

FEC Review: iPlayAmerica

By GEORGE MCAULIFFE

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Long before Snooki gave millions of Americans the wrong image of the Jersey Shore, I was growing up there, in Spring Lake Heights, a half mile from the ocean with caring neighbors. It still is a great community. Big parts of our family are still “at the Shore.” We’re back several times a year.

Thirty miles west of my hometown is the Monmouth County seat, Freehold, home to iPlayAmerica, a new, “traditional” family entertainment center (FEC). “Traditional” distinguishes it from the “Bowling FEC,” the most common format of FEC built these days. Not many of the traditional, non bowling variety have gone up in recent years.

iPlay has long been on my radar screen. Having followed the development phase and pre-opening news in *RePlay*, I wanted to see what the developers came up with. On March 28, I gathered my nieces and nephews, James, age 6, Charlotte Mae, 3, and Maggie Lou, 23 months, along with their parents Tara and James, and my wife Julie. We headed west for a visit to iPlay. For the record, I did not consult on this project, and iPlay is not a customer.

Location

The old retail mantra of location, location, location applies in spades to an FEC. FECs are front-end, capital-intensive businesses. Where you park all that money — in the form of your big box building,

entertainment attractions, furniture and fixtures — really matters.

iPlay has a great location for their business. Monmouth County is in a high-kid-count/high-income community. Close enough to



George McAuliffe

— but it does here. iPlayAmerica is adjacent to (and, I believe, affiliated with) the Encore Event Center, a 20,000+ square foot “wedding quality” event center. The combination is perfect as a venue

for bar and bat mitzvahs and allows iPlay to market itself to its Jewish family neighbors. The combined facilities have a wider appeal, of course, for traditional FEC group sales targets and stand alone events in the Encore.

Design, Layout & Theming

The entire facility is billed at 115,000 square feet, of which 20,000 is the Event Center. The two businesses are connected and adjacent but visually separated on the outside. Management has done a terrific job with this design challenge. Two and two can sometimes equal three when co-locating two businesses. Event planners can be turned off if they see it as an adjunct of the FEC. FEC patrons may perceive less fun. Not the case here: management seems to have struck the balance. If so they are on their way to the



New York City yet far enough to be able to afford a nice, big home with good schools for the kids. As I mentioned, Freehold is the county seat, and much of the county can get there in a 20-30 minute drive time. iPlayAmerica is located at the intersection of two major highways, north/south Route 9 and east/west Highway 79, along with other high-traffic feeder roads from all points of the compass.

The immediate community features a high percentage of Jewish families. The ethnicity of an FEC’s market area usually doesn’t matter — FECs appeal to most if not all cultures



George McAuliffe took the family to iPlayAmerica to check out the new FEC. Having fun at the water race game are nieces and nephews, James (age 6), Charlotte Mae, (3), and Maggie Lou (23 months), along with their parents Tara and James, and George’s wife Julie.



Glowing Elaut E-Claw cranes flank a walkway at iPlayAmerica. It makes for a visually stunning presentation. At right, little Maggie Lou is mesmerized by the prizes in the display case.

Holy Grail of retail design synergy, where two and two can add up to five.

iPlay is laid out in a traditional main street/racetrack design, a tried-and-true approach for amusement parks and FECs. There is one major innovation: the arcade is in the center of the racetrack (traditional design would put a major attraction there, with the arcade the first attraction on the right as you enter). I'm kind of intrigued with what iPlay has done here and would love to study it, but the way they designed and equipped their four access points seems to work. The attractions are well mixed and arranged in the square racetrack circulating around the arcade, a good job of grouping complementary attractions in adjacencies.

Theming is nice, nothing overpowering, but that's my style too. Architects like to sell the WOW factor. Unfortunately the WOW factor often disappears from the guests mind after a few visits. Better to invest in staff, attractions, and marketing than to spend too much on the walls. Don't get me wrong, iPlay is nicely designed, a good atmosphere was created. They just put their theming dollars in the



right places and used them wisely. Light levels were a little too dim for my preference. I like a brighter atmosphere, particularly around the family attractions.

Attractions

This is a very traditional mix of attractions. I was struck with how similar the layout and mix was to our first big box FEC, Time Out on the Court in Cincinnati, back in 1989. That's not a slam. I think it just goes to show that some industry attractions have a proven audience that can span generations. It also shows the fact that FECs have clearly arrived as mainstream family entertainment. FECs have now been around through two generations, working on the third.

Attractions include a well done laser tag, with mezzanine, with a capacity of 38 per game session, by Laser Tron; a Creative Works *Laser Frenzy*; and 4D EFX Theatre. As guests circulate around they encounter "retailers" like



an airbrush t-shirt sshop, candy and ice cream shops. Four lanes of mini bowling are housed in their own space. There is a significant soft play attraction for younger kids, midway style group games and a series of party rooms.

Rides

Rides are a big part of the iPlay guest experience. This sector is anchored by Indoor Electric Go Karts and also features Amusement Products' *Spin Zone* floorless electric bumper cars. The design folks spent some money here, enhancing the ride with a light and sound show. The ride selection is completed with a selection of five kiddie rides, the operator attended, park-style variety.

Arcade

As regular readers of this column know, I started as an arcade guy over 30 years ago. Our consulting practice spends a lot of time on arcade development today, all over the

world. As part of Redemption Plus we obviously spend a lot of time in our customer's game rooms. iPlayAmerica's arcade is simply one of the best executed I've ever seen.

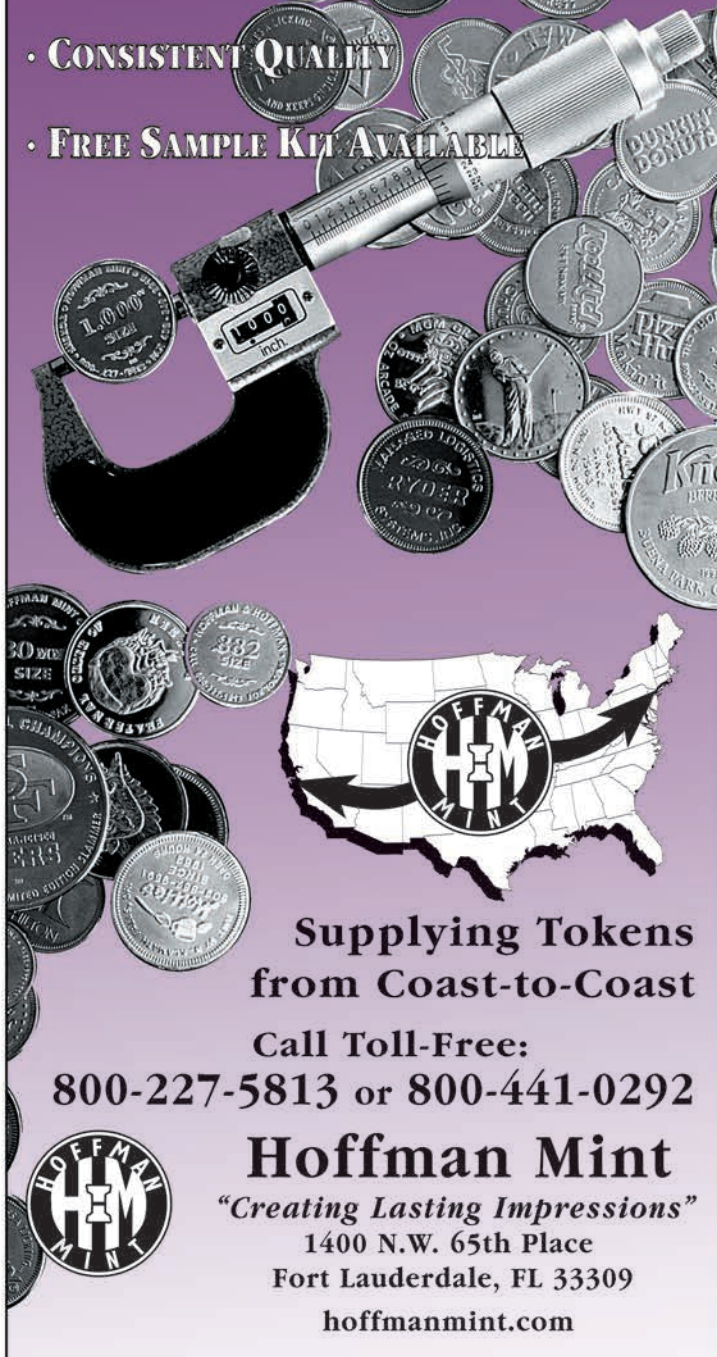
It has a classy feel, great use of light, design features, floor surfaces, access points and game arrangement. Management has invested in the WOW factor here in the games. It seems as if every piece is a deluxe game version. There were three Elaut *Wizard of Oz* pushers (at \$50-60k a piece). The new Elaut color-glow crane cabinet is a work of art. iPlay must have 30 of them, creating a terrific approach into the arcade from one direction. The redemption center did not quite match the high level of execution of the rest of the arcade. It was well done, for sure, but I was not as wowed here as elsewhere.

Operations

Labor: Aside from attracting people to experience the business and getting them to

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return repeatedly, the second biggest challenge in managing a big box FECs is controlling labor. iPlay's traditional FEC approach adds to that challenge. Just review the attractions above, place a person at each required workstation, and multiply by operating hours. If the required top line sales volume is maintained, naturally, this will not be a problem, but it is a challenge.

Guest Experience: We had a great time. The kids had a blast, their parents were happy and got to interact in some attractions, and Julie and I had fun too. My deadly jump shot in the basketball throw won us a nice piece of plush and some brownie points with James and Charlotte. Watching Maggie Lou bowl with her dad was worth the admission.

We had only one negative experience. While in the mini bowling area (which we had to ourselves), I snuck three or four steps down an adjacent lane to take a picture of each kid as they released the ball. I got caught by security. A young gentleman came in and said, politely, that I should please not step out on the lane. At that point I had pictures of James and Charlotte, but not Maggie. After waiting for the security guy to get 50 feet away I snuck back out to get that last picture. Sure enough, at that moment SG spun around and came hustling back the fifty feet to tell me to stay off the lanes. Okay, I was wrong, I get it. But I'd guess management would rather have had the security officer put the guest experience ahead of the hard and fast rule (especially that it was mid week, low traffic time, ages of all involved, no safety issue etc., etc.). Outrageous guest service might have had the young guy offer to take the picture for me.

This was an exception as the rest of the staff was friend-

ly and seemed interested in ensuring that we had an enjoyable experience.

Safety: On attractions like rides, which require uncompromising safety standards I'd have to give iPlay an A+. Every ride was signed, every operator taking their job seriously, checking height when required, ensuring safety restraints in place. I witnessed a safety training session for ride operators going on in one of the party rooms and was very impressed with the professionalism displayed.

Pricing: A friend of mine in the industry lives close to iPlay. Prior to my visit he shared that the "word on the street" was that the facility was very expensive, so I went in prepared to pay though the nose and be underwhelmed by the price-value relationship.

As we left for home we did the math. We spent \$65 for admission which entertained us for an hour and a half. The kids loved it, their parents were happy, and we created some memories. We walked out with toys with a combined wholesale value of about \$15-translating to retail value of about \$40-45. It was a great value in my opinion.

I love to see good execution and that is what we saw here. iPlay America is a credit to the industry. Congratulations to the owners; we wish them great success.

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