

From Play to Playces: the representation of *contexts of play* in Japanese games and popular media.

Vincenzo, Idone Cassone

Ritsumeikan Center for Game Studies (RCGS), Ritsumeikan University
56-1 Tōjiin Kitamachi,
Kita Ward, Kyoto
22v00329@gst.ritsumei.ac.jp

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LONG ABSTRACT

This contribution will focus on the media representation of contexts of play (*playces*) in Japanese games and popular media. In the following pages I will: a) highlight the importance of the study of the representation of contemporary contexts of play (e.g. game centers, home space, theme parks, entertainment districts etc) for game studies; b) describe the aims, method and corpus of the research; c) briefly present some preliminary findings, based on the analysis of part of the corpus, which is based on the representation of Japanese game centers.

Introduction

Game Studies, since its inception, has long been investigating the spatial dimensions in games and of games. Initially, many studies focused on the nature of simulated interactive spaces (Aarseth 2000, Newman 2004, Nitsche 2008), mostly conforming to the understanding of play as separated, bounded and inconsequential activity, based on the reading of Caillois (1958) and Huizinga (1938).

Over time, however, researchers broadened their scopes, matching the investigation of the in-game space with the study of the spaces *for* games and *for* play, focusing on the interaction/integration between ludic activities and their context/environment. They thus begun to analyse playgrounds and amusement parks (Walz 2010), Entertainment districts (Daliot-Bul 2014), theme parks (Notoji 1990, Raz 1999) and Game Centers (Katō 2011, Pelletier-Gagnon 2019, Kawasaki 2022).

Concurrently, games began to be discussed in terms of their pervasive potential, invading and coexisting 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, both digital and not (Taylor 2006, Wirman 2021); or to exist within the interstitial spaces and times of daily activities (Poremba 2007, Thibault 2017). As for the previous efforts, these studies can be considered in light of the concurrent internal debate over the nature of game boundaries, and the re-evaluation of the magic circle of play (see Lammes 2008 or Fassone 2013), in light of the general tendency to consider digital games less as a separate, bounded and temporary experience and more as an activity interacting with external space, time and social dynamics.

Moving beyond specific game typologies or gameplay dynamics, however, the understanding of the dynamics of the contexts of digital play is still underway,

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especially in relation to the more ‘traditional’ forms of digital games (console, pc, portable). There is still much to discuss in terms of the general relationships that take place between the contexts of digital play (or *playces*, see Brown and Lam, 2021), the ludic activities inside them, and the cultural discourse surrounding them.

This is especially true once we focus on the media representations of playces in popular media; in spite of their (often) fictional narratives, popular fiction often provides insightful representation of playful activities, including their societal role, the rhetorics of play, the historical spread of games and, last but not least, the contexts of play.

Investigating the representation of playces may thus prove useful to:

- a) observe relatively less studied dynamics of remediation (*i.e.* how ‘old media’ accept, translate and discursivise new media forms, such as digital games) and meta-mediaic dynamics (*i.e.* how digital games embed, represent and interpret the ludic activity in context) by means of the focus on the representation of the spatial dynamics of play;
- b) analyse the media representation and discourses over digital games and play forms, their historical change over time and in relation to the cultural inception of digital games and their playces (*i.e.* how the discourses and representations of arcades have changed after the arcade golden age or the dominance of console games).

Objective and method

The current proposal aims to investigate one of the less-studied dimensions of the contexts of digital play, at the intersection between game studies and media studies: the representation and discourses of Japanese *playces* in the popular media in Japan. The proposal is part of an in-progress research funded by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), focused on the analysis of the cultural representations of the boundaries and frames of Play in the Japanese media system.

The choice of Japanese playces and media environment is motivated by several reasons: first, the popular media production in Japan presents a vast and diversified corpus of representation of contemporary playces (from game centers to entertainment districts, and theme parks), and daily life of people who play games; furthermore, these texts are part of historically relevant system of media mix and transmedia practices (Steinberg 2012, 2015), which further improve the significance and comparability of the findings; lastly, these representations are at the interplay between national and global game practices (Roth et al 2021), by being part of dynamics of national self-representation (Hutchinson 2019) and orientalist rhetorics (Tosca 2021), as well as belonging to internationally recognised and diffused series, game genres in the globalised game culture.

The research has been analysing the representation of the contexts of digital play with specific focus on manga, anime and video games, with specific reference to the representation of game centres, entertainment districts, at-home-play, outdoor play, theme parks.

The analysis is based on a corpus of around 40 items, that includes, among others, manga/anime such as *Game Center Arashi* (Shogakukan 1978-83), *Famicom Rocky* (Shogakukan 1985-87), *Arcade Gamer Fubuki* (Enterbrain 1998; Shaft 1999-2001), *Hi-score Girl* (Square Enix 2010-18; J.C. Staff 2018-19); digital games as the *Boku no Natsuyasumi* series (Sony Computer Entertainment 1999-2009) *Shenmue I and II* (Sega 1999-2001), the *Yakuza* series (Sega 2005-), *Persona 3-5* (Atlus 2006-2017), *The World ends with You* (Square Enix 2007, 2021), *Steins:Gate* (Kadokawa 2009) and TV shows as *Game Center CX* (2003-).

The methodology for the analysis is drawn from the author's previous work on the boundaries of play (Idone Cassone 2019); it is based on the integration of the above-mentioned research on the spatial properties of game contexts and on semiotic models (e.g. Greimas 1983, Lotman 1990, D'armenio 2014, Thibault 2017b). The model investigates the representation of spatial contexts of play under the following dimensions:

- The urban and architectural properties of the space (delimitation, relative position, inside/outside, public/private, architectural features, functions of the space etc);
- The ludic activities performed (individual or collective, type and forms of play/games, expected groups participants, side-play activities involved, economy and sociality);
- The interaction between the space and the players identity (dynamics of fame and recognition, societal frames, anonymity, group identity, liminal vs liminoid function (Turner 1982)
- The societal and self-rhetorics surrounding the space (safe haven, competitive battlefield, dangerous or immoral den, temporary distraction, separated world etc)
- [for games] The interaction between the simulated space, the gameplay and player agency (space for minigames, non-interactive space, ludic side-content, narrative integration etc).

Expected results and preliminary findings

By integrating these dimensions with the above-mentioned literature, the research is expected to shed a light on the features of the media representation of Japanese *playces*, at the intersection between the spatial affordances of play, the cultural rhetorics of ludus and the development of the medium of digital games.

The preliminary findings tied to the representation of game centres have shown, for instance, how the different spatial affordances are integrated into the rhetorics and imaginary of play and games. Spatial and architectural features (position, size, lights and arrangement) interact with game characteristics (newness, genre, technology, modes) and cultural rhetorics (stigma, self-ghettoisation, subculturing, self-improvement) to make it a paradigmatic place for the construction of the cultural identity of players of digital games between the '80s and the late 2000.

During the '80s and the first half of the '90s, game centers are simultaneously subject to idealisation and moral panic: space of future technology and progress, and space of deviation and crime. Both these rhetorics will, however, largely reflect in representation 'from the outside', with limited focus on the people, space, and dynamics of the place itself.

During the '90s game centers slowly became part of the urban environment, appearing as part of the landscape of everyday leisure, despite retaining many negative rhetorics and being often framed by gender, social class etc. Through their social acceptance, their representation shows sometimes a simultaneous process of sanitization, with focus on specific games and activities (e.g. crane games) above others (fighting games). Their nature of 'places from the future' begin shifting to one of 'nostalgic places', with the increasing importance of console games at the beginning of the 21st century.

With the economic and social rise of games in the Japanese mediascape in the following decade, the representation of game centers is increasingly linked to nostalgic sub-cultural movements (i.e. fighting game cultures) on the one hand, and to the idealised otaku-based entertainment environment (Akihabara, entertainment districts) on the other, in a representation that is simultaneously obsessively accurate (in terms of detail

and 'from the inside' perspective) and stereotypical (in its reinforcement of contemporary rhetorics about gamers, subcultures and new otaku generations).

The rhetorics of game centers thus vary according to the time, the texts and the perspectives: they are simultaneously a space depicted as safe and protected (from the external world) and a dangerous battlefield (for competitive players); a space for relax 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.

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