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The Power of “Place” in Videogame Culture

Focusing on Game Centers in Japan (Column)

In the digital environment of amusement culture, the place where games are played is determinative and influential for gameplay. Simply put: the digital game itself, the game players, and the place where the game is played are three essential constituents for creating the situation of playing digital games.

Today’s digital games have evolved to the point where they can be played anywhere and at anytime, at least in Japan. However, depending on location, there are restrictions on the digital games that can be played. In Japan, for example, anyone wanting to play a digital game on a train is limited to smartphone-based games and portable game consoles. And enjoying an arcade game-type experience at home is generally beyond the reach of most Japanese people. On the other hand, in “game centers”,¹ the game machines are mainly dedicated arcade games. Playing anything other than arcade games in game centers is difficult because few game center managers are willing to allow smartphones and mobile game consoles to be played in their stores. Thus, we can see that the acceptance and tolerance of game consoles alone vary depending on location.

Furthermore, social relations change dramatically in these places and spaces of gameplay. One example of this change is the difference in communication spaces. For offline gameplay at home is likely to occur in a space that facilitates communication with people you know, such as friends and family. As Hiroyasu Kato (2011) and Yoshiaki Kijima (2014) analyzed, the game center creates a space for direct and indirect communication, including tacit understanding, with an unspecified number of people. Furthermore, a variety of communication spaces with an unspecified number of people have been created in gameplay spaces that are connected to the internet.

Thus, the environment and context of digital games is determined by the place where they are played. In particular, the gameplay environment outside

¹ In America, it is called a “game arcade” or “amusement arcade”. In this column, I will use the English term “game center,” which is commonly used in Japan.

the home is inevitably linked to society, and is therefore liable to generate particular differences among countries.

This column focuses on “game centers” in Japan in order to illustrate these differences in the place and environment of videogames.

Game centers have various names and definitions in different countries (see footnote 1), but Mark J.P. Wolf’s definition of game arcades comes closest to a generally accepted definition. Wolf describes them as “commercial venues that feature coin-operated devices such as video games, pinball machines and other electromechanical games, and merchandiser and redemption games.”²

In previous studies undertaken in various countries, the term game centers usually refers to stores that operate as independent commercial facilities, equivalent to the American game arcade (hereafter referred to as “independent stores”).

Independent stores’ main source of revenue is the sales garnered from game consoles. There are also versions of these stores that are open to all, but whose main clientele are individuals wanting to communicate through gameplay. As a result, players who frequent independent stores have developed their own communication culture, which has been the subject of research in Japan by e.g. Kato, Kijima, and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon (2019).

In Japan, however, in addition to independent stores, arcade and similar game machines are installed at locations that become game centers or a small game corner. Specifically, both locations function as “store formats” of more traditional game centers and each have their own culture and context. This column focuses on “game corners for children” as an example of a store format that differs greatly from independent stores.

Game corners for children are a store-based format where game machines are installed as a side business in the store frontage or inside stores aimed at children, such as toy shops and dagashi-ya (a Japanese penny candy shop). In this case, the game machines that usually leased for free on the agreement that the leasing companies receive a portion of the revenue generated. Most often, you will find arcade-style videogame machines and medal game machines for children (games played with a specific type of medal coins) in these spaces.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Kawasaki, 2017), such store formats have created a gameplay space that differs from the so-called game arcade or independent stores. For example, the primary customer base for this store format consists of individual children of elementary school age or younger. They visit dagashi-ya and toy stores for sweets and toys, and play arcade games while they are there. Since such locations are primarily private stores, their

² Wolf, 2012, 34.

owners allow the children to play under their supervision. In addition, children have been observed playing in these places under rules that have been clearly defined by store owners. As mentioned above, my analysis suggests that the existing children’s communication culture and the emerging digital gameplay culture are well-matched in this store format.

In this way, the same game machines are played in game centers in Japan albeit in a variety of store locations. Even in 2020, when the diversity of store formats itself has declined, game centers are still firmly oriented toward being entertainment facilities for all, incorporating a range of customers of all ages and genders. In a sense, we can speak of a chaotic gameplay culture in these spaces. This historical trend emerged from the rise of arcade-game manufacturers in Japan and the popularity of the arcade games themselves. The most significant factor, however, is the fact that it was socially possible to install game machines in the aforementioned locations, and that these store formats were accepted in various parts of society.

Based on the above premise, it can be suggested that the game-playing environment outside the home has been influenced by and forms part of the history of games and the social culture of each country.

In Europe and America, for example, “family entertainment centers,” offer amusement facilities for parents and children. Such places are an entertainment facility that also features arcade games. From a Japanese perspective, such locations can be considered as a form of game center or game arcade. As far as I can see, however, these places are treated completely differently to game arcade facilities, and, moreover, they appear not to have been analyzed in previous studies to date.

The family entertainment centers that are to be found in America but also throughout Europe are considered as places that have a significant influence on the society and game culture of these places. Consequently, we must discuss them in terms of their social position as “game centers” or places where digital games are installed.

These global comparisons of the “places” where gameplay of digital games occurs can encourage thinking about the game culture itself in each country. Indeed, in the context of the subject discussed in this column, it is necessary to consider the definition of a game center based on the characteristics of the “places” as well as the characteristics of the “coin-operated devices” defined by Wolf.

Based on my research, I would like to define a game center more broadly, as “a facility that presents a variety of cultures based on coin-operated entertainment devices.” Under this definition, game centers are more than game arcades; they are also an opportunity to think about the possibility of other amusement facilities with coin-operated devices. I would suggest, therefore,

that our understanding of this issue of “place” in relation to videogames would be enhanced by researchers from a range of countries working together in future.

References

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