

Fear & Loathing @ the Pick-Axe Pete Pick-Off

(1982)

Remember that episode of *The Simpsons* where Bart comes into possession of a fake ID? Add a jigger of Milhouse as witless sidekick and Martin as the sap with the money. Stir in Nelson because he'll beat you up if you don't and - *voila* - you've got your classic animated sitcom cocktail. The four youthful offenders then leverage Bart's bogus ID and Martin's moolah into a road trip-worthy rental car during a school break and lack only for a destination.

Milhouse comes across a flyer for the Knoxville World's Fair, failing to notice the publication's year (1982), and the rampaging quartet make for Tennessee and a World's Fair that had flopped two decades earlier. Great episode, with most of the jokes coming at the expense of the Fair's moldy statuary (the "Sun Sphere" hypocritically predicted a future run by solar power but looked more like a bright, orange tennis ball mounted on an oversized bowling trophy) and overall aura of despair it evoked.

The real punchline, however, is that the Knoxville World's Fair was just as shabby and third-rate back in 1982 as whatever remains of it today and I can attest to that fact as a first-person witness. I was there, you see, with Arnie Katz and Joyce Worley-Katz, on the very last day of the Fair's tortuous run through the dreary summer of '82. It had been a debacle all around, a dark cloud without even a plastic lining. The odor of failure clung to everyone from Jimmy Carter, who had promised the "honor" (and an economic shot in the arm to the devastated Knoxville economy) to Tennessee during his presidential run, to the smattering of tourists who were somehow lured to this economic horror show.

How bad was this Fair? Fairly bad. Its culinary claim to fame was intended as a new fast food fad called the Petro (a taco served in an inedible plastic casing in lieu of an actual taco shell), so that should be enough to serve as a master metaphor for the entire fiasco. But why stop there, when there's so much more to complain about? There were no exciting rides of the type that had been made popular by the earlier Seattle, New York, and Montreal Fairs. No futuristic technology, no holograms, no laser light shows, or movies projected onto a domed ceiling. Just a collection of dreary exhibits seemingly sponsored by the petro-chemical bogeymen, paying lip service to ideas like solar energy while in fact presenting it as tedious, pie-in-the-sky tech. If they had held a World's Fair in Poland during the '70s, I imagine this is what it would be like. Lots of

exhibits of farm machinery and other wonders guaranteed to dim the light in the eyes of the most inquisitive child.

Have you ever arrived at the end of a really big event that had just bombed? A wedding where the bride and best man got loaded and she gave the best man a lap dance on the dais? A ponderous Broadway musical where the juvenile lead's voice began changing during the second act? A long set of stand-up from a comic who couldn't get you to smile if he promised to stop sticking you with a white hot poker?

By the end of such events, the stink of failure mingles with other unpleasant odors - exhaustion, bitterness and desperation - to evoke an environment somewhere between ennui and explosion. When we were flown into Knoxville (Magnavox headquarters in '82), unemployment in that city was so bad that it occupied the lead position in every news show I saw from my room at the Hilton Hotel, which had been constructed exclusively for the Fair-goers who no-showed. Now, at the end of the nightmare, Hilton seemed in an absolute frenzy to obliterate every trace of the place. Everything in my room had a price tag on it. Everything. The bathroom mirrors, the bad art on the walls, the reading lamps. Nobody was stealing any towels or ashtrays from *these* rooms - they had clearly marked prices on all of them. I was afraid if I overslept, I'd awaken with an embarrassingly low price affixed to my forehead.

Then there were the employees of both the hotel and the Knoxville World's Fair itself. The Fair had not generated nearly enough jobs to staunch the city's hemorrhaging unemployment woes, and now the few gigs it had been able to provide were about to go up in smoke.

Visiting the lavish homes of Magnavox executives - who treated us like absolute royalty, by the way - was an experience which generated mixed emotions. I had been a political radical in the '60s and here I was, a guest at this or that showplace of the Establishment while the people in the surrounding neighborhoods (many of them Magnavox employees) suffered the terrors of unemployment (real and potential), minimum wages, and an economic recession stemming from Carter's constantly wavering policies - not to mention the check for a bomb of a World's Fair, a major gamble that yielded up the Sunsphere, the Petro, and lots of bad feelings.

These sociological musings were intermingled with some fear that Magnavox might actually announce layoffs while we were there and that workers might riot, in which case we were sipping cool beverages on the veranda of Ground Zero.

But no, the real bomb on that final day of the Fair (which included a gutsy visit by Carter himself) was the *Pick Axe Pete* Pick-Off, i.e., the reason Katz, Kunkel and Worley were in Knoxville to begin with. Now anyone who knows me can testify to my love of *Odyssey²* games. I think *UFO*, *War of*

Nerves and *K.C. Munchkin* stand right alongside the best stuff Atari was generating for the VCS at the time.

Pick Axe Pete, as best I can recall, was not quite in that lofty company. I dunno, maybe it's a forgotten classic but make sure the emphasis is on "forgotten" because I don't remember a damned thing about it except for the fact that it was all but impossible to do anything like "play-by-play" or even sensible commentary while watching it. But we had microphones in our hands, so we were obviously supposed to say something. These were the best *Pick Axers* in the country, but making this lifeless contest seem interesting while standing in the middle of an exhibit hall that was already being given the eye by the demolition crew, was far from my most gratifying gaming moment.

Two decades before LAN tournaments, Nickelodeon and G4 would bring competitive gaming credibility on a mass-market level, the few remaining dead-eyed World's Fair patrons wandered aimlessly through the airplane hangar-sized building in which the Pick-Off was being staged, looking for something, anything to brighten their day. And we couldn't give it to them. Of course, part of the problem was format. Arnie and I contrived that he would serve as play-by-play man, while I would deliver color. However, a fact that is not very well known is that Arnie overcame a vast handicap to partner in the creation of electronic gaming journalism - his vision is so bad that he has been classified as "industrially blind" since a childhood accident detached a retina.

Give Arnie his props - he never let his terrible vision get the better of him. He even had the sac to take a walking tour through the Cadillac Plant at Hamtramck, Michigan while we were working with Brett Sperry and several other members of Westwood Studios to help GM create a training simulator for the programmers who fixed the welding robots. Now I don't know how many of you have been in a GM plant, but we're talking a CITY, complete with a class system (engineers, execs, line workers, etc.) as rigid as anything you'll find in the history of the British Empire.

You're also talking about something physically awesome. I was a pretty flexible fellow in those days, but even I was daunted by my walk through the vast plant. For example, you had to time your jump, videogame-style, as you passed in between gigantic auto chassis, swinging on hooks like massive sides of beef, moving relentlessly along the assembly line. Then there was the matter of getting covered in spewing masses of molten sparks when about 16 robot welders hit their spots on the chassis in the bay simultaneously (one of the Westwood guys actually had to beat out the flames covering Arnie's hair and coat following a particularly nasty shower). It was no picnic, I'll tell ya, but Arnie just kept going, like Mr. Magoo in Hell, and never once asked for an easier route.

Okay, back to Knoxville. You've got me and Arnie standing there, trying to follow the several games being displayed on several of what passed for big screen projector TVs 20+ years ago. Alas, the minute any light hit the screen on one of those suckers, they went white. Guess what the ceiling of this massive exhibition hall was covered with? That's right, lights. Bright, bright lights, decorating whole sections of the screen off which we were supposed to call the action with silver-white patches that completely obscured the playfields.

As for doing color, well, I kind of fell down on that job by failing to interview any of the contestants. Or maybe I did and they were just kids with nothing special to say. I only remember standing there, occasionally attempting to explain the rules of the game to the indifferent clusters of lingering Fair visitors. They would remain long enough to be polite and then move on. I got the feeling videogames weren't a big part of their world for the most part. Meanwhile Arnie carried on manfully, making the game action as dramatic as his hero, Dodger broadcaster Vin Scully, ever could have done.

That night, a barge came floating down the river that ran alongside the hotel rooms on the side of the hotel where we were staying. The barge then stopped and waited as the sun set. When darkness fell full, it launched a spectacular fireworks show. At first I'll confess I was afraid Hilton had been unable to restrain its more hawkish board members and they'd sailed a gunboat down the river to blow the building off the face of the Earth prematurely.

But no, the Fair ended with both a bang and a whimper. As I sat on the floor of the darkened hotel room, inhaling the atmosphere (among other things), I felt a genuine sadness for Knoxville and an overwhelming sense of relief to be departing come morning.

It was depressing to see the O² fail again and again during that period. Not only did the VCS clean its clock but the later Intellivision and Colecovision also easily surpassed it. In Magnavox' last attempt to save the franchise, they showed off the Odyssey³ at a CES. It was not a state-of-the-art machine; in fact, it was basically the O² with some background graphics (something that had always been a sore point with gamers).

But it was too little, too late. That was really a shame because the Odyssey crew were first rate people, but they just didn't have the right stuff to whip the cooler systems. And I can't help but remember that terrible Knoxville Fair as a sad example of the entire experiment.