

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: Movie Review – ***The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*** (documentary)

*Note: The following review of ***The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*** may contain details that could be considered spoilers.*

Ah, the glorious 1980's. This was the decade that encompassed my teen years and also one in which some of my favorite horror films were produced. The "decade of decadence", as it's now called in retrospect, gave us movies like ***Friday the 13th***, ***A Nightmare on Elm Street***, ***Demons***, ***Prom Night***, and ***Terror Train***, among many others. However as I mention on my [Biography](#) page, I didn't really become a horror film fan (partially due to being scared witless as a child by ***Jaws***) until the mid to late 1980's, after seeing the groundbreaking ***A Nightmare on Elm Street*** on video. The 80's was a time when the VCR and home video revolution was taking hold, and many of the aforementioned films were now readily available in VHS format for the small screen. Prior to my immersion in the horror genre however, much of my free time went to things that many of my teenaged friends were also engaged in, including popular sports like bowling and baseball and... (drum roll) ... video games. Yes, even before I became a horror film aficionado, and long before I became an independent filmmaker, I was bitten by the video game bug/craze of the late 1970's and 1980's. I owned the Atari Video Computer System (or VCS for short), also known as the Atari 2600, and a slew of game cartridges to go with it. My friends and I enjoyed countless afternoons in front of the television blasting aliens, slaying dragons or moving a blinking square around a maze while trying to out-manuever all forms of on-screen pursuers (in Atari games such as ***Maze Craze*** and ***Adventure***). I was a regular at the toy store, which at that time was the place to go for video games, eagerly awaiting each new and exciting Atari 2600 cartridge release (until I eventually traded up to the Atari 5200 Super System - while still making it a point to buy the adapter for 2600 cartridges). I even read *Electronic Games Magazine* regularly, and of course frequented the arcades at my local mall just as regularly. I used to bowl in a league on Saturday mornings, and my buddies and I would run into the lounge to play the video games there between games (and sometimes even between frames!). Then, after bowling, we would walk or be driven to the mall, where we would enjoy the afternoon playing arcade games in the two adjacent arcades they had. Aside from breaking to enjoy a

pizza at Papa Gino's, we would keep popping the quarters (later tokens) into games such as *Asteroids*, *Centipede*, *Millipede*, *Galaxian*, *Galaga*, *Gorf*, *Pac-Man*, *Ms. Pac-Man*, *Defender*, *Donkey Kong*, *Joust*, *Dig-Dug*, *Tempest* and *Kangaroo*, just to name but a small few. These arcade games all eventually became available for the home systems thanks to Atari, Activision and other companies, which was exciting; however the excitement of being at the arcade playing them "live" was an experience like no other. I remember some Saturdays staying at the arcades well into the evening after my friends had left and feeling like I had a satisfying day indeed. As I said... Ah the glorious 1980's.

Walking through my (same) local mall today, it's almost hard to imagine those days. And that's not just because the arcades are no longer there. At some point which I can't remember I stopped playing video games. It was just something that happened somehow without much forethought on my part. It might have been partially due to things going on in my life, and partially due to the changing state of the video game industry. * In any event I always thought the days of the arcades and the era of classic arcade games and companies like Atari had come to a close sometime back in the late 1980's or early 1990's, never to return except in nostalgic flashes on shows like *I Love the 80s Strikes Back* (on VH1 Classic). However as I found out recently watching the 2007 documentary ***The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters***, for some the era of classic arcade games is much more than just a fond reminiscence. Rather for some adults classic arcade games are still an integral part of their lives, often even bordering on obsession. This intriguing new documentary from director Seth Gordon gives an insightful look into the lives of several such people and, to a somewhat lesser extent, explores the enduring appeal of the groundbreaking arcade games of yesteryear. And as one might guess by the title, the classic *Donkey Kong* takes center stage in the film. Now let's take a closer look at ***The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters***.

This documentary primarily focuses on two very skilled adult video game players. First there is Billy Mitchell, a successful hot-sauce mogul from Hollywood, Florida. Billy is a driven individual who is also charismatic, self-promoting and outspoken. Before achieving success in the business world, Billy set a record high-score on *Donkey Kong* over twenty years ago (in addition to being an ace and holding records on other games such as *Centipede*). In 1982 he was featured on a Life Magazine cover photo story about the whole video game phenomenon, and until several years ago his record went unchallenged. He was then, and still is now, a king of kings in the subculture of classic arcade games – and he knows it.

The other game player is Steve Wiebe, an average, immediately likable guy with a loving family who lost his job at Boeing at the same time he and his wife bought a new home. He's soft-spoken and humble, and the polar opposite personality-wise of Billy Mitchell. His one similarity to Mitchell is his determination and drive. However Steve is a guy who tries hard at everything, but somehow always seems to come up short. He's really the classic underdog who viewers will immediately begin rooting for.

A few years back, after hearing of Mitchell's *Donkey Kong* record, Wiebe went about trying to break it. This turned out to be a not-so-easy task. We watch as Steve finds out dedicated practicing on his machine at home may not be enough. He breaks the score in front of a video camera and sends the (VHS) tape in to Twin Galaxies for verification. Now just what, you may ask, is "Twin Galaxies"? The answer is it's a place not far from where Billy Mitchell lives in Hollywood, Florida, where people go to play classic arcade games and attempt to set records. Simply put, it's an arcade like the type I used to go to when I was a teenager. Twin Galaxies is the brainchild of Walter Day, the third major character in this drama, a hippie folksinger who is the referee of sorts for classic arcade game tournaments. His establishment has also become

the authority when it comes to records on classic arcade games. (They have a guy whose job it is to sit through and watch hours and hours of submitted tapes). And when Steve submits the tape breaking hometown-boy Billy Mitchell's twenty-plus year record, it creates more than just a stir. The validity of the tape is immediately called into question and men are dispatched, supposedly on behalf of Mitchell, to look into the matter. It's funny and creepy at the same time as Steve's wife talks about guys showing up at their home one day wanting to get into the garage to examine the *Donkey Kong* machine (which they do). Following this Steve decides to step things up a notch in the competition by scraping enough money together to travel to Twin Galaxies to a video game competition in order to best the score live and in-person. He makes several unsuccessful attempts to get Billy to come there so they can compete one-on-one and find out who really is the "King of Kong".

If all of this sounds a little bit crazy, that's because in many ways it probably is. However it's also a fascinating look into a little-known subculture and some of the people immersed in it. As mentioned above, I used to be very much immersed in video games as well. However I had never before heard of Billy Mitchell, Steve Wiebe, or Twin Galaxies for that matter. Listening to Billy talk though, one would think everyone should know who he is. That's because for Billy the record for highest score on *Donkey Kong*, as well as his devotion to the intricacies of the game itself, is very serious business. In fact the same can be said for just about everyone else featured in the film, except perhaps spouses and family. This is really a story about people who take their devotion to *Donkey Kong* (and presumably other classic arcade games as well) to heart. As I said, Billy talks about it and says things like "When you want your name written into history, you have to pay the price". And Steve literally cries when Billy almost immediately sends in a higher taped score to reclaim his title. Additionally, a host of supporting players talk very intensely about the game, the record and Twin Galaxies as well. This ranges from the eclectic Walter Day, all the way down to a wannabe game champion who spends most of his time in the film reporting to Billy Mitchell by phone on Steve's progress on *Donkey Kong* at Twin Galaxies (a Billy Mitchell disciple of sorts). And yet throughout the film we're also reminded just what an underground subculture this really is, because even at pinnacle moments when someone is about to reach a "kill screen" on the game (don't worry if you don't know what that is – I had never heard of it either), the crowds shown at Twin Galaxies are never very large. However for most of the people that are there, it's the equivalent of a stadium event.

Good documentaries uncover the humanity in their subjects. And this one accomplishes that very well. ** As mentioned above, ***The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*** is less about the intricacies of classic arcade games such as *Donkey Kong* (although some time is spent examining this "brutal" game in-depth, especially in the DVD extras), and more about people extremely devoted to it. On one side we have the brazen Billy Mitchell with his American Flag neckties, long dark hair and black boots. Billy is obviously the "bad guy" here, only missing the Snidely Whiplash mustache to complete his look. Steve Wiebe is just as obviously the hero in the film and someone we can all route for, with his quiet, good-natured demeanor. He is in many ways a true American Hero. However despite the films' leanings, I think it's easy to identify with Billy as well. Even though he comes off as arrogant and self-centered, it's understandable how someone would want to hold onto their (arguably impressive) moment of fame for as long as possible. In short the film uncovers the humanity and motivations of both these men in a very accomplished way. And while some may very well view such a pursuit as being strange at best and pathetic at worst, it's no doubt incredibly interesting to say the least. Furthermore it should be pointed out that the overall subject is not without its importance. After all, first-generation arcade games such as *Donkey Kong* set the foundation for the multi-billion dollar gaming industry we see before us today. *** And who wouldn't want their name in the 2007 Guinness Book of World Records for having the highest score on a game that is instantly recognizable to

countless numbers of people the world over? ***The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*** provides a fascinating glimpse into the little-known world of competitive classic arcade gaming competition and is a movie I highly recommend.

* Apparently there is still great interest in classic arcade games and home systems as is evidenced by websites like Atariage.com. Here people can get information about past Atari game systems like the Atari 2600, Atari 5200, Atari 7800, Atari Jaguar and more. I also had never heard of “homebrew” games (new titles) being developed by aficionados of such systems. So in that way, what’s old is also still new at the same time.

** It’s demonstrated in this documentary how *Donkey Kong* is one of the most difficult of the classic arcade games. I can attest to this personally, as it was one of the games I got discouraged with early on, even though I was admittedly more a fan of the space games anyway. (Games like *Galaga*, *Asteroids*, *Centipede*, *Millipede* and *Gorf* were more to my liking, although I was quite a pro at *Kangaroo* as well).

*** There is no doubt that even though one of these two players clinched the 2007 Guinness Book of World Records nod, the competition will continue on well past the end of this documentary.