

A long, narrow hallway in an arcade, lined with colorful, illuminated game cabinets. The ceiling is decorated with long, narrow panels of multi-colored neon lights. Two people are walking away from the camera down the center of the hallway. The overall atmosphere is bright and nostalgic.

The King in Neon

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Colin Ryan Writes

For Shaun,

*For being the brother who always shared
his quarters.*

Not all kings wear crowns. In 1993 most of them don't appear as any sort of kings at all. Chances are you'd pass them on the street without a second glance. Each of them reigning over their own hidden parts of the world that only exist if you spare the time to unearth them. That guy in the off-the-shelf business suit waiting for the 8:16 bus that's running a little late, he's the king of the eastern seaboard's amateur demolition derby. Ask anyone with an after-market roll cage in their sedan who's the best, and you'll learn that guy's name. He's the god damn king. That girl who mixed your drink last night, the one with the shiner beneath her left eye. She's the undisputed queen of the lower New York underground kickboxing circuit. And that grungy-looking dude with the greasy black hair pattering along in the 1977 Honda Civic being held together with the sheer refusal to quit. Him... His

name is Paxton Rivers and he's the king of the Long Island arcade scene. Any player worth knowing east of the L.I.E had lost enough quarters against him to fill a piggy bank, break it and lose it again. And we're not talking competing for high scores through the likes of Pacman, Galaga, or Robotron. No. We played face to face. Mano e mano. The introduction of the fighting game put one player against another, smashing combos and flicking the joysticks till there was only one player left standing. By 1993 there were plenty of options like Tekken or Mortal Kombat, but if you wanted a shot at the crown, then you played Street Fighter II.

Paxton pulled his rattling gray hatchback into the parking lot of a massive tan and white industrial-looking building that could have been any industrial warehouse were it not for the giant *Spaceplex Family Fun Center* spanning its face in bold, glowing red lettering. If Paxton was king, then this was his castle. Hell, this was his whole kingdom. He took his regular spot directly in front of the entrance. A handicap spot. Pax didn't give any shits for the sideways looks he got whenever he parked there. Besides being a bit underweight and in a constant state of sleep deprivation he was a healthy enough specimen. If he was feeling particularly spicy, he'd make an extra effort to wave his mother's old handicap pass at

whoever was watching just to let them know he's legit. Doesn't matter that the pass expired more than two years ago; nobody ever checked the date on those things.

Spaceplex's choice to design its entrance as a long black tunnel lined with multicolored LEDs was a near-perfect transition into a world that was entirely of its own. Those who descended the tunnel crossed a precipice where an assault of light and sound came from the combination of rides, games, and arcades filling the forty-five thousand square foot floor space. The smell of pretzels mixed with the unique scent of synthetic fog machine smoke did well to mask the constantly underlying stench of sweaty children coming down from their sugar highs. Spaceplex had the ability to simultaneously send kids into a state of manic delirium while inducing anxiety in their parents.

Pax had walked that tunnel hundreds, if not thousands of times. Halfway through he passed a father with three tiny monsters dancing around his tired legs as he barely struggled to corral them toward the exit. As a courtesy, Pax held the cloud of nicotine smoke filling his lungs until after they had passed. He was a gentleman like that. As he exited the tunnel, Pax locked eyes with the complex's manager, Eric. Eric was mid-forties and

thought that switching his degree from mechanical engineering to Slavic literature studies in his final year of college would serve him well. Now he managed a family fun center. He was too intelligent for his job and too cowardly to do anything about it. He wasn't fat, but at some point, he must have made a conscious decision to adopt satisfyingly circular features. The edges of the caterpillar living above his lip curved down and around the edges of his mouth. His plastic-framed glasses held circular lenses and his hair perpetually mimicked the shape of a mushroom cap. There was effort put into that haircut. That's how he wanted to look. Pax never understood why. Eric, armed with his clipboard, made his usual round of the floor. He had a habit of always finding himself in line of sight of the entrance every time Paxton strutted in. There wasn't disappointment in his glare, not anymore, just disapproval as his free hand shot out a pointed finger to the *No Smoking* sign posted next to the entrance just a few feet from Pax's head. Such a fucking square.

Paxton took a final drag from the cigarette in his mouth and flicked it directly at the *No Smoking* sign. Its glowing cherry burst against the metal like a tiny firework before landing on the ground and being stomped out under Paxton's faded Converse high top.

Paxton didn't miss a step. Eric may have been the manager, but he was the fucking king. With a shake of his head, Eric continued on his round.

Spaceplex was certainly a family fun center. For most, the appeal came from the bigger attractions. The three-tiered speed-slide was a classic. A small indoor Rollercoaster brought in the real young crowd and the Spider Web was a five-story mess of huge rubber bands that in no universe would pass for safe, but god damn if the kids didn't love getting wrapped up in it and falling two or three stories onto the padded floor. The place was a jungle, build of metal and plastic and lit in neon. A solid quarter of the floor space was dedicated to the arcade. Tucked away in the back corner of the building, past the laser tag arena stood row after row of arcade cabinets. As was with any Friday evening, there was a solid mix of the kids playing whatever flashed the brightest, dad's clinging to the machines of their bachelor years, and the new generation of younger guys that had just begun to adopt the moniker of 'gamer'.

“Pax! Hold up!” A high-pitched boy's voice cracked as it cut through the bustle. IT was Conor, a regular, and by the sounds of it, just starting to enjoy the changes puberty brings on.

He was a kid. To Pax, who at 24 was practically an institution, they were all kids. But Conor was alright, he was a regular. He might even be better than alright if his go-to Street Fighter character wasn't E. Honda. Little asshole was always trying to corner-lock his opponent with the Hundred Hand Slap move. Give the kid credit, it worked on most of his peers, but it was a Busch league compared to Pax who reminded him every time he started to get a little cocky.

“What’s up, Connor,” Pax said.

“Pax, there’s some guy on the machine. He’s been on there all night. I even beat him, but he wouldn’t get off. He just said “best two out of three” and then I lost. He’s pretty good, but I won first, he should have rotated out, but he won’t leave,” Connor said.

“Seriously?” Pax said.

“Yeah, Pax,” Connor said. “He’s being really mean too, he made Max cry.”

Pax’s eyes shot over to the snack bar and located Max, all red-eyed and puffy-faced, sitting by himself at a

table meant for four sipping on a clear plastic cup of water. Paxton felt his teeth grind. In combat there are rules. We aren't savages. If you lose a game you're done. That's the deal. You can put up another quarter and wait your turn, but a loss is a loss. It's one thing to be a sore loser, half the fun is watching cocky pricks sulk after a whooping, but there's a line you don't cross. And making kids cry, especially one who comes here to get away from their asshole dads, is way on the wrong side of that line.

“Who's he playing as?” Pax asked.

“Mostly Guile, but sometimes Chun-Li,” Connor said.

“Connor, you got a quarter?” Pax asked.

Connor dug deep into his pocket and fished out a twenty-five-cent piece. “It's my last one,” He said.

“Here, trade me,” Pax said, pulling out the five-dollar bill he had set aside for the night. It was all the disposable money he had to cover food and play. They swapped the note for the coin. “Take this and get Max a soda and an ice cream sandwich, he likes the

strawberry ones. Then get one for yourself and sit with him. Okay? He looks too pitiful sitting there by himself.”

“What are you going to do?” Connor asked.

“I’m going to get our machine back,” Pax said.

“But you’ll only have one quarter. What if you lose?” Connor asked.

“I won’t,” Pax said.

The guy at the machine was old enough to know he was being an asshole, but not old enough to care. The shit-eating grin stretch across his face as he combed a ginger-headed sixteen-year-old into a perfect victory spoke volumes. As usual, there was a crowd around the Street Fighter II cabinet, most waiting for their shot, some just enjoying the spectacle. The cabinet was given a spot at the head of the first row of arcades on account of its prestige. Pax didn’t recognize the guy Conor complained about, occupying the right-hand position of the two-player machine, but it was summer, so all the exports were home from college and arcade fever was national. Lined up on the ledge of the cabinet’s marquee were a line of quarters. Each quarter placed by a player

to formulate the queue. Once a player is defeated, they vacate their spot, and the owner of the next quarter on the marquee faces off against the victor. If you win, you keep playing. If you lose, well, throw up another quarter and wait. These were the rules, not written down anywhere but understood by all and honored to a fault. So when Pax rolled up and placed his quarter at the end of the long queue it was a sign of respect, acknowledgment, and faith when all eight players in front of him reached up, pulled their quarters down, and replaced them behind Pax's. They did it because there was a jester on the King's throne.

When Pax stepped up, he didn't say anything, he just dropped his quarter into the slot, smashed to Player 1 button, and lit a fresh cigarette.

"You're not supposed to smoke in here," The guy said as he locked in the fighter Guile, just as Connor had reported.

"Shut up and play," Pax said and locked in Ryu, the game's original character and franchise staple. Pax had always liked the character's karate gi and headband. Pax fantasized about being Ryu, going so far as to take an introduction karate class at the dojo near his house.

But classes cost money and the amount of time he'd spend making the money to take classes would take up any time he had to actually take them. High school dropouts weren't exactly pulling in the big bucks. So, he decided, this was as close as he'd ever get.

The fight loaded up. Pax's world condensed onto the 24" screen in front of him. The 16-bit soundtrack filled his ear, drowning away the ambiance of the greater family fun center. On the screen were two players. Two fighters. Life was simple here, there were no bills he was late on, no mortgage he couldn't afford, no tuition payments to make, and nobody reminding him of his wasted potential. None of that mattered now. The metric in which he would be measured was clearly displayed in the yellow health bar at the top of the screen. The only thing that mattered was beating the person next to him.

"Round 1," The game announced, "Fight!"

His opponent came at him with a flurry of attacks. Pax instinctually pulled back on the defensive, taking the first few moments to feel out his opponent.

Back -> jump -> back -> low attack.

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Pax had to give him credit, he had some slick moves. Gimmicks mostly, but it made sense why the younger kids weren't able to best him.

Feign back -> Forward -> Down -> right -> punch -> back -> forward -> back-> kick.

Pax's first combo caught the guy off guard, who took a moment to reset his grip on the arcade stick before doubling down on his attack. Your problem isn't your grip, Pax thought, it's that you've never played anyone who actually knows what they are doing.

Jump -> foward -> foward -> punch -> punch -> down -> forward -> punch.

Pax took his backside and let his opponent corner himself on the left side of the screen. Pax unleashed a frame-perfect combination of attacks that dazed his opponent's character and dropped his health bar to zero.

“Ryu Wins!” The game announced.

Round 2 was more of the same. His attacks were telegraphed and predictable. Connor should have been able to wipe the floor with this dude, he was surprised

that the kid lost. Then maybe it was cause he was tired, or because he knew that it would piss off his opponent, Pax let out an exaggerated yawn as he once again emptied his health bar with surgical precision. Guile hit the floor and a countdown began asking the loser if they'd like to continue. Now, in the civilized world, this is when the player would bow out, maybe even shake hands and sink back into the crowd until it was his turn again. But the college guy stood steadfast at his stick, his hand gripped around it hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

“You’re done, you lost. Step back and let the next kid play.” Pax said, the cigarette dangling from his mouth. He spat the words in a way that little puffs of smoke splashed across the college guy’s face.

“Best two out of three.” The guy said, fishing out another quarter and sliding it into the slot just as the counter was about to expire. The game returned the players to the character select screen.

“Look, I don’t know where you came from, but that’s not how we do it here. One and done. You want to play again, get in line.” Pax said.

“Screw you. Why don’t you take your own advice and just shut up and play.” He said.

“Come on man, that’s not how it works, don’t be a dick,” Pax said.

“Well, it’s too late, my quarters already in the machine, so we gonna play or what?” He said.

The crowd around the cabinet had grown. Among them stood Connor and Max, each clutching a soda with ice cream-stained fingers, sipping out of squiggle straws. Nice touch, Connor, squiggle straws fucking rule, Pax thought. This asshole was planted, obviously, reason had escaped him.

“Fine.” Pax said. “But if we’re going to play again, how about we make it interesting. You know, make a challenge out of it, since your first display was so embarrassing.”

“What you want to put money on it?” He said.

“I don’t want your fucking money. We’ll play for this machine. I’ll even give you an advantage. At the start of the round, you can attack me until I’m one strike from dead, then I’ll start playing.”

“Seriously?” He asked.

“Seriously,” Pax said. “If you can beat me when I’m one hit from dead, then I’ll let you play until you run out of quarters and nobody will say shit.”

“You’re nuts, man. You really think you can beat me without taking one hit?”

Pax ignored him and kept talking. “But. If I beat you, you leave this cabinet and never come play it again.”

“You’re kidding?” he said.

“No. I’m not. You can go play at the Pizzahut in Smithtown,” Pax said.

“Ha!” He said. “You think you’re hot shit, don’t you? If you really think you’re that badass then how about if you lose, then you go play in Smithtown. Loser is banished from the Spaceplex forever.”

Pax felt a tug on the side of his dirty Nirvana t-shirt. It was Connor, eyes wide with genuine concern

shaking his head. “Don’t do it. He’s tricky and if he hits you even once, you’ll lose.” The kid wasn’t wrong, those were the stakes. One slip and it's game over, no continues. And he’d have to win both rounds. A double perfect.

“Deal. Let’s play,” Pax said and locked in Ryu again.

In this neon jungle, he was king.

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End of Preview

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