Media Imaginaries of Game Centers in Japanese Digital Games and Popular Media

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Abstract

Game centers have represented for decades one of the most significant contexts of play (e.g. playces) in Japan and abroad, a paradigmatic element of the transnational history of videogames, connected to the evolution of game systems and the transformation of play contexts since the '70s in Japan. They have been investigated by game studies scholars, who analysed the dynamics of youth socialization (Katō 2011), the interaction between people and space (Pelletier-Gagnon 2019), their history and national regulations (Kawasaki 2022), and their transnational appeal (Katō and Bauer 2021:124). Despite that, until now relatively little attention was given to the representation of game centers in the media system, with the correlated depiction of the contexts of play in popular media fiction. The paper aims to analyse the interaction between games, contexts of play, and sociocultural gaze, by identifying and mapping the different ways in which game centers have been represented in Japanese popular media fiction. In this way, it will highlight: (a) the emergence of specific patterns of representations of arcades (*i.e.* imaginaries) in the different periods from the early '80s to the late '10s; (b) the relationships between these imaginaries and their historical, socio-cultural and media context.

1 Introduction

Game centers (also known as arcades, *gēmusentā/gēsen* in Japanese) can be considered a paradigmatic element of the global history of digital games (Ashcraft and Snow 2008). These spaces are deeply linked to the technological evolution of game systems, the transformation of game practices and the shift in contexts of play since the '70s in countries such as the USA or Japan (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015). In Japan, gēsen have been representing for decades one of the most important contexts of (digital) play, together with the domestic space.

While Game studies, since their inception, have long been investigating the spatial dimensions of games, research initially focused on the nature of simulated interactive spaces inside games (Aarseth 2000, Newman 2004, Nitsche 2008). Because of the focus on the digital environment, these studies implicitly reiterated the understanding of play as a separated, bounded and inconsequential activity, based on the reading of Huizinga (1938) and Caillois (1958), thus implying that digital play too could be separated from the places in which the playful activity was conducted.

Over time, researchers broadened their scopes, matching the investigation of the space *in* games with the study of the spaces where the ludic activity is performed: the places *of* play and *for* play, or *playces* (see Brown and Lam 2021). In this way, they started focusing on the interaction and relationship between the playful activity and its environment.

Concurrently, games began to be discussed in terms of their unbounded potential, the possibility to coexist and overlap with non-ludic space, time and society (Montola, 2005, De Souza and Silva 2008), or their ability to merge and interact through persistent and dynamic environments (Taylor 2006, Wirman 2021), or to exist within the interstitial spaces and times of daily activities (Poremba 2007, Thibault 2017). These studies mirrored the concurrent academic debate over the nature of game boundaries, and the re-evaluation of the magic circle of play (see Lammes 2008 or Fassone 2013). This discussion stemmed from the criticism to a perception of games and play as separate activities, and linked to the general tendency to consider digital games less as a detached, bounded and temporary experience and more as an activity interacting with external space, time and social dynamics (Idone Cassone 2019).

With time, this led to several works on the contexts of play such as playgrounds and amusement parks (Walz 2010), entertainment districts (Daliot-Bul 2014), theme

parks (Mitrasinovic 2006) and more recently, game centers, for which studies have been focusing on societal group dynamics (Katō 2011), economy and market (Eickhorst 2002), legislation and societal discourse (Kawasaki 2022) and environment-collective interactions (Pelletier-Gagnon 2019).

Yet, insofar, there is little if no reflection on the representation of playces in the system of media, with specific reference to game center and popular media (manga, anime, TV shows and the very digital games). The analysis of the media representations of game centers, we suggest, could provide original insights into the understanding of the cultural dynamics that link games, contexts of play, and societal framing of games.

This analysis would prove significant for several reasons:

- Popular media representation shows useful traces of the historical, social and cultural dynamics of play in general, and the inception of digital games in particular. As historians observed for past art forms, these representations help understand why, where, when, and with whom people played games, so as to reconstruct the context of play and to contextualise discourses on games (Kopp and Lapina 2020: 18);
- Representations in media, of course, do not provide pure historical facts about games and play, but traces of the socio-cultural codes that constitute the 'circuit of culture' (Hall 1997: 1-11) around play. They exemplify, reflexively, the rules and norms that determine the societal gaze on play and playces: discursive practices (Foucault 1971) on games and space translate to prohibitions, rejections, limitations, and commentary over games and their contexts. Popular media are particularly significant because of how they 'naively' replicate those powers and practices (Eco 1976) and thus help understand the 'cultural encyclopaedia' (Eco 1984) of their times.
- By doing so, these texts also shape the mediascape, revealing the ostensive and pragmatic side of representation (Marin 1988): by depicting games they indirectly reflect their cultural power and role in the media system. The comparative representations across media may show early forms of retrograde remediations (Jutz 2018) or the rise of self-reflexivity (Noth and Bishara 2007) in the very digital games (games on games, meta-ludic representations, *mise en abyme* etc).

The investigation of media representations of game centers, thus, would make it possible to observe from a different angle the interaction between people, games, and space, by analysing how game centers have been understood, framed and remembered by society and culture through the media system.

2 Objectives and method

This paper investigates the representation of game centers in Japanese popular media, with a specific focus on fictional representations of game centers in manga, anime, TV shows, drama and digital games.

The paper aims to analyse the interaction between games, context of play, and sociocultural gaze, by identifying and mapping the different ways in which game centers have been represented in Japanese popular media. In this way, it will highlight:

(a) the emergence of specific patterns of representations of arcades (*i.e.* imaginaries) in the different periods from the early '80s to the late '10s;

(b) the relationships between these imaginaries and their historical, socio-cultural and media context.

The analysis stems from the premise that the representation of game centers in Japanese popular media is not uniform; instead, it greatly changes across time and media form. These shifts, it is suggested, aren't solely to be attributed to the evolution of the game industry or societal transformations; rather, they are intertwined with a broader transformation in the way digital play is experienced *in context*, and to how societal rhetorics connect play with place and its environment.

As a result, the representation of arcades exhibits different and partially incompatible *media imaginaries of playces*, each one defined by specific characteristics in relation to the representation of arcades, discourses over play and rhetorics on the role of games in society.

The analysis focuses on the representation of game centers in the Japanese popular media environment, because of its relevance in quantitative and qualitative terms. First, the game center industry in Japan outlived its equivalent in USA or Europe (Ashcraft and Snow 2008); furthermore, Japanese popular media have been often representing digital games, players and leisure activities, often including them in the media mix and transmedia dynamics (Steinberg 2012, 2015). Lastly, the global

popularity of Japanese games and popular media contributed to an imaginary of Japan as a gaming land under ludic techno-orientalist rhetoric (Tosca 2021), once again linking the practice of digital play to specific contexts. These rhetorics simultaneously influenced the National self-representations (Hutchinson 2019) and thus, the internal self-image of Japanese games in their interaction and comparison with the "West", despite the existence of an interplay between national and global game practices (Roth et al 2021:1-2). This makes game centers a paradigmatic place for the construction of the cultural identity of players, games and playces between the '80s and the late 2010s.

Because of this complexity and evolution, the analysis was applied to a broad corpus of different media across time, to highlight meaningful aspects, recurring elements or significant transformations in the representation of game centers in the media system and the representation of the dynamics of playces.

2.1 Media imaginaries

While the title mentions the term *imaginaries*, this paper slightly diverges from the general use of the term, both singular and plural form, in cultural anthropology (see Strauss 2006). Instead, it follows the understanding of the *imaginary* in Semiotics, where the imaginary can be understood as an abstract collection of culturalized figurative representations of certain concepts (Volli 2011: 3-4), whose traits and characteristics are connected to the broader *cultural encyclopaedia* (Eco 1984, see Desogus 2012), and to the cultural systems of *self-descriptions* (Lotman 1990, see Madisson 2016).

The choice of the plural form *imaginaries* to group the different depictions of arcades, in place of the other terms (such as representation/s), is to highlight a few important features:

a) imaginaries include both visual or iconic elements (i.e. the type of arcades, the graphic style, the urban landscape, and so on), social elements (references, norms, values, rhetorics) and cultural ones (tropes, narratives, myths, beliefs, anticipations etc);

b) each imaginary presents internal variation by texts and is dynamic over time, providing more complexity than a trope, motif or static repertoire;

c) imaginaries partially contradict each other, thus not being possibly ascribed to a single, abstract system of culture (Hall 1997); they exist in a dynamics cultural system that includes asymmetry and contradiction as part of its mechanism (e.g. Lotman et al. 1978);

d) imaginaries emerge in specific sociocultural contexts, however co-exist and develop in time and culture. They may persist, adapting to sociocultural changes or clashing with newer or older ones, depending on the change of models and schemes of play and games, society and culture.

2.2. Framework and Corpus

The methodology for the analysis draws on general semiotics and semiotics of play (*e.g.* Greimas 1983, Lotman 1990, Eco 1975 and 1984, Ferri 2006, Thibault 2017b) and a topologic understanding of play developed from the author's previous work on play and game boundaries (Idone Cassone 2019). The model investigates the representation of spatial contexts of play by analysing the following dimensions:

- the spatial, architectural and properties of the place (position, boundaries, appearances, functions of the space etc);
- the ludic activities performed (individual or collective, type of games, group participants, side-play activities involved, economy and sociality);
- the influence of context on players' identity (fame and recognition, societal frames, anonymity, group identity, liminal vs liminoid function (Turner 1982:20-60);
- the individual and societal rhetorics on space (moral evaluation, symbolisms or allegories, tropes etc);
- [for digital games] The interaction between gameplay, simulated space and player experience of arcades within the digital game (space for minigames, non-interactive space, ludic side-content, narrative integration etc).

For the investigation, a corpus of works has been selected for case study analysis among many potential works, ensuring a balance between different media forms, release periods, and historical periods (see Table 1, below). Other works (not included below) have been explored during the research or analysed for comparisons with the main corpus or the research and will be briefly mentioned in the following pages.

Table 1. Game Center Corpus

Title	Medium	Year
Game Center Arashi	Manga; Anime	1978-84; 1982
Tokimeki Memorial	Digital game	1994, 1996
Game Tengoku	Digital game	1997
Shenmue	Digital game	1999
Arcade Gamer Fubuki	Manga; Anime	2000; 2002
*Game Center CX (*Tamage*)*	TV Show	2003-present
Yakuza 1	Digital game	2005
Persona 3	Digital game	2006, 2008
Steins;Gate	Digital game;	2009; 2016
Hi Score Girl	Anime	2010-18; 2019-20
	Manga; Anime	
Yakuza 5	Digital game	2012
Umehara: to live is to game	Manga	2013
No Coin Kid	TV Drama	2013
Umehara Fighting Gamers	Manga	2014-18
Yakuza Zero	Digital game	2015
Yakuza Kiwami	Digital game	2016
Persona 5	Digital game	2017, 2020
Gamers!	Anime	2017-18

3 Mapping the media imaginaries of arcades

The analysis identified and mapped six different imaginaries of arcades, from the late '70s to the late 2010s. Each of these imaginaries emerges in a specific socio-cultural context and is defined by specific characteristics in the representation of game centers. Each one implies different cultural rhetorics of digital play in relation to its context, and on the relationship between games, space and societal gaze.

Their interaction is however complex and layered, more than it can be properly analysed in these few pages: imaginaries become part of media motifs, rhetorics and social models. As part of cultural dynamics, they evolve, shift, change and thus provide stereotypes and models for the following generations.

3.1 Place of hopes and fears

Since the '70s and during the '80s, game centers are simultaneously celebrated and looked at with concern, concurrently at the spotlight of the video game industry and with marginal representation in the mediascape. This is linked to the novelty of game centers and to the huge success of games such as the Japanese *Pong* clones or, especially, *Space Invaders* (1978), *Pacman* (1982) and other games based on *high scores*; for this reason, arcade games and game centers represented at the time the rose-tinted future of gaming (Koyama 2023: 3).

On the other hand, however, being the first semi-public place for digital play, and because of their original links to medal games, gambling and pachinko parlours, the media panic in Japan focused above all on the dangers and issue of the ludic space itself, more than the content of the games (Pelletier-Gagnon 2019: 52); the existence of a closed space, exclusively designated for leisure activities, originally tied with quasi-gambling entertainment, triggered many fears and concerns about social order, children safety and public morality (Kawasaki 2022).

In this context, the representation of game centers in popular media is somewhat contradictory: incredibly limited and always fleeting, as if the social concern translates into hesitation, and reticence to represent them in popular media.

Even the most important work that focused on video games at the time, the manga *Game Center Arashi* (Shogakukan, 1978-84; adapted by Shin-Ei animation, 1982) embodies and exemplifies the same pattern. The story is centered on the namesake protagonist, Arashi Hoshino, the 'invader champion', who participates in game challenges, tournaments and adventures based on famous video games at the time (*Space Invader, Heyanko Alien, Pac-Man* etc).

Despite the focus on video games, proper game centers are rarely portrayed (less than 10 times over 17 volumes), mostly in the first few volumes, only for a few panels. Arcades are portrayed as problematic since the beginning, for instance in ch.2 and ch.4 (vol.1, p.39-40 and 105), when Arashi is forbidden to enter the local arcade because of elementary student prohibitions, due to recent problems with fake coins and thieves. Soon after, Arashi criticizes the prohibition and the idea that playing at gēsen makes children delinquents (*hikōshōnen*).

Yet in ch.6 Arashi is asked to inaugurate a new modern game center, presented as a wide, bright and clean place, full of technological marvels, and happy customers playing together. The technological dreams and the game fever co-exist, to a certain extent, with the representations of the fears and concerns over games.

In the following volumes, the few times arcades are depicted it's generally through temporary peeks or '*glimpses*', short sequences (1-2 frames), mostly from external viewpoints, that briefly peek or hint at the internal venue. No noteworthy action takes place inside, with very limited focus on the space itself, its people and activities. It is not the act of playing to raise concerns, but the depiction of the very game centers, since other playces featuring

game cabinets (such as game corners at the rooftop of malls, or video game fairs) are more easily and consistently represented.

Moreover, in Arashi, the climatic game challenges take place in Olympic-like settings, such as stadiums, domes or theatres, with many spectators, broadcasting and commentary. Gaming itself is portrayed as an exciting activity, projected into the future of technology, which is held in regard as sports or other ludic practices. Digital games are thus imagined as forms of *ludus* (Caillois 1958), recognised by society as culturally paradigmatic and thus deserving a special space/place, time, and societal spotlight. And this involves the exclusion or marginalisation of the problematic places where those activities are conducted.

This contradictory imaginary will resurface many times during the following years, in conjunction with new gaming technologies and successful innovations in the industry, at least until game centers won't become a 'natural' element of the urban landscape, during the '90s.

3.2 Space of uncertainty and self-reflexivity

Around the mid-80s the excitement of the industry and gamers community for game centers changed to a degree, the bright future making way for a clouded and uncertain one. First of all, the media panic over game centers would continue, with local and national initiatives that will result in the update of the *Fūeihō* law in 1984 (the law regulating entertainment venues, see Kawasaki 2022); the inclusion of arcades among the venues involved in obligatory national registration, age curfew at midnight, further restrictions for minors in the evening (Nobuoka et al. 1994: 7, Pelletier-Gagnon 2019: 50-51). This resulted in a lack of income for many small-scale gēsen, leading to uncertain economic outcomes.

A further issue was represented by the arrival in 1983 of the Nintendo Famicom, whose incredible success brought competition for game centers. The console was perceived as a cheaper and safer alternative to playing at arcades, reducing the long-term income of arcades because of many games being ported to the Famicom (Koyama 2023: 87-88).

These years also show how quickly the manga/anime industry shifted towards the representation of domestic play, with many manga trying to catch the lighting in a bottle by focusing on the new experience of home play and probably inspired by the Famicom manga-like instruction manuals. Titles such as *Famicom Rocky* (Shogakukan

1985-87), *Nekketsu! Famicom Shounendan* (Shogakukan 1986) or *Famicom Runner Takahashi Meijin Monogatari* (Shogakukan 1986) would mimic many of the grand adventures of Arashi while smoothly showing daily training sessions at home.

Both events required the industry to be able to adapt and change relatively fast, providing new games and entertainments that could be only experienced at the arcade, because of better graphics or innovative controls, such as the *taikan* games (body-feel experiences) as Sega's *Hang-out* (1985) or *Out-Run* (1987). This was, however, very expensive in terms of arcade cabinets costs, especially for smaller venues.

All these events led to a new tendency in the media representation of arcades, in which we witness the inception of self-reflexive representations of game centers within digital games.

The increased technical capabilities of new arcade boards make it possible the first representation of arcades inside video games; many of these will be tied to side-scrolling beat 'em-up, such as *Seishun Scandal* (Sega 1985), where the cityscape is the stage for the action and game centers are experienced, once again, through short glimpses from the outside. A few games begin to represent game centers from the inside, such as the detective comedy *Sanma no Meitantei* (1987, Namco), which include an optional location in the form of a game center, where players can obtain hints by playing a Galaxian clone. At the beginning of the '90s, the homages to arcades will multiply and became very common in many beat 'em up or fighting games, such as *Burning Fight* (SNK 1991) or the Sailor Moon games (see below).

The most notable game to represent game centers in the '80s is (surprisingly in light of the setting) *Golden Axe* (Sega 1989). Once beaten the final boss, a wall-breaking ending credits section shows a family of three playing a *Great Axe* [sic] cabinet in an arcade, when an explosion makes the enemies and characters of the game jump out from the screen and run outside, into the city. In the background pinballs, other cabinets and a *taikan* cabinet. Golden Axe will be one of the first games to represent arcades from the inside, being the first of a series of Sega's self-representations of arcades, together with the game *Alex Kidd: High-Tech World* (1989), only released in the USA.

The appearance of game centers inside digital games marks an important stage for the game medium, in which forms of media self-reflexivity are tied to the uncertainties of the industry, and the desire to highlight the existence of

an emerging new media. Over the following years, other digital games (e.g. *Shenmue, Game Tengoku, Persona*) will inherit this imaginary, using fictional game centers to reflect on the medium of games, the act of playing and its culture.

3.3 Venues of everyday life

At the beginning of the '90s game centers have already become ordinary elements of the urban environment in Japanese cities, a common place of entertainment for the younger (and less young) generations. After the *Shinfūeihō,* the fight of the industry against the three K rhetorics (*Kurai, Kitanai, Kowai*, Nobuoka et al. 1994: 4), together with the success of taikan games and UFO Catcher, arcades have become different venues from the ones ten years ago, and this is mirrored by a shift in their media representation.

Whereas game centers in the past were (at least for their community and the industry) considered a place from the future, the '90s surround arcades with an aura of *everydayness*. They are increasingly represented in the background of several narratives that depict the daily life of young people. This happens mostly through glimpses and peeks, which however happen to be significantly more frequent, slightly longer, and more meaningful.

For instance, in the manga *Bishōjo Senshi Sērā Mūn*, the Crown Game Center is a significant part of Usagi's daily life and appears almost in every chapter as part of Usagi's daily routine. This also testifies to the (progressive) shift of the arcade population in terms of gender, with an increase in the number of young girls that will further develop with the success of *purikura* (after 1995).

Bishōjo Senshi Sērā Mūn is also significant because it depicts arcades going beyond mere glimpses, with short story segments taking place entirely inside it. Furthermore, the many contemporary video-game adaptations of the series will, not casually, feature the Crown, both through glimpses (such as *Bishōjo Senshi Sērā Mūn,* Angel 1993) or with game segments taking place inside arcades (*Bishōjo Senshi Sērā Mūn*, Banpresto 1995), which will be more and more common in these years.

Whereas *Golden Axe* included arcades as a wall-breaking homage and a self-reflexive trigger, games such as the above-mentioned, as well as new console games (*Live-a-Live*, Squaresoft 1994; *Sokko Seitokai Sonic Council*, Banpresto 1998) will depict arcades as part of the game arenas because they are part of the everyday cityscape. Arcades are now accepted as a 'normal urban element.

This does not mean, however, that arcades are not perceived as problematic anymore: on the contrary, two main forms of representational mediation take place:

- on the one hand, we see a *filtered* representation of arcades, where most problematic elements are erased or concealed (run-down suburbs, fighting games, delinquents or salarymen playing) in favour of shining façade made of modern game chains, crane games, bright colours and young people.
- On the other hand, when not filtered, the moral issues are *highlighted*, contextualised focusing on the rhetorics of arcades as a place of idleness, criminality or predominant masculinity.

A fitting example of the imaginary of arcades as daily entertainment, together with its representational mediations, is provided by the dating simulator *Tokimeki Memorial* (Konami 1994).

In the game, players impersonate a high-school boy who wants to experience love before the end of high school, by confessing to one of the many schoolmates NPC. To do so, they may invite them to dates in different venues of the city (the aquarium, a park, the baseball stadium…) including a game center. The game center is brightly coloured and warmly lit, with a UFO Catcher at the entrance and a wide pastel venue (the opposite of the triple K's image).

During dates, a dialogue system is tied to the affection level, in relation to the affinity of the partner with the venue selected and the answer provided during the dialogue. Almost all partners are linked to neutral feedback to the arcade, and all of their dialogues will reflect this by stating that game centers are unusual place for girls to attend. Players can reply that times are changing so as to obtain a small increase in affection. Two NPC are set to have positive feedback on the venue, the stereotypical childish girl (Yumi) or the cosmopolitan entertainment-addict girl (Yuko), while the negative feedback is tied to the no-frill mad scientist (Yuina) or to a girl coming from a traditional background (Yukari), who will explicitly say that her father believes that she should not frequent this sort of place (to which the player may snarkily reply that she will turn into a delinquent, immediately losing affection). No other venue in the game will result in similar gender-based comments from all the partners.

This depiction shows how the naturalisation of game centers in the cityscape co-exists with the rhetorics of

highlighting and filtering. Despite the prominence of this new imaginary, for years the depiction of arcades as dark, dirty, dangerous places, not suitable for children or good students, will resurface as a motif or trope, even when arcades have been completely changed in their social role and forms.

3.4 Nostalgic corners

Between the end of the '90s and the following decade, arcade gaming experienced new changes: the success of the 4th generation of consoles (Playstation and Sega Saturn), which reduced the technological gap with arcade boards; the difficult post-bubble economy and the subsequent closure of small, local game centers in favour of bigger and more financially solid chains; the crisis of once key genres such as *shoot 'em-up* and *fighting games*. Simultaneously, new genres (*bemani*) and trends (*purikura*) appeared, making it clear that the dazzling game chains of the present were very different from the small local corners of the past, with their local communities, communication notes (see Katō 2011), ashtrays and high-score boards. Because of the economic instability and the decline in arcade revenues, many feared once again that game centers would be destined to slowly disappear.

These events are reflected in a representation of game centers that is increasingly tied with the nostalgic past of gaming, instead of the original bright future of the game industry, or the everyday present of young students.

The representation focuses on the past of gaming and considers arcades as precious but endangered, which won't last forever. Furthermore, many narratives show a strong focus on a self-introspective gaze on the past and present of the game industry, player cultures and video games in society.

This is reflected either in titles set in the past which feature arcades in the '80s (such as *Shenmue*), or set in the present, but heavily describing arcades under nostalgic rhetoric, such as the *Tamage* segments of *Game Center CX*; or the manga/anime *Arcade Gamer Fubuki,* a spiritual sequel to Game Center Arashi.

The viewpoint in these works shifts from an external and fleeting view to an internal one, where the venue is the focal point of the narrative. The segments set in arcades are longer and provide more details and events on gēsen culture, even in relation to the above-mentioned imaginary of daily entertainment. Furthermore, the depiction focuses once again on a variety of different shapes of arcades (local run-

down game corners, *dagashiya* with arcades, shopping mall corners etc), the ones that differ from the modern game center chains. Arcades acquire a more prominent role in the broader narratives: significant moments of the story and the character's key moments happen inside the arcades, with a deeper focus on the relationships between people and place, and people within the place.

Arcade Gamer Fubuki (Famitsu 1998-2002; Enterbrain 2002; adapted by Shaft in 2002) shows this complex braid between nostalgia and self-introspection; a spiritual sequel of Game Center Arashi (the previous hero returning as a mentor of the new heroine), it centres on Fubuki, a normal teenager with a passion for older games and playing with friends. Instead of the futurist gaze of Arashi, the narrative seems stuck between the present and past, looking fondly at the period of simpler games and warm memories, in a time characterised by online matches, new consoles, and game-like technology. The game center DiG (anime, episode 2) exemplifies arcades as the milieu of true gaming and gamers' spirit.

Similarly, the shoot 'em-up *Game Tengoku* (Jaleco 1995; 1997) looks back to the past of arcade games through a meta-ludic experience on the death of vertical shooter games. The story is set in a small game center, hijacked by a mad scientist who wants to control the game industry. An employee manages to tinker with her old arcade boards (all Jaleco classics) to bring their characters to life and defeat the program. The different levels are all set inside the game center (stages 1-2) or inside renowned game settings (space, racing, air dogfight (3-5) or the very circuit board of arcades (6). Elements of arcades, from cocktail cabinets to UFO Catcher dolls, became enemies to be shot. Basically, the player destroys the history of arcade games by progressing through the stages. Once completed the game and saved the world, all the original Jaleco arcade boards stop working, with a narrative Möbius strip that shows how the ending leads to the creation of the game that players have just completed (a homage to the memory of the characters).

This nostalgic imaginary recovers the contemplative mood of the mid-'80s, but with an original retrospective gaze that considers game centers the force that keeps together people, games, and memories. This imaginary will often persist and re-appear, in conjunction with the growth of retro culture and the progressive disappearance of physical venues, the dematerialisation of the game industry, and the rise of online multiplayer.

3.5 Land of coolness

Around the 2000s the game industry became increasingly linked to the national and global image of Japan as the country of entertainment and media industry, under the cultural rhetorics and national brand strategy that will be labelled Cool Japan (see McGray 2002, Iwabuchi 2002). This dynamic led to the simultaneous development of forms of cultural self-representation, as well as globalised narratives, which strongly linked Japan to digital games and popular media. On the one hand, Japanese games build up the image of Japan and *Japaneseness* as a playable object (Hutchinson 2019) that is shaped and packaged, easily diffused abroad; on the other, these productions and representations strengthen the techno-orientalist idea of Japan as a gaming land (Tosca 2021: 1-2), especially abroad.

Arcades end up embroiled in this imaginary as part of the entertainment industry, together with manga, anime, J-pop music, character merchandise and major new cultural symbols such as Akihabara, the *mecca* of gaming and otaku culture, or the many entertainment districts of Tokyo. The 'playful hedonism' lifestyle that had been growing during the '90s develops and transforms, through media narratives, into a representation of these places as extraordinary lands of coolness (Daliot Bul 2014).

In the following years, many narratives focused on modern Tokyo wards, merging fantastic or supernatural elements with contemporary metropolitan allure. For digital games, this can be seen in game series (*Ryu ga Gotoku*, modern *Persona* games, *Steins:Gate*) and games (*The World Ends with You*, *Tokyo Jungle*).

In this context, on the one hand, arcades are assimilated as a paradigm of gaming Japaneseness; on the other, they are just an element in the extra-ordinary land represented by entertainment districts. While game centers are still part of the normal cityscape in many cities, the ones in the famous wards and venues become coated in the atmosphere of the wards.

If the imaginary of arcades as ordinary life depicts game centers as everyday spaces, 'taken for granted' to some extent, this imaginary considers arcades as part of the broader heterotopies (Foucault 1986) of entertainment districts: places that are incompatible or subversive of the societal spatial organization and the societal rules and norms there enforced; places where the daily rhythm of work, learning, and leisure is reversed, where traditional relationships between architecture and living are subverted, where time is disjointed from normal practices.

This determines a focus on specific aspects of game centers (big city chains in famous landmarks, arcade and crane games-based media mix), and is linked to a shift in the figures and characters frequenting arcades; not any more delinquents or salarymen, but instead game otaku or NEETs. Lastly, this shows a focus on the collective dimension of arcades over the individual one, with the flow and movement of people inside/outside places put in the spotlight.

For instance, in the first instalment of the *Ryu Ga Gotoku* series (Sega, 2005) (known as Yakuza in USA and Europe) the district of *Kamurochō* (modelled after Kabukichō) is depicted as a restless *sakariba*, where alcohol, violence and entertainment continue with no stop nor alternative, a mass of people that flows through the streets, never settling.

The two Sega Club in the game can be accessed, with people inside playing racing, shooters or fighting games. But the only interaction available for the player is with the UFO crane, through a mini-game that provides different plushies, mostly references to Sega characters. All the following games will improve and extend the number of mini-games and side-activities (including emulated versions of arcade classics since *Ryu ga Gotoku 5*), to the point where the very experience of the game mirrors the endless entertainment of the district and make players forget the original narrative drive of the game.

Similarly, the visual novel *Steins:Gate* (Spike Chunsoft, 2009) presents a group of young people living in Akihabara, pretending to run a science laboratory that creates world-shattering technology, while actually being mostly Net Otakus and NEETs fuelled by conspiracy theories (that will somehow prove true). The main character, Rintaro Okabe, a self-proclaimed mad scientist, is the only one who does not interact with Akihabara as the other regulars, ignoring gatcha, kyarakuta, media mix and arcade games. Furthermore, by involuntarily changing the past through a time leap, he will unmake Akihabara as a gaming and kawaii mecca, leading to a present in which the Electric Town endured and quietly continues to be.

Conveniently, players embody the only 'foreign body' in the narrative, the character that is unaffected by the allure of the town and thus, can 'play with it' from a distance (differently from a game like Akiba's Strip, Acquire 2011).

This imaginary of arcade coolness, together with retro nostalgia, can be probably seen as the dominant one in

recent years: its characteristics are still present and even more popularised (i.e. reflected, replicated) by the increased popularity of Japanese games during the 9th generation console.

3.6 Place for growth

Around the end of the 2000s the relatively unexpected comeback of fighting digital games, in the form of *Street Fighter IV* (Capcom 2008), seems to rekindle the memories and sparks of the golden fighting game generation (1991-97). With the new possibilities offered by online play, at home as well as at the arcades, and the quiet but stable growth of fighting game tournaments in Japan over the years (*Super Battle Opera – Tougeki*; *Capcom Cup*; *Evo Japan*), the return to form of fighting game culture matched a new representation of arcades.

During the '90s, fighting games and their players were probably the most dedicated regulars at local game centers or corners; this subculture was underrepresented in the mediascape, despite the success of tie-ins such as the animated *Street Fighter II Movie* (1994). Once again, the fears were not addressed at the game itself, but more at the groups and habits of players, believed to be a refuge for solitary, unsocial or delinquents (Katō 2011).

With the rekindling of the fighting game genre and circuit, popular media display a new form of retrospective imaginary. This nostalgic gaze focuses once again on game centers, but this time represents the largely ignored subcultural dimension of the fighting game culture in the '90s, the so-called "golden age of fighting games". Titles such as *Hi Score Girl* (2010-17; animated by J.C. Staff, 2018-19) or *Umehara Fighting Gamers* (Kadokawa 2014-17), and to some extent the novel-documentary *The End of Arcadia* (Otsuka 2016) look back to the past to give voice to a previously underrepresented dimension of the arcade community.

Those works put game centers in the spotlight of the representation, as the *milieu* of fighting game culture. Their depiction is less stereotypical and brings back the many different shapes and forms of arcades at the time, with a focus on details and nostalgia-driven accuracy. Arcades in the '90s become the force of gravity that brings together people and machines; a place for personal growth (under the techno-orientalist rhetorics of the mastery of martial arts, see Goto-Jones 2016) and group identity, a place represented as separated from and even opposed to the outside world.

However, these narratives focus on the necessary relationship between the inside (games) and the outside world (study, work), by showing the young protagonists develop their identity by finding the right balance between the different spheres of life and finding a place they belong to.

For example, the manga/anime *High Score Girl* describes the life of Higuchi Haruo, a middle schooler, game fanatic and avid fighting game player. In 1991, while playing Street Fighter II at an arcade center in his town, he is utterly defeated by a girl his age, who is later revealed to be a classmate of his, the upper-class Ōno Akira. Their rivalry/romance will cross the era of fighting game craze games from 1991 to 1997, by weaving together the history of arcade gaming at the time, the coming-of-age of a boy in the mid-'90s, and the subculture of fighting game tournaments during the Lost Generation.

The manga looks back 25 years in the past with a nostalgic perspective, mixing the incredibly in-depth representation of video game evolution with the personal experience and growth of a child in the periphery of the Greater Tokyo Area (Kanagawa). By doing so, it gives a significant interpretation of how the grassroots culture of fighting games was perceived at the crossroads between leisure and passion.

Arcades in High Score Girl are represented as relatively autonomous spaces, where external influences are mitigated or suspended (yet under constant surveillance by schoolteachers or police, in order to enforce the *Fūeihō* law, curfew and age restrictions.)

Most side characters, adults and educators, clearly display a varying degree of criticism towards game centers and people who frequent them: also described as places for delinquents (*furyō*), a *sakariba* that makes students lose their way. The moral criticism is thus double: on the one hand, videogames subtract time and focus on other activities that are considered to improve students' character (after school, home-study etc); on the other, game centers are places in which people who already lost their way gather, thus influencing children who frequent them.

Conversely, for Haruo gaming is more than a simple hobby, a passion and ultimately a way of life. Haruo initially confirms the idea of a clear separation between the world of the arcade and the outside, by considering the *gēsen* the only space where serious growth, effort, and dedication can happen. Because of his meeting with Akira, he will start to reconsider his view, trying to apply the ethos

he learned inside the game centers to the challenges of everyday life.

This imaginary is linked to (and partially overlapping with) the one of retro nostalgia, but emerges in relation to its contradictions and limits, and with a stronger focus on the social context and individual growth, in an intimist retelling of the Lost Decade that uses space as a metaphor to discuss the role of games and play in contemporary society.

4 Conclusions

The above-mentioned imaginaries of game centers in Japanese popular media fiction show the many meaningful ways in which playces represent, mediate, and shape the representation of games, playces and the societal position of play *in* and *through* its context.

Through the interactions and clash between these different imaginaries, game centers have partly reflected the broader cultural history of digital games, and partly represented a specific paradigmatic yet problematic play context. These shifts are intertwined with a broader transformation in the way digital play is experienced *in context*, and in how societal rhetorics connect play with place and its specific context (here, game centers).

As the original context in which digital play emerged, and because of their nature of quasi-public yet closed space for games, game centers triggered the moral fears on leisure together with the economic hopes of the industry. This resulted in a representation marked by awe and reticence (see par. 3.1.). With the economic uncertainties and public disinterest, the industry focused on re-shaping its identity, while giving birth to self-reflexive imaginary (par 3.2.). The subsequent naturalization of game centers as urban elements brought forth a new face and implied a new relationship between game, space and societal gaze, despite the persisting of filters and biases (par 3.3.). With arcades passing down the baton to consoles and handhelds, they will increasingly be perceived as nostalgic corners, triggers for personal memories (par 3.4). The Cool Japan cultural dynamics, however, will show a different side of game centers, tied to the heterotopy of entertainment districts and to the magic realism of popular media narratives (par 3.5). While the memories of the Lost Decade, channelled by the revival of fighting games, will be linked to a retrospective gaze that looks at the societal conflict and the arcade subcultures as a paradigmatic symbol of a whole generation (par 3.6).

All these dynamics show ties with different imaginaries that overlap and clash, each one a paradigm of a different relationship between games, players, space and society. This results in a heterogeneous and stratified image of arcades, even today: simultaneously a space depicted as safe and protected (from the external world), a marginal and criminal place, and a dangerous battlefield (for competitive players); a space for relaxation and simple distraction, or a ground for self-improvement and mastery; a symbol of the unstoppable rise of games in the 80's, as well as a paradigm of nostalgia-inducing past in the 2000s.

Acknowledgement

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