

I was born a little bit too late and maybe a little bit too elsewhere to really enjoy the Golden Age of coin-ops, but I still got quite a lot fun from the invention that I until today consider one of the biggest milestones in entertainment.

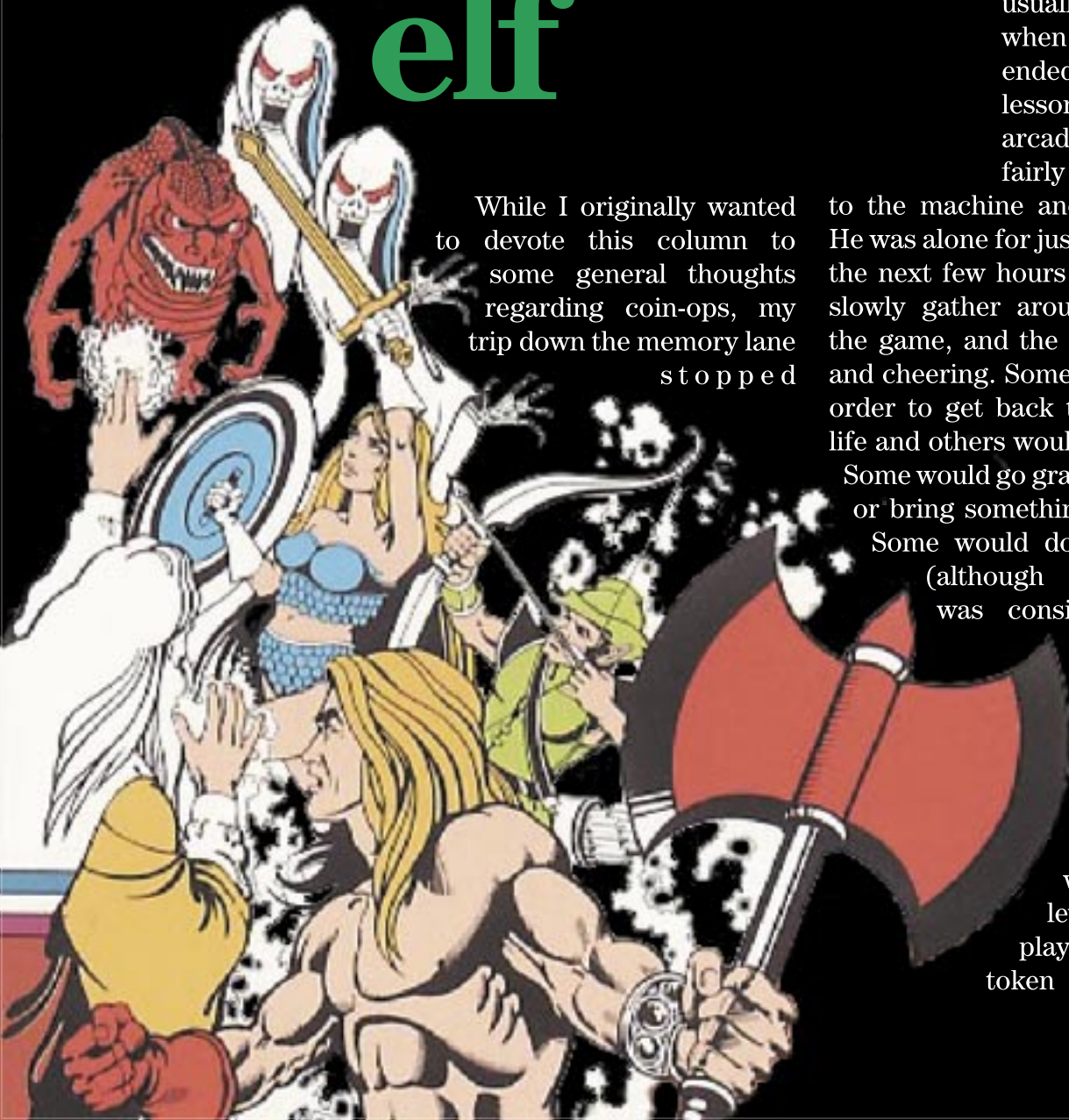
Warrior, valkyrie, wizard, elf

While I originally wanted to devote this column to some general thoughts regarding coin-ops, my trip down the memory lane stopped

rather abruptly by one of the machines I'll never forget—"the game that never ended," or, as Atari (and the "outside people") would rather call it, "Gauntlet."

The rumour had it that it actually ended at some point, at some distant 1000ish level, and even if I ceased to believe in that rather quickly, it never stopped me—nor anyone else—from trying (as a matter of fact, I could probably look it up even right now on some Internet FAQs and once and for all solve the great mystery, but I don't really want to do it and deliberately dispel the magic).

In any case, it was usually early afternoon when the first person ended his school lessons, went to the arcade (at this time fairly empty), stepped to the machine and started playing. He was alone for just a short while—in the next few hours other guys would slowly gather around, some joining the game, and the rest just watching and cheering. Some would step out in order to get back to the dreary real life and others would take their place. Some would go grab something to eat or bring something for the players. Some would do their homework (although that, obviously, was considered lame and generally laughed upon), and some would even—as unrealistic as it may seem—fall asleep playing! But the game would continue—level after level, player after player, token after token, just



until late evening when the arcade had to be closed and we all rushed home (some already thinking up excuses for their parents). And it didn't really matter that we already knew all the levels by heart and that we wasted extraordinarily large amounts of money on it, because at some point it became a whole lot more than just a regular gaming experience.

We would have casual conversations on just about everything that occupied our minds when we were young. We would make friends and lose friends. We would form and break alliances. We would solve life and death problems and deal with all the small and big crises. And all that accompanied by a strange mixture of on-screen warriors, ghosts, wizards and omnipresent magic.

Somehow, it all blended perfectly. We were a team no worse than the game's four brave characters. There was this strange aura surrounding the game, a bonding of some sort, and sometimes it was hard to tell both the realities apart. The token put in the slot by some helpful hand just after computer announcing that "warrior is about to die" would mean a gratitude for a next couple of days, and—sometimes—a great friendship for life. You never had to ask twice for a replacement when your hand was starting to hurt after hours of pressing a shoot button, and just as everyone had their advices for the real life problems, you could always count on some tips as to what to do next in the game itself. Not mentioning the code of honour, which I believe was never really spoken out loud, but somehow everybody seemed to stick with it just fine, even if it was sometimes similarly difficult as with its real life counterpart (rules stated, for example, that one would never take the belongings of a character which just died and if the death came after him, he'd always draw it away from the others).

And even if the levels, characters, enemies were the same, we never got bored playing. Not only because we never let it become boring; "Gauntlet" itself had a lot of mysteries, some of which would forever remain unresolved (such as the aforementioned mythical final level). We must have been feeling like Chris Columbus the day that we figured out that you can actually turn all the walls into exits when you wait long enough—I always smile when I imagine all the parents that evening repeatedly shrugging their shoulders when the excited teens tried to explain them how significant discovery it was for us (and the smile is even wider because I recently realised the game itself tried to tell us that every single time, but who back then knew English that well...).

To this day I remember my favourite character—it was green elf—but even if "Gauntlet" was later (badly) ported to PCs and I can launch its exact copy at this moment on a coin-op emulator, it'd be nothing more than a small part of the experience. But I have it all in my memory: the laughs of victory, the sadness when someone's character died, the distinctive smell of the coin-ops (if you were at the arcades at least once, you know what I'm talking about), the sound of the tokens kept in the pocket... And heartbeats—obviously not ours, just those coming from the speakers.



by Marcin Wichary