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# THE HIGH G OF HIGH



Why are men devoting their lives to getting  
the high score on a 30-year-old video game?  
Sam Rowe heads to New Jersey to find out



**I** need to stop, before I have a heart attack." Vincent Lemay is defeated, a broken man. A French-Canadian bodybuilder, he has been chewed up and spat out, and at the age of just 23 is ready to announce his retirement. But not from the gym. Lemay's adversary is an 8-bit ape called Donkey Kong who has just murdered him – or rather a moustachioed plumber called Mario – with a flying barrel. It seems he's done it for the last time. "If *Donkey Kong* subtracted seven minutes of your life, like a cigarette does," says Lemay, "I would have been dead years ago."

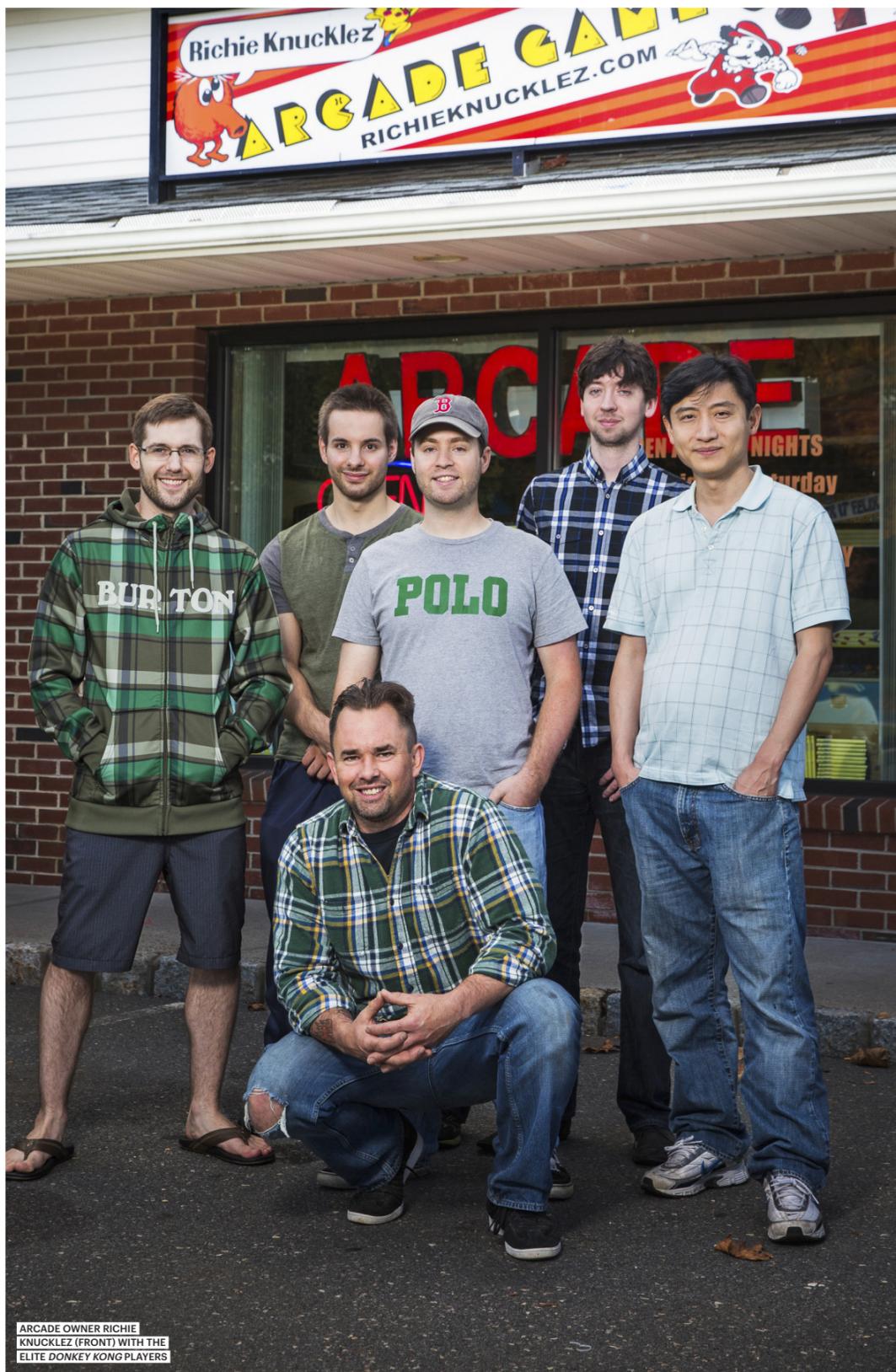
Deep within the confines of a New Jersey arcade, in among the antique games, five men are battling to make gaming history amid leftover takeaway containers and a fug of marijuana smoke wafting in from outside. It may not be as decadent as the Champions League final or the Super Bowl, yet some of the planet's finest joystick jockeys are here, duking it out for the high score on *Donkey Kong* – a contest that goes back 33 years.

The game has attained mythical status over time, considered to be among the hardest ever made and impossible to complete thanks to a software glitch known as the 'kill screen'. For a beginner, all three lives will be spent in under a minute, whereas a world record game will require more than three hours of constant focus from the pros, trying to squeeze out every point.

So why the devotion? Well, it's partly nostalgia and partly the difficulty. *Donkey Kong* represents the Holy Grail for retro gamers. It has driven men around the world to distraction along the way, spawning fierce rivalries, even death threats, and plenty of repetitive-strain injuries besides. For Vincent Lemay, it's forced him to say "game over".

### DONKEY WORK

Thirty-six hours earlier, and proceedings are just getting underway. Lemay's girlfriend has recently given birth to their first child, a son, yet instead of toasting the new arrival with premium-strength French lager, Lemay challenged the cult *DK* community to join him at Richie Knucklez arcade in Flemington, New Jersey, as he takes one final run at the



ARCADE OWNER RICHIE KNUCKLEZ (FRONT) WITH THE ELITE DONKEY KONG PLAYERS

*Donkey Kong* crown, something he has spent five years failing to achieve. He's come close before: his 1,135,900 points in January 2013 was just 2,700 off 40-year-old plastic surgeon Hank Chien's then-world record. "It's my DNA, I need a rivalry," admits Lemay. "Hank seems to be a very successful man in life – he's a plastic surgeon, got the *Donkey Kong* world record, graduated from Harvard – but when you look at him, he doesn't look like a champion. When I think about a real champion, I think of Arnold Schwarzenegger. But when I look at Hank I don't see any muscles. When you look at me, you see muscle. I am the image of a real champion."

Sidling up to the five *Donkey Kong* cabinets, the competitors represent a miscellany of ages, career and ability. There's Robbie Lakeman, 27 – the new record holder as of September, a golfer and poker player who dedicated the past three years to the game after a bar bet with a friend; Wes Copeland, 24 – a software engineer and pianist who just recently graced the top 10; Ethan Daniels – a 30-year-old barber who notched his first kill screen in three months, yet plays in such a dangerous way that he seldom finishes a game and sits in 40th; and, of course – warring rivals Chien and Lemay.

"We're definitely overly competitive," confesses Lakeman of the group. I notice that, Chien's girlfriend Youmee apart, there are no girls in the arcade. Is the draw of competitive *Donkey Kong* uniquely male? "It might just be the concept of the game that doesn't really attract women," shrugs Lakeman. "I mean, you're a chubby plumber with a moustache, trying to save the girl. Maybe from a female perspective that doesn't look great."

"I think men are a little more stubborn and competitive," adds Chien. "There's something about *Donkey Kong* that makes you think you can do better than you can actually do. Then the game slaps you in the face and says no, so you come back for more."

As day one draws to a close, drama has been scant, bar the odd expletive muttered in the direction of a machine, as players complain about wonky monitors, stiff joysticks and a particularly ruthless primate. Playing on a cabinet that's not your own is a bit like running a marathon in someone else's



ROBBIE LAKEMAN BROKE THE WORLD RECORD IN SEPTEMBER



GETTING TO A CERTAIN POINT IN THE GAME TRIGGERS THE 'KILL SCREEN' GLITCH

### "I DON'T HAVE A WIFE OR A GIRLFRIEND. I FIGURED THAT STUFF CAN WAIT"

trainers. Apparently.

Away from the competition, today's been a chance for the players who usually converse via the internet alone to catch up. For them, *DK* is their church. They recite lines from 2007's *The King Of Kong* documentary (credited for breathing new life into the scene) like scripture and bemoan 'randomness' on the game as if it were a higher power. *Donkey Kong* Forum is their Facebook, *Donkey Kong* Blog their Sky Sports News. "Sometimes it feels like life can get in the way of *Donkey Kong*," says reigning champ Lakeman. "I don't have a wife or a girlfriend – I figured that stuff can wait."

### KILL SCREEN KINGS

Shuffling in armed with green tea and ice cream, a little after 8am, world No9 Wes Copeland is ready to tackle day two. "Every kill screen I've ever had come immediately after drinking green tea," he says. A careful and methodical player, Copeland appears Zen in front of the machine, yet could fill a swear jar each time Mario meets his end. "I use it as an outlet for my anger," he says. "I really think *Donkey Kong* is an interesting medium for personal growth."

Next in is rank outsider Ethan Daniels. After earning a masters in genetics, the Pennsylvania native turned his back on medicine in favour of taking over the family

business, a barber shop. Daniels' ambition is to open a bar/arcade hybrid. "It would be a barber shop, bar and arcade – 'Barbarcade'."

As Lemay and Lakeman settle in at their machines, Lemay is happy with one small victory, even if the record still eludes him. Chien is in surgery today, meaning the 250,000 point game he scored yesterday languishes far behind Lemay's 1,080,100. "I scored four times higher than Hank this weekend, that's all that matters," boasts Lemay. "He can go home with all his money, but he will use it to wipe his tears, because I have the record for this week, and he has nothing." As the day progresses and credits mount up, frustration reigns. "We're chasing such statistical outliers that rarely come up," says Daniels. "It's like you're trying to roll a dice with skill."

### CAN'T QUIT

As it turns out, Lakeman's record stays unbroken, and Lemay's 1,080,100 remains the highest of the weekend. Lakeman manages a kill screen on a single life – more for my benefit than anything else – yet is almost embarrassed by his 858,000 points. The modern scene is absurdly competitive (the all-time high is Dean Saglio's 1,206,800, but it's not considered for the record as it was achieved on computer emulator, Mame), though Lakeman's weekend score is not far off legendary gamer/hot sauce impresario Billy Mitchell's original 1982 record, it's barely worth mentioning nowadays. Every new player getting a kill screen (at the time of writing there are 72) only dilutes the achievement further. "To get a kill screen in the Eighties, you were an expert player, a god," claims Copeland. "Today, once you get the kill screen, you are no longer a beginner."

As for Lemay, his long-term goal is to teach his newborn son the way of the joystick, so one day he can beat Chien's (yet-to-be-conceived) baby at *Donkey Kong*. And as for his retirement...

"It's like smoking," says Lemay. "I'm sure that in a few months I will want to play again because I can't quit – it's an addiction." He sits down at a cabinet, grinning. "I'll play maybe one more level, just for fun. It's my nicotine patch, I need it."

## THE MOST DIFFICULT VIDEO GAMES EVER MADE

THAT APE HAS GOT COMPETITION...



### SUPER MARIO BROS: THE LOST LEVELS (NES, 1986)

So difficult that its release outside of Japan was blocked by Nintendo until 1993. Randomly spawning enemies were tricky enough but poisonous power-ups made it almost unplayable for most.

### BATTLETOADS (NES, 1991)

A Ninja Turtle rip-off, this beat-em-up was hailed for its pioneering graphics and infuriating difficulty. With just three lives available, co-op play made it even harder, as you might accidentally kill your fellow toad.

### F-ZERO GX (GAMECUBE, 2003)

A futuristic racer with minimal guard rails where you'd spend most of the time swerving your craft into oblivion. A test of memory as much as skill, you'd face off against up to 29 competitors. And subsequently lose.

### FLAPPY BIRD (MOBILE, 2013)

Dong Nguyen's notoriously maddening phenomenon prompted complaints, whispered rumours about Nintendo lawsuits and a swift removal from the app store. Still a masterpiece of side-scrolling sadism.