. Someone would take the scores into the back room and key them in by hand in to an old Excel spreadsheet made by an employee ages ago."

Last year, the effective but inelegant score-keeping system was replaced by Aurcade, a realtime score-tracking system. "Shortly after our 2009 tournament here, **David Hurnley** approached me – he's come here for years, I've known him for a long time – and he said: 'I have an idea that will make this tournament a lot better for you,'" says Vincent.

Hurnley is on hand this year to help maintain the system. He describes the origin of his brainchild as a response to personal necessity: "It started out specifically as a way to maintain a list of arcades and their locations. There's so few arcades left in the country, real arcades, that I wanted to know where I could play them. There wasn't something intuitive like that on the Internet. I set out to fix that." Aurcade currently tracks over 13,000 games at 874 locations around the world. For many, the database has become the definitive resource for locating classic arcade games near them.

It was from Aurcade's framework that Hurnley developed a new method to track the tournament's scores. "The process they used before was dirt slow. You wouldn't see the standings until six hours later. By the time you saw them, they were out of date," says Hurnley. His solution was to layer a score-tracking system over Aurcade's game database, allowing competitors to view each other's progress on each machine, as well as their overall tournament ranking. Participants were no longer left wondering how they fared until the next day of the tournament, and Hurnley had successfully found a way to collect data from unconnected, decades-old machines.



Aside from holding more than 40 world records for videogames, Isaiah 'TriForce' Johnson (above) promotes pro gamers through his company, Empire Arcadia. The Brooklyn native was also the first person in the US to purchase a 3DS – directly from Reggie Fils-Aime

Its adoption of technology isn't the only way the tournament has changed over the years. At the relatively young age of 25, and sporting full-sleeve tattoos on both arms, **Dan Garofalo** seems like an unlikely participant in this year's tournament. While most of the other contestants are middle-aged men, often with children of their own, Garofalo stands out as a youthful contender among a field of old-guard veterans. He and several of his friends have travelled from New Jersey to compete. "It's a gentleman's competition," he says. "It's friendly, but at the same time you're doing this for bragging rights. We're kind of unofficially representing Richie Knucklez".

Richie Knucklez is another classic arcade in Flemington, NJ. Garofalo started going there five years ago, drawn to the older arcade games because of their difficulty: "They're not like today's console games. They don't hold your hand, there's no tutorial. They're hard. You have to be at least half decent to compete here." For Garofalo, the steep, often brutal learning curve of the older arcade titles offers a challenging alternative to today's newbie-friendly games. "There's no easy setting for *Amidar*," he points out.

Historically, not all of the tournament's attendees have seen classic games as platforms for friendly competition. The King Of Kong, the 2007 documentary centered on the world record for *Donkey Kong*, depicts a battlefield upon which Steve Wiebe, Billy Mitchell and other classic-gaming heavyweights fight a war for personal recognition. Classic gamers are portrayed as larger-than-life heroes, villains and conspirators, their squabbles backlit by flickering game monitors.

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