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Game On

The B Side becomes a barcade as the retro game bar trend comes to Cleveland

By [Douglas Trattner](#)

Brad Petty realized he had a problem on his hands. As managing partner of B Side, he had cultivated a reputation for the East Side venue as one of the premier rock dance clubs in town, attracting top-flight DJs and the coolest of crowds.

So, what's the problem?

"We were fortunate to become known as the 'hipster club,' but our popularity actually came and bit us in the ass," Petty explains. "Even though we'd open the doors at 8 p.m., our crowds were too cool to show up before 1 a.m. Meanwhile, our neighbors on the street are doing dollar-beer specials and killing it."

With crowds growing younger, later and poorer by the day, Petty and partner Kathy Simkoff – also of the Grog Shop upstairs – decided it was time to go in a new direction. In search of a concept that would attract more mature crowds for more hours of the day, the team ultimately settled upon the idea of a "barcade."

"These things are popping up in every city," notes Petty, referring to adult-friendly bars stocked with classic arcade games. "I thought, if we do retro video games we could attract the older crowd who grew up hanging out at the arcade, but also the younger crowd who grew up playing X Box."

It's a tactic that's working in cities like Seattle, Portland and New York. Unlike soulless "family entertainment centers" like Chuck E. Cheese's, Dave & Buster's and Jillian's, barcades are small, indie-minded, and geared to adults.

"Places like Dave & Buster's are more about bringing the whole family and spending a lot of money," says John Stanchina, who along with Mike Scur launched a Kickstarter campaign to open a retro arcade in Cleveland. "I don't want to drive 25 minutes out of the city to go spend money at a place owned by a huge company just to play games with eight million screaming kids. That's not the way I remember it."

Like many people of a certain age, Stanchina grew up immersed in video games – both on game systems at home and on video games at arcades. For many of us Gen X-ers, riding bikes up to the arcade to sink quarters into Defender, Joust and Galaga was a weekly rite. And nostalgia being as powerful as it is, it's no wonder folks are eager to resurrect the sights, sounds and sacraments of a generation's youth.

"People my age are starting to get somewhere in their careers, and we're thinking about all the fun things we did growing up and wanting to recreate that," says Scur. "And the broader mainstream culture is more accepting of that. When I used to play video games back in high school, that was totally not cool. Now, all the things that were not cool are – and not ironically!"

It's not just classic video games that are enjoying a revival. Pinball, all but exterminated by the rise of the video game, is also seeing a boost in popularity. Last summer at the BottleHouse Brewery in Cleveland Heights, staffer and self-described "pinhead" Ari Friedman organized Pins and Pints, a week-long event that saw the delivery and temporary installation of five pinball machines. The games proved so popular they never left.

"Pinball is making a comeback," Friedman told me. "It's a more organic experience than video games. No two games will ever be the same. And it's social."

When the B Side Liquor Lounge & Arcade reopens this week or next, it will boast 30 new (old) games: 22 classic arcade games and eight pinball machines. Ms. Pac-Man, Mortal Kombat, Donkey Kong and Dig Dug will join choice pinball machines like Addams Family and The Simpsons. And everything will cost a quarter to play.

Petty and company are using the down time to totally refresh the 10-year-old subterranean bar. New bathrooms, paint and TVs will join new tables and bartops built from repurposed bowling alley wood. A small kitchen will pump out retro-themed snacks like movie popcorn, soft pretzels, and Frito Pie. The bar will open at 4 p.m. during the week and 2 p.m. on weekends. Tournaments built around specific games will be held regularly.

"If I can go five years with this concept and have it make money, I'll be happy," says Petty. "I don't know what the next trend will be, but I'll take five good years."

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