Video Arcades: a Male Domain

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Technological progress continues to rapidly expand the boundaries of what is possible in computing, electronic communication, and information quality and mobility. One of the advances directly linked to the technological revolution has been the development and refinement of video arcade games and home computer games. Video games have risen from relative obscurity in the early 1970s to their assimilation into the U.S. culture (Greenfield et al. 1994a). Today we find video games in mall arcades, corners of grocery and convenience stores, in the lobby of movie theaters, on home computers, and projected through television sets. From the simplicity of Pong, an early video game in which a spot of light moves across an electronic tennis court, action or "arcade style" video games have evolved to a creative and complex form of entertainment (Greenfield et al. 1994b).

Today video arcades and home systems are providing games with life-like graphics, three-dimensional playing environments, and powerful sound effects. No longer limited to just a few scenarios, available games can be grouped into several distinct genres including crime and violence, military or paramilitary adventures, sports, and cartoon/fantasy games (Gailey 1993). The popular "urban violence" games, such as Street Fighter, have even been the basis for major motion pictures, and many of the games are related to popular comic book creations.

In 1992, Nintendo figures indicated that approximately 44 percent of all U.S. households had video game systems. The extent of this "Nintendo phenomenon" equates to 45 million homes (Greenfield et al. 1994a). When considering the mere exposure of people to video games (arcade games or home video systems) the numbers are equally amazing. Greenfield et al. (1994b) had to modify their experiment because they found that a population of American college students had been universally exposed to video games to some degree (unlike their Italian sample in which some had never been exposed to such games). They also reported how a 1986 dissertation by Rushbrook showed that 94 percent of 10-year-old children in Southern California played video games (Greenfield et al. 1994b). "Video games have blossomed into a robust industry with consumers ranging from adolescents to professional athletes to business travelers to family units" (Panelas 1983).

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in identifying groups of people who participate together in consuming specific products or types of products. When such a group evolves into a community based on shared commitment to a certain product class or consumption activity, members are able to draw identity and stability from the group solidarity by purchasing and
using certain "sanctioned" products, adopting those products and associated values into their personal sense of self, and displaying group attributes in their social self. Termined "subcultures of consumption," these groups generally maintain an identifiable social structure, a set of shared beliefs and values, and unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Players of video games comprise one such subculture of consumption, and the video arcade provides a venue for investigating the intriguing characteristics of this group of people who share an interest in playing video games.

THE CULTURAL SCENE OF THE VIDEO ARCADE

The purpose of this study is to gain additional insight into the unique culture of the video arcade. Although numerous studies have investigated various aspects of video game players and video arcades, very few have attempted to construct the "cultural scene" of the video arcade. A cultural scene is the information shared by two or more people that defines some aspect of their experience (Spradley and McCurdy 1972:24). Members of the video arcade "culture" share a certain knowledge that organizes and structures the way they interact within the social situation of an arcade. By providing behavioral norms, social etiquette, specific vocabulary, and certain values, this "knowledge" creates the cultural scene (Spradley and McCurdy 1972:24-30).

UNDERSTANDING THE VIDEO ARCADE: THE METHOD

Spradley and McCurdy (1972:4) explain that, "Ethnographic field work in any cultural scene will provide flesh for a great many conceptual and theoretical skeletons." In this study, we are in the process of "fleshing out" the video arcade cultural scene by utilizing an iterative process which involves collecting data in the field, expanding it through familiarity with relevant literature and previous research, and then returning to the field to further explore the cultural scene. Similar to the paradigm presented by Venkatesh (1995), we hope to achieve an understanding of the cultural framework of the video arcade subculture and ultimately interpret our findings in such a way as to present a better understanding of the video arcade cultural scene.

This paper presents an overview of the work-in-progress for our study on the video arcade subculture. The data reported here will largely be gleaned from non-participant observation at various video arcades, a depth interview with a key informant, and a group interview with three players of varying levels and intensity. The remainder of the paper will be structured as follows: (1) a brief review of relevant literature which started following our initial observations and will continue throughout the research process; (2) a description of the observation sites visited for data collection; (3) a presentation of themes that are beginning to emerge; and (4) a brief summary of directions for further research.

THE VIDEO ARCADE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Games played in a society embody the values of the dominant culture and are ways of reinforcing through play the behaviors and models of order rewarded or punished in the society (Gailey 1993). Due to the popularity and pervasiveness of video games, together with their potential ability to
socialize children to cultural values, video games have proved an interesting topic for research. Studies have focused on the relationship between adolescents and video games (Ellis 1984; Selnow 1984; Wilder, Mackie, and Cooper 1985), addictive or deviant behaviors of players (Egli and Meyers 1984; Ellis 1984; Fisher 1994), the cognitive development and skills associated with playing video games (Greenfield et al. 1994a, 1994b), and the self-concept and self-esteem of avid players (Funk and Buchman 1996).

A great deal of research interest has centered around personal aggression as a result of repeated exposure to video games and the competitive (versus cooperative) nature of video games (Anderson and Morrow 1995). Unlike viewing violent television, the video game player is actively involved in beating and killing enemies, destroying structures, avoiding danger, and achieving the end goal. Numerous experiments have been designed to determine if video games result in greater aggression and violence (Calvert and Tan 1994; Irwin and Gross 1995; Scott 1995; Sneed and Runco 1992). However, many of these studies are based on the earlier video games, such as Asteroids and Space Invaders, so the conclusions may not be relevant to today's more realistic human and alien combat games. Moreover, the studies aimed at determining if video games impact aggressive behavior have shown no consistent conclusions.

The video arcade subculture presents a fascinating combination of socialization norms, gender issues, and competition. Previous research has experimentally tested various cognitive and behavioral aspects of the video arcade and video game players. However, there has been very little naturalistic inquiry into the video arcade subculture, and virtually no examination of the unique "male" domain that it creates.

THE VIDEO ARCADE: OBSERVATIONS

We initially approached our first non-participant observation experience with very little knowledge of the video arcade subculture. One investigator did have limited personal experience with playing video games, and does play (infrequently) in video arcades. Our initial observation took place at a university video arcade. Throughout all of the observations, each researcher independently kept field notes and recorded reflective comments. Discussion between the researchers occurred within the iterative process.
The university arcade presented an interesting look at "adult" players. After our initial observations, we approached the literature and started to develop possible themes. We engaged in other qualitative activities to further examine the nature of these themes. Additional video arcades were observed over a three-week period; these sites included arcades located in shopping malls and in amusement centers. Return visits to the initial arcade site were conducted at different times of the day and week. One depth interview was conducted with a 14-year-old male informant to better understand the dynamics of the mall arcades and the perspectives of younger participants. A second group interview was conducted to learn more about the culture from an insider viewpoint. The three informants in the group interview were all males, ranging in age from 22-years-old to 29-years-old, and each is currently a student at the university where our initial observations were made.

The remainder of this section discusses each of the five emerging themes based on observations, participant comments, and applicable literature.

THE VIDEO ARCADE: EMERGING THEMES

Five dominant themes are emerging from our initial research of this unique subculture. They are: (1) arcades as a male domain; (2) importance of competition; (3) clear cultural norms; (4) vastly different levels of participation in the subculture; and (5) a trend towards more violent combat games.

Theme 1 - Male Domain

Our initial observations suggest that video arcades are clearly a male domain consisting of distinct gender boundaries. Each video arcade observed in this study had an overwhelming majority of male players, which is consistent with previous research (Egli and Myers 1984; Kaplan 1983; Wilder, Mackie and Cooper 1985). Kaplan (1983) found evidence of the "male domain" in a sign posted in one arcade he visited:

...For the sales clerk, the young boy with adventure on his mind, the middle-aged man with adventure behind him, game machines turn a drab existence into action packed adventures...

The university arcade provides the clearest gender differences, as (with the exception of three Asian women) we have yet to see females playing the video games.

The gender boundaries at the university arcade are very explicit, even though the arcade is immersed in a general thoroughfare in the student activity center (hereafter called the Union). The video games line one wall along the walkway, forming a video "gauntlet," and players and observers often form large crowds that encroach upon the walking area. When observing non-participants traversing the "gauntlet," we repeatedly saw consistent patterns of how males and females reacted differently to the arcade boundaries. Males were drawn to the games, and usually stopped to see what was going on or gazed wistfully at the games as they passed by. On the other hand, females (especially Caucasian females) seemed oblivious to the existence of the games and consistently looked away or down when passing by the arcade area. At one end of the arcade area, females must pass through the arcade boundary to reach the women's restroom. Our observations of females following this path revealed a distinct pattern in which the females walked around the arcade...
area “boundary” and then pivoted sharply to reach the restroom. They looked in the direction away from the arcade area as they proceeded along this path. One advantage of having a cross-gender research team was to view the reactions of participants when the investigators crossed into the arcade boundaries. For example, when the female investigator walked over to a group of males playing and watching a video game, there was an immediate sense of discomfort and of not being welcome. Many males glanced at her strangely and in some cases, the group of males closed ranks to keep her away from the game and the participants. The male investigator could approach a group and watch without the players recognizing his presence. In fact, male observers typically moved to accommodate him into the circle around the game and provide him a better view of the screen.

Observations of mall arcades continue to support the theme that video arcades are a male-domain. However, the clear gender boundaries observed in the university arcade are not as strong at these other settings. The younger-age of the participants found in the mall arcades account for much of this difference. The mall arcade is populated mostly by teenagers and appears to be more of a social "hangout" than an exclusive male-bonding territory. In one mall arcade, females between the ages of 10-years-old and 14-years-old were fairly common. This finding is consistent with Fisher (1994) who identifies the amusement arcade as a social space for adolescents. Many of the teenage girls were inside the arcade to accompany a male who was playing, or were there as part of a larger group of girls. When the girls do play, they tend to play carnival-type games, such as "skee ball" and the claw that drops down to capture stuffed animals.

As the age of women increases, it is unlikely that they will participate in the arcade games. This was confirmed in the interview with the 14-year-old player.

There are some girls in there (a mall arcade). Not grown women, though, just girls. But for the majority, it's men. [Male, 14]

Throughout our observations, females beyond their early teens did not appear comfortable within the arcade area. While waiting for their children to finish playing, many mothers positioned themselves on the fringe of the arcade, under the entrance. Women who did enter the mall arcades were watching their young children play or were retrieving their children. In contrast, during an evening observation of one of these mall arcades, many adult men stopped in to play a few games. Many of these men were dressed in uniforms or business suits, suggesting that they were stopping on their way home from work.

The video arcade culture seems to marginalize women. Within the video games themselves, the female characters in the games are typically "Amazon-esque" in appearance, scantily dressed, and sexually alluring. What they lack in brute strength and power, they make up for with speed and cunning. Our observations are very similar to the findings of Gailey (1993) who conducted a content-analysis of home video games. She found that "good" females are generally portrayed as helpless maidens who act as rewards for successfully navigating the adventure. In the "urban jungle" games, which were most popular in the arcades we visited, the women are presented as sexually mature and provocative, but at the same time muscular, leather-garbed, and "tough." In these games, the women are subject
to the same range of violence as the men. Galley asserts that the women in video games are manifestations of underlying male fantasies and are either sheltered "good" girls to be saved, or aggressive "worldly" women to be dominated.

Women are also marginalized by men within the context of the arcade. The three older informants said that they had never played against any females, and responded that they had rarely been involved with female participation in the arcades. Our younger informant suggested that females he had played against in the arcade approached the game very differently than males.

Well they (females) are much more polite first of all. You know, they'll ask, "Can I join in?" "Do you mind if I play you?" "What character is good?" Things like that. But they're good, they're very good....Guys never do that. You just expect a guy to be good, and then if they're not, they're not. You don't expect a girl to be good because they don't act like it. You know, guys usually swagger up and they're like, "You're dead." Girls don't do that [Male, 14].

Theme 2 - Competition

The majority of popular arcade games involve competition, either between multiple players, or between the player and the computer. Although competition is certainly challenging, it is generally impersonal (in that the winner continues playing and doesn't ridicule, or even pay attention to, the loser) or between good friends. Cooperative game-playing is possible with some of the games (i.e., players can team-up against the computer), but this mode of play was observed only one time when two men were playing a basketball video game, NBA JAM.

Two sub-themes emerged within our broad theme of competition in arcade cultures. First, competition is an integral part of the American male experience. Second, male desires for competition are more satisfied by playing against other participants rather than competition against the computer.

Competition Is Important

Competition is an essential component in this arcade culture dominated by American males. The participants that were interviewed repeatedly emphasized the importance of the competition and trying to win, as demonstrated by the following statement regarding the necessity of competition:

I think human nature is also very competitive, especially when you're playing someone you know--you want to beat them. What better way to beat them than to totally give them a thrashing [Male, 29].

Other general comments of the informants indicate that although players are polite to each other and are expected to be gracious in victory or defeat, they still want to win and to be competent opponents. Research on gender differences in competitiveness suggests that males and females are socialized to different views about competition from a very early age, through the games that they play (i.e., boys playing sports or good guys versus bad guys, and girls playing with dolls or playing house) (Wood 1994). This may explain, in part, the high proportion of male players in an arcade due to the competitive nature of the games and the confrontational aspect of the culture itself.
Human Competition Preferred

Second, each of our informants described how satisfying it is to play against another human being instead of the computer. One of the participants in the group interview suggested that players compete against the computer primarily to hone their skills for the "real" competition against other human beings. He stated:

I like the games where you can play against another human...so you've got your buddy right there. If you give him a good punch on the screen, you can turn to him and say "Ha!" It's not as fun to me to play against the computer. The reason that I play against the machine with nobody else there is to practice my moves for the next time I'm playing against my buddy [Male, 24].

Another sentiment echoed by these informants was that the unpredictability of human players made for better competition than the consistency of the computer.

That's kind of why it is fun to play against humans--there's that element of doubt. You know they're going to make mistakes. The computer just doesn't make mistakes [Male, 24].

Another facet of competition entails clear norms of video game competition. Specific behaviors are culturally acceptable for challenging others (i.e., entering the competition), actually competing in a game, and responding to victory or defeat. These aspects of the video game culture fall under the broad theme of cultural norms.

Theme 3 - Explicit Cultural Norms

Sportsmanship and fair play are very important themes expressed by expert, or serious, players. These players emphasize the importance of skill and competition, rather than merely winning the game. Distrust and anger is conveyed toward participants who win the games by using specific "power moves" which cannot be defended against. All of the informants mention the relative ease of defeating other skilled opponents with a particular sequence of moves. Instead of reveling in victory, the informants indicate that they find more fun and gratification in a good, fair match with another person. The following comment was representative of a common sentiment among the informants:

I usually don't like playing people I don't know because...there are some ways you can just be really cheap in winning instead of going out and trying to enjoy the game [Male, 22].

They also suggest that players should purposefully reduce their level of play when competing with a clearly less-skilled opponent, so that both players can enjoy a fair competition. If someone is controlling a game by using the "cheap shots" mentioned previously, the informants stated that they would leave that game and return later when the "cheap" player was gone. A stigma is then placed on the "cheap player," and he is remembered and avoided by other serious participants.

Not only do strong norms of appropriate play exist in this subculture, but equally defined norms exist for entering a game as a challenger. The basic etiquette for entering a game involves walking up to a game in progress and placing a quarter at the bottom of the display screen. This behavior establishes the challenger's place in line to play the game. When the current game ends, it is the loser's responsibility to pay a quarter to stay in the game, and if that person decides not to continue, then the challenger whose
quarter is next in line enters the game. An important consideration for would-be challengers is the stage of the current game underway if the player is competing against the computer. It is unacceptable conduct to challenge someone if they are in the final levels of defeating the computer, because if the challenger wins, he would essentially be "stealing" the game from the initial player and would himself enter at one of the highest game levels.

Another norm is the near-reverential respect participants hold for skilled players and the games themselves. This respect is manifested through the large groups of spectators which congregate around certain games. Interested, supportive spectators demonstrate their respect by silently watching someone play, congratulating him on good moves, and seeking his "expert" help as a learning opportunity. Recognizing proficiency through a request for help with a certain move or sequence of moves shows tremendous respect for what the expert players have learned and accomplished. Similarly, an expert player is expected to assist others who seek to improve game-playing skills. Rather than treating the information as proprietary trade secrets, players attempt to help others better themselves. This is not surprising given the importance of competition in this subculture. After all, the better other players become, the more competitive they will be as opponents.

A final norm is the relative lack of displayed emotions in the arcade area. Whether the participant is feeling frustration, anger, or exhilaration, it is not appropriate to express those emotions. When winning, it is not acceptable to gloat or "trash talk," and when losing, behaviors such as "throwing a fit" or "having a temper tantrum" are frowned upon. One of the informants explained: "The joy of winning or the agony of losing dissipate rather quickly...I would never afterwards, you know if I met someone in the hall say, "Boy I sure kicked your butt in that game yesterday." It's already gone [Male, 24]."

The video culture is one in which members are socialized in the arts of fair play and acceptance of game outcomes in a relatively emotionless manner.

### Theme 4 - Different Participation Levels in Culture

Previous research found that a small segment of the arcade participants were obsessive game players (Egli and Meyers 1984; Ellis 1984). Our initial observations at the university arcade also led us to conclude that multiple participation levels exist in this culture. The different levels, ranging in frequency of play from high to low may be defined as follows:

- **Serious Players (Experts):** Like the male character in the Who song "Pinball Wizard," these individuals have achieved high competency on a particular game and will typically stay at the same video game for an hour or longer, willingly accepting challengers.

- **Casual Players:** These individuals play multiple games, but do not stay in the arcade very long (typically fifteen minutes to half-an-hour); they appear to be less serious while playing and watching others.

- **Nostalgic Players:** Participants who do not play the popular or trendy games, but rather remove themselves to an isolated section of the arcade where the older games are located; the age of these participants is older, which leads us to suspect they are trying to
recapture some aspect of their youth.

- Spectators: Some of the combat games tend to draw large audiences, and many of those individuals never play the games, they just stand back and watch; most of them tend to stay in small groups of two or three and focus their attention on one or two games; the number of female spectators is much higher than female players, but they still constitute only twenty to twenty-five percent of the non-playing crowd.

One of our informants helped to characterize the serious players. His comments reflect the time and effort spent by video arcade “experts.”

There’s a lot of people there who they’ve got like their six manuals with them, they’re pulling cards (with instructions for special moves) out of their wallets—literally. You know, they sit in there and they ask the manager questions, you know, “What version is this of the game? Which codes are going to work on this?” I went in there maybe, over the summer, maybe once a week; sometimes more, sometimes less. And I would see the same people in there every time [Male, 14].

Beyond individual differences in terms of levels of interest in the games, two other factors appear to differentiate the serious players from the other groups: perceived competence and cost of play. For example, one informant explained why he considered himself an infrequent arcade participant:

I haven’t frequented the arcade that much in my life...because it’s 25 cents a shot and I was never that good anyway, and you know, thirty seconds later the game is over [Male, 29].

The emphasis in this culture on competition and game-playing skills demands that serious players be highly competent in their favorite games. Our teenage informant mentioned that when new games come out, he purchases them for his home system first, practices to build his abilities, and only then will he challenge others in the arcade. The propensity for spectators at the newer, more popular games also raises the stakes of peer humiliation for those who are not experts.

Theme 5 - Violent Action Games

The most popular games in each of the observed arcades involve violent, fast-paced action. We observed the largest crowds playing Tekken 2, Killer Instinct, Area 51, Mortal Kombat 3, and Virtua Fighter 2. Each of these games, except Area 51, is based on martial arts person-to-person combat, although some incorporate non-human characters. Area 51 is a laser shooting game in which the players take on the role of commandos who have a mission to shoot as many of the “bad guys” (aliens in this case) as possible. Our informants underscored this theme and suggested that the attraction of the violent images is a transitory one:

I started playing it (Mortal Kombat) because it was cool, it was extreme...you’re playing with your buddies and you want to see what gory thing will happen next. There’s a certain kid factor—gross, yet strangely compelling. You can’t take your eyes off it, and it’s like “Ooh!” (he cringes) If you’re going to have a weird fantasy, make it extreme because you know it’s not real [Male, 24].

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I think after a while that novelty (the graphic violence) wears off. You know, the grossness wears off...it gets old [Male, 22].

Anything where there’s violence involved (he laughs), I kind of enjoy that. Games like basketball or golf on arcade games aren’t that enjoyable to me, the action isn’t there. But when there is violence involved, when you’re trying to beat someone up, that’s enjoyable [Male, 29].

VIDEO ARCADE DYNAMICS: A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION

Although this research study is not close to its final phase, numerous strong themes are emerging. The iterative process of non-participant observation, depth interviews, and data analysis has started to refine themes and uncover potential explanations for them. The “male domain,” of the video arcade, its competitive nature, and the “sportsmanship” norms provide an interesting combination of characteristics. Fischer and Gainer (1994) present a paper on “Masculinity and the Consumption of Organized Sports” which should be investigated further in the context of the video arcade. In their article, they explain how sports provide a means in which men can refine their masculinity. These activities are often associated with traditionally “male” traits such as power, dominance, and aggression.

Video games provide many similarities to organized sports with their emphasis on “sportsmanlike” behavior and the accommodation of spectators. Video games could very well provide the same male-bonding opportunities as those found in organized sports, and also similarly emphasize the need to marginalize women in order to emphasize masculinity. Many of the themes described by Fischer and Gainer (1994) are seen in the video arcade: the masculine traits of aggression and violence are emphasized at the expense of more feminine traits such as empathy, cooperativeness, and nurturance: the men denigrate the games that are not male-dominated; and similar to male athletes, video players comment on the cathartic value of being able to “try to kill each other” and then be the “best of friends” afterwards. Lastly, the use of “cool pose” as a way to express masculinity is something that is increasingly evident among athletes, and this was also observed in the arcades. Our 14-year-old informant in particular explained how he would exhibit certain bodily displays of confidence after winning a round in a game.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTINUING RESEARCH

This section briefly highlights some of the critical activities that we plan to pursue prior to formal completion of this research. Most of the steps mentioned here will add to the trustworthiness of our study.

As a means of triangulating our observations of the university setting, we will observe two other university arcade settings and compare and contrast our results. The additional universities will include a second state-funded university and a private university. The state-funded university is more residential in its student population than the university setting already observed for this study.

Although our interviewing to this point has been limited, the overlap between the comments of our informants is astonishing. It could very well be an indicator of how pervasive this culture can be. However, even with the
consistency of results thus far, we plan to conduct additional depth interviews with video game participants and video arcade managers. In doing this, one goal will be to contact female video game players. We also plan to use projective techniques to better understand the perceptions of non-participants (especially Caucasian females) with respect to video arcade games and video game players. We feel that our present findings already provide important insights into this distinct consumption subculture, and additional research will enrich the quality and credibility of our study.

NOTE

1. The authors are listed in alphabetical order. Both authors have contributed equally to this research project.

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