

Reading Time: 9 minutes

NOTE: This is a re-post of an article posted on RaceSpot News in December 2023, a website which is temporarily closed. The software and experience is the same, though the prices may have changed.

I've not lived in Birmingham for a couple of years now, and try not to make a point of visiting it when I can avoid it. Thankfully the German Christmas Market is gone for another year, but aside from the Bullring Shopping Centre, a Cat Café and a restaurant designed to be the UK Version of Dick's Last Resort the Centre of Birmingham offers very little these days. If you want to visit Birmingham, all the good stuff is away from the main City Centre. There is however an exception to this rule. There's a growing number of indoor 'entertainment' venues taking up shop in former... Shops, and other locations in the city core. These range from golf to football, designed for teenagers / adults, and providing something different when it comes to spending a day in the city.

On the site of the old brutalist library and a shopping centre ironically called 'Paradise Forum', there's now a bunch of high-rise office blocks and the home of [the best Strudel in the West Midlands](#). There's also a new(ish) entertainment venue called F1 Arcade. It essentially combines a restaurant, bar, viewing location for F1 races, and has a number of rigs to allow people to participate in racing, hence the 'arcade' part of the name. Being in Birmingham for a few hours with a desire to get away from the rain, a friend and I headed on in to see what it was all about.

First Impressions, Getting Setup.

In terms of first impressions, this is very Liberty Media F1esque, and never would have been a thing in the old Bernie days. The venue isn't exactly bright, but has more than a couple of true F1 vibes to it. From circuit outlines adorning walls, to a set of red lights to a replica F1 car stuck to the ceiling so that they don't have to have someone guard it when the drunken punters want to 'get in for a photo', there's a lot on offer visually. The food and drinks are perfectly F1 priced: Expensive. There's a Greggs and a Nandos just down the road if you don't fancy maxing out your credit card before you even get to the racing aspect. I would argue prices are akin to somewhere London 'venue' which may put some people off, but it's not as if they are checking to see if you've eaten before you walk into the place.

The key attraction for me on this day is of course the simulators. According to their website they have 53 of them, but they are laid out in such a way you can race with your friends without sharing another group's emotions like at a Wagamama. In fact a little deep dive into the FAQs on the F1 Arcade website states that you will only ever race with people in the same group as you, so none of this 'arcade bully' nonsense. Even better, you can actually buy a version of the rigs used in F1 Arcade, [so long as you have about £40,000 free](#).

It's clear that these rigs have been crafted with care, and are in effect [Vesaro V-Zero rigs](#), with [Ultimate+ load cell pedals from Heusinkveld](#) a direct drive input, and [Moza FSR wheels](#). As someone who's had to setup and maintain rigs for live events, I do like the all in one design. The monitors may not be the best in terms of field of view if we were doing GT racing where I would always take triples, but for F1 racing, this is more than enough; remember you barely have a decent FOV these days as a driver with a HANS device and Halo, so you can at least say that's showing off realism! Also single monitors make setup and maintenance a much simpler process, so I can get the reasoning from a commercial perspective too.

The gameplay is an F1 modded version of Motorsport Games. Graphics are designed to look like what you are used to on TV, and the 'pre-race' experience is immersive enough to be useful without overwhelming. The one thing I think needs to be changed is the time limit for getting signed onto the rigs, as if it wasn't for the fact I knew that I would have to register via a QR code, I may have missed the timer. For some reason my friend and I were allocated to different rigs to the one we signed up on, but thankfully we were next to each other, allowing a quick fix. Moving the bucket seat was easy enough, and even though my pedals seemed to move back at the end of race 2, I could still just about reach the pedals before moving my seat forward for race 3.

You have two race package options, either 3 races or 5 races. 3 races ranges from £15.95 to £20.95 per person depending on when you race (Daytime, off peak, or standard), whilst the 5 race package costs between £25.95 and £30.95 per person. Not cheap, but I'd argue you'd get more entertaining seat time compared going to one of the go-kart tracks scattered across Birmingham (Though sadly the best of the bunch, Birmingham Wheels is no more). You can race with up to 6 people at a time in head to head mode, and larger groups can use team mode.

Actually Racing On This Thing.

[There are 5 levels of difficulty](#) depending on your experience using a sim rig / general knowledge of an F1 car. These are Rookie, Casual, Semi Pro, Pro or Elite. The most basic (Rookie) pretty much just requires to point in the right direction and has a driving line attached to it. Only Elite requires you to gear shift using the flappy paddles, which I must say has a really nice tactile feel to it. I chose Elite and my partner in crime chose Rookie, to see the two complete ends of the spectrum.

One thing I was disappointed with was the fact that there was no practice, qualifying or warmup of any sort. In short, you were chucked straight onto the grid for the first race. I'm not certain if the tracks are randomly generated / are just assigned based on your race package, but in our three race package we had Spa, Silverstone and Monza in that order. This means that your first actual experience in the rig is trying to get through La Source, Eau Rouge / Radillion then Les Combes. Not easy in any car, and could be a barrier to longer term interest perhaps? Being 10 seconds back after a handful of corners can always be demoralising, and if nothing else they could replace the load screen with something a bit like the track key points run through at the start of a Grand Prix.

Thankfully for some, there's no damage on these cars. They can flip, but you wait a bit and magical oompa-loompas flip your car back over for you so it's upright again, all whilst under the cover of Harry Potter's invisibility cloak. There's also the option to reverse for those who inevitably will meet an Armco barrier / tyre wall. The only difficulty was that when this was being explained in the loading

screen, it could sometimes cut off half way through to join the race, and I'd say it's one of those things you'd ignore until it became important to you.

Because I overshot La Source, I ended up racing from the back at Spa. By the back I mean about 10 drivers, either AI / people you are racing against. The AI is pretty decent in terms of not going at a stupid speed through the fast - medium speed corners, and you certainly could race them with a bit of decorum. I would say that as the only difference between modes is how many of the car's controls you have to actually use, the AI cars has deliberately set to be slow enough that you could pass $\frac{3}{4}$ of the field with comparable ease regardless of what mode you are on. The challenge is more about being able to use all the car controls rather than actual 'racing' skills in my opinion.

It's not just winning / finishing above your fellow 'human' players that score you points. Perhaps knowing that some people would struggle more than others in relation to fully adapting to a rig setup, there's points on offer for staying on track etc and making clean overtakes, as well as time & points lost for jumping the start, crashing and so on. I would have tried to elaborate on this in more detail but it does whizz past you pretty quickly, and I never seemed to have enough time to take a photo from my rig (Using a mobile whilst driving is bad remember!)

Races 2 & 3, And A Problem Uncovered.

Races 2 and 3 were far more entertaining after Spa became an extended test session. They advise you to brake earlier than you expect, and the real reason is that the AI cars seem to be running Fernando Alonso's GP2 style engines at points. At Silverstone you could seemingly overtake any which-way in sector 1, and through Copse / Maggots / Becketts, it was a case of hoping other cars would just stay in a lane. I think this is pretty much how the AI is modelled. Run on line, be about 85% decent racing speed, and not be notorious douchebags when it comes to overtaking.

By winning at Silverstone, I started on pole for the final race at Monza, overshot the run into the first chicane, started going down the escape road, and learned something important... There's no time penalties / slow downs for cutting the course! Especially as my conversation with the front desk after racing revealed that longer term plans are to have AI based on fellow F1 Arcade Participants and some form of mini LAN Event tournaments during the week, this is one thing that needs to be addressed, especially at Pro / Elite levels.

I can understand why this doesn't need to be addressed for the lower levels as at Rookie there's decent braking assist anyway, but there's a good chance you could end up with a couple of party tantrums / drunken fisti-cuffs if people take too much advantage of this. There's not exactly anyone acting as marshalls, and certainly no fair play rules to sign beforehand, so this is one thing which does have the ability to turn an otherwise fun and entertaining experience into something less so.

Conclusions.

Would I return to F1 Arcade? For the most part, yes. You only need to pre-book for F1 races for raceday itself, so would be somewhere where I wouldn't mind popping in for a practice / qualifying session. Personally I like to watch my F1 like I watch my CFB / NFL; I don't want to be spending the entire time explaining every little detail or holding my ears shut due to frankly ridiculous comments

from people and tables around me. I'm still not convinced about the food prices, and whilst I'm no longer a purveyor of alcoholic beverages, even the soft drinks are expensive enough to leave a minor dent in my wallet.

In terms of the main attraction? As an infrequent thing, sure. It's worth it. I'd prefer it more over the few go-karting locations left in the West Midlands, especially as most are now indoors and I have serious concerns about how often the overalls are washed. If you were going with a group of people who each have some racing game experience, you will have a bunch of fun, and I can see this concept working from everything from teambuilding to friendly rivalry get togethers. It's worth noting that dress code rules means that you can tick this off the stag / hen do location list, and frankly for good measure. These rigs are not cheap, and all it would take to ruin things for everyone is an errant pint landing on hardware.

Customer Service was great, and for the most part the racing was fun. I wouldn't make this a weekly 'thing', but as somewhere to add to a repertoire of things to do whilst in Birmingham, sure. Why not? Especially on one of those rainy days in Birmingham when you just want to have some fun, this provides yet another one of those 'experience' locations that the city seems to crave these days.

Peace And Love xx

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