

Spring 5-2017

GLHF: A Brief Overview of Gaming Cafes

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Recommended Citation

John Sun. "GLHF: A Brief Overview of Gaming Cafes" *ART 108: Introduction to Games Studies* (2017).

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GLHF: A Brief Overview of Gaming Cafes by John Sun

Gaming cafes are one of the last bastions of true gaming. Nowadays, most people prefer to sit in front of their computers at home to play video games. What most do not realize, is that nothing can replace the essential human element of gaming. To experience true gaming, one must be able to interact with other people. Whether the game played is a video or table-top game, the experience is enriched when all players are physically present. Co-operative games are more fun together, and rivalries are intensified when players can gloat over their opponents in person. Granted, gaming cafes have a long way to go and society must learn how to relate to them in a healthy way. Certain people will abuse anything that can be considered enjoyable, and other people will blame the thing instead of the person. Gaming cafes provide an enriching experience and therefore preserve an ancient form of gaming, that combines entertainment with the opportunity to be physically social with others; i.e., true gaming.

To understand how we got to where we are, we must look at the history of gaming and internet cafes. A long time ago, when the Internet was still in its infancy, what we think of as Internet cafes (pre-cursors to gaming cafes) were simply places where people went to chat with other people over the Internet while getting a bite to eat. At the time, this pool of patrons consisted mainly of “techies” and business professionals. One such place, The High Tech Café in Dallas, “opened [as a place where] . . . , business can literally continue over lunch, as customers at selected tables can download their food and their Internet mail at the same time -- taking bytes between bites, as it were.” (NYTimes, Lewis) Looking back today, such a place seems ordinary (or outright boring or cheesy) but back in the day it was a technological wonder. It was also in places like this, that incorporating a LAN for gaming into an Internet café was first proposed. “What's ahead for the cafe? Plans include a Doom Room, where individuals or groups can play

Doom, a networked computer game that is phenomenally popular among the Internet's cognoscenti. ” (NYTimes, Lewis) At the time, all this was cutting-edge, state-of-the-art. Looking back, it is astounding to see how far we have come, technologically and socially.

Today, when someone from the public thinks of an Internet or gaming café, generally it is not a positive image that one thinks of, and that’s mostly because of the growth in popularity of gaming and video gaming. When more and more people are flocking to these havens for gaming, it is inevitable that some of those people will cause problems. Bryan Lufkin, who writes for Gizmodo on the history of Internet and gaming cafes, states “Internet cafes seem to be spots for all sorts of bizarre news: Earlier this year, one man died in a Taiwanese internet cafe after gaming for three days straight. Also this year, a 26-year-old woman in China gave birth while in an internet cafe toilet cubicle.” (Gizmodo, Lufkin) The result of all these scandals, and that distressed people (who are Internet or gaming addicts) are attracted to these establishments, is the stigmatization of modern day gaming cafes. A person that tells their family that they frequent a gaming café, is equivalent to a person confessing that they have a binge-eating disorder or that they smoke a pack of cigarettes a day. That behavior is considered degenerate and is legally restricted in some places. For instance: In China and Korea, the government has levied heavy legal restrictions against “gaming dens” due to past problems associated with them, and that they are believed to be corrupting young people. “Over the last six years, increased government regulation in China, at least, has seen a whopping 130,000 internet cafes shut down. The reason? Officials claim that these places are corrupting users 18 and under.” (Gizmodo, Lufkin) Nonwithstanding cultural differences between the west and China, Korea, the sentiment that gaming dens are modern opium dens is not as uncommon as one would think. Gaming cafes are victims

of their own success and popularity; their increasing popularity attracting undesirable elements that tarnish their image.

While attitudes toward gaming cafes has remained negative, the public's perception towards gamers has improved greatly, thanks to mobile, casual gaming bringing gaming into the mainstream. Hardcore, competitive online games have a wide audience, but they pale in comparison to that of the casual market; for games like Angry Birds, Bejeweled, Candy Crush and Diner Rush. According to Alison Murdock at Verto Analytics, "[Mobile games] rank second behind social media activity in terms of time spent on devices. That equates to a whopping 1.15 billion hours that consumers spend each month playing games." (Verto Analytics, Alison) Mrs. Murdock explains how, between Zynga, EA, and King, over 90 million people play their games monthly. It is easier to get into mobile gaming than it is competitive gaming, so it is easy to understand why mobile games are one of the quickest growing entry-points for gaming in the world. That is where gaming cafes come in as enablers for people to experience the latest and greatest video games on the market. These business establishments come stocked with high-end spec gaming computers, for people who cannot afford to purchase them. This is how gaming cafes are helping to grow the hardcore and competitive gaming market. Large video game corporations are supporting competitive electronic sports to help that form of video gaming become mainstream. Although more people are playing video games in a competitive format, there are even more people playing mobile games exclusively; therefore, mobile games have a greater effect on gaming going mainstream. Gaming has gone mainstream thanks to mobile games, and it is more difficult for people to harbor prejudiced thoughts about gaming and its evangelists, but gaming cafes still have a long way to go if they want to reinvent and rebrand themselves in the public eye; after a flurry of public outcries and tragedies.

Playing games offline is more fun than playing them online, because offline play satisfies primal human urges to socialize, compete and achieve goals. It might seem counterintuitive since playing video games online is more convenient than offline, but it makes perfect sense considering how people generally are. Dr. Michio Kaku talks about the Caveman Principle. “Whenever there is a conflict between modern technology and the desires of our primitive ancestors, these primitive desires win each time... Likewise, our ancestors always liked face--to--face encounters. This helped us to bond with others and to read their hidden emotions.” (Big Think, Kaku) No matter how advanced our technology becomes, if it does not appeal to our primal instincts it will not be adapted widely. Although online gaming has become increasingly popular nowadays, there is a resurgence of interest in board games and LAN parties. YouTube channels such as Node – a channel that specializes in videos about a group of friends playing video games, have become increasingly popular and commonplace. It is not exactly flattering that the human psyche has remained essentially the same over the hundreds of thousands of years of human history, but Dr. Kaku does have a point. It is not farfetched to imagine that most people would prefer face-to-face encounters, over ones that take place on the Internet. Playing video games in-person with other people, satisfies our primal urges to socialize while immersing us in competition for some imagined goal.

Offline gaming is an essential part of human culture. That is why gaming cafes are so important and need to redeem themselves in the public eye. Numerous Yelp reviews will make it clear that people don't find going to AFKgg to be a very enjoyable experience. Most negative reviews center around unclean conditions, unprofessional staff, and long wait times to rent gaming consoles. Obviously, no business has a spotless record and AFKgg is a business. It is important for these establishments to improve their reputations, so that attending them does not

have such a heavy stigma that it does today. Some ways that these businesses can improve is: hiring more professional staff, and having more consoles to rent to patrons. If business establishments like AFKgg are businesses, they should start being run like businesses and not side-projects. The stigma around gaming cafes goes beyond bad service and food, and extends to the lack of community outreach by businesses like AFKgg; coupled with the perception that these establishments are seedy. These establishments could hold weekend workshops that teach basic coding and game design skills. Events like these could earn gaming cafes good will with the public, and make it more socially acceptable to spend an afternoon playing the Nintendo 64 at a place like AFKgg. Furthermore, if many people attend these hypothetical workshops, they will likely purchase food and drinks, and rent consoles after the workshop; earning the café some much needed revenue to keep prices low, but the quality of service high. Offline gaming does not have to occur exclusively at gaming cafes, but this is how it increasingly happens. It is not always possible or practical, to gather a group of people to play a pick-up game of Magic: The Gathering. Gaming lounges provide a place where like-minded people can meet, eat, and compete. This arrangement is far more practical than getting a group of people who all have different schedules, together to play a board game at your place of choosing.

Nostalgia is a powerful force of nature, but the appeal and merit of offline gaming goes beyond it. What is the point of playing video games, if not to have fun? There is some truth to the argument that video games have become a storytelling medium, or a way to make a point about the world. Those are valid arguments but they do not tell the entire story. Video games are a way for people to socialize and have fun. Playing video games at home is more convenient over the long term, but as Annie Dillard says, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” (Annie Dillard) It is not always about what is more convenient or productive,

because something is lost when we are all content to sit behind our computer monitors; together, but alone. There will always be problems where people are involved. It can be difficult for newcomers at these gaming establishments, and not everyone is supportive to people learning a new game. These problems, however, are outliers in the overall experience of offline gaming; the net effect of offline video games is positive. These are not the musings of a video game “purist”, but observations that gaming together is true gaming. The point of video games is not “saving the princess”, or “slaying the dragon”. These are fictional obstacles and overcoming them does not accomplish anything for ourselves or other people. The point of video games is to create shared experiences, where participants can grow and learn from the game (as well as each other), in a safe and supportive environment while having fun at the same time. Gaming lounges are the last bastions of true gaming, because they enrich their patrons with human interactions.

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