An Arcade in an Arcade Cabinet in a Neoclassical Palace: Evaluating the Arcade Britannia Project

Dr Alan Meades
Canterbury Christ Church University
North Holmes Road
Canterbury
Telephone
alan.meades@canterbury.ac.uk

Keywords
Game history, amusement arcade, exhibition, local history, practice-based project

Extended Abstract

The amusement arcade is recognized as an important location in the familiarization and public adoption of early videogame technology and part of a chronology of games development and game history (Kokurek, 2016, Wade, 2019, Meades, 2022). Amusement arcades and the games they contained have become valuable commodities and motifs: arcade games are repackaged into retro anthologies that offering curated origin stories for modern games that generate consistent income, e.g., ATARI 50 (2022), Capcom Beat ‘Em Up Bundle (2018), and Capcom Arcade Stadium (2021). More recently, the physicality of arcade cabinets themselves; their form, shape, and inputs, have become part of this commercial repackaging, with micro-console versions of arcade cabinets being released (e.g. NEOGEO Mini Arcade International Version 2018, and SEGA Astrocity Mini Console 2021), and limited-run 1/12 scale plastic model kits created for a niche but dedicated audience (e.g. Wave’s Hang-On 2016, and Astro City 2020). The mythic notion of the amusement arcade with its neon signs, majority adolescent male players, as captured in TRON’s Flynn’s Arcade (Disney, 1982) and more recently Stranger Things’ Palace Arcade (Netflix, 2017), has become shorthand for some kind of cool place in the early days of videogames, and this myth is invoked to sell arcade related products (see Meades, 2022). The mythic arcade is a stereotype only loosely based on historic North American amusement arcades, and as time progresses it becomes more compelling, and dominant as memories of the real historic arcade fades away. This mythic arcade turns the arcade into a singular commercial concept, overshadowing game history accounts that highlight that amusement arcades were – and in many jurisdictions remain – distinctly different from the North American ideal, a product of regional legislation, cultures of public play (including carnival and fairground heritage), and historical precedents.

This extended abstract seeks to offer a report on an ambitious three-year practical research project (and a larger seven-year research project), that seeks to combat the mythic arcade by recording, articulating, and sharing accounts of regional amusement arcades, specifically the arcade in Great Britain. Led by Dr Alan Meades and produced by students at Canterbury Christ Church University, the project, Arcade Britannia: Interactive Social History, is intended as an interactive companion to the Arcade Britannia monograph on the same subject. Arcade Britannia: Interactive Social History combines local games research, oral and cultural history, and high-end gaming graphics cards and authentic 1980s arcade videogame hardware, to bring the experience of the historic British amusement arcade to the public. Arcade Britannia: Interactive Social History provides its players with an authentic digital twin of two British amusement arcades circa 1989, containing the videogames and trappings that defined the British arcade at the time. The arcades can be freely explored, and oral history narrations triggered when
specific machines or other touchpoints are activated. While designed using contemporary games
development tools including Unreal Engine 5, the virtual arcade is built into a 1990 Electrocoin Xenon
arcade cabinet, hardware synonymous with the British arcade of the period. It will be exhibited
alongside 360VR narrated videos of the same spaces (made available online at a companion website
www.arcadebritannia.com opening opportunities for further oral history collection), and a companion
comic book as catalogue. At the same time as the DiGRA 2023 conference, the Arcade Britannia:
Interactive Social History will be exhibited as part of the prestigious London Design Biennale 2023.
This will place game studies and local game history practical research alongside works by some of
the most celebrated contemporary designers, and an anticipated visitor footfall of 35,000 visitors over
twenty-five days. Arcade Britannia: Interactive Social History virtual arcade is intended as a way of
communicating the cultural and historic significance of the British amusement arcade and combating
the overbearing influence of the iconic mythic arcade, to a general audience in an interesting and
engaging manner.

This extended abstract will consider the effectiveness of Arcade Britannia: Interactive Social History
by presenting a very recent (and likely rather raw) perspective on preparing and exhibiting interactive
games history experiences to the general public. In so doing it will consider the overarching Arcade
Britannia project (research, monograph, and impact activity) and consider its suitability as a model
for local and experiential games histories activity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Digital Eclipse. 2022. ATARI 50: The Anniversary Collection, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4,
PlayStation 5, Windows, Xbox One, Xbox Series. United States, Atari Interactive Inc.

Capcom Co., Ltd. 2018. Capcom Beat 'Em Up Bundle, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Windows,
Xbox. Great Britain, CE Europe Ltd.

Capcom Co., Ltd. 2021. Capcom Arcade Stadium, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Windows,
Xbox One, Xbox Series. United States, Capcom U.S.A., Inc.

Kocurek, C. A. 2016. Coin-operated Americans rebooting boyhood at the Video Game Arcade.
Minneapolis, United States: University of Minnesota Press.


Academic.