

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.

Meades, A. 2022. *Arcade Britannia*. London, England: The MIT Press.

Wade, A. 2019. *Playback: A genealogy of 1980s British videogames*. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic.