

A public place of their own.

A Fieldstudy of a Game Café as a Third Place.

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the meaning and function of the game café as a ‘Third place’ for boys and young men who play games in a game café. As there has been relatively little focus on game cafés in Western Europe as compared to studies of game cafés in Asia this paper examines the meaning and function of a game café in Sweden. This is achieved through an ethnographic study of a game café in central Stockholm. The author argues that the game café functions as a public place of their own. This means that for this group the game café is an escape from the moral judgments and parental restrictions and control at home. It also provides young men with a local hang out to maintain, negotiate and establish relationships with friends, peers and like minded through gaming. This place is a rather restricted third place which fosters interaction within a homogenous community of people of the same gender and age group. Therefore the game café shares more similarities with a sport club than a traditional café.

Keywords

Game café, third place, public places, online games, gameplay, young people.

INTRODUCTION

With the mass consumption and diffusion of digital games, be it computer games or game consoles, public places [1] for playing digital games have emerged across Europe, Asia and the US. These places are referred to as Internet/cyber/net/game cafés, PC bangs, wangbaa’s, gaming centers or mass LAN-parties. Besides providing players with a physical place to play online and digital games these places are also social places where people who like to play games gather, socialize and interact with friends, peers and others [2-5]. The social appeal of the game cafés are similar to the older video arcade halls

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where young people gathered to socialize with friends. These places can be described as third places (see also [6, 7]) as these are not home or work but public places for encounters and interaction between friends, acquaintances and strangers. The term ‘third place’ was introduced by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg [8] to describe the public places that can be found in urban societies such as pubs, restaurants, bars, those places which are separate from the place of work and home. According to Oldenburg the hallmarks of a true ‘third place’ is: free or inexpensive; food and drink, while not essential, are important; highly accessible: proximate for many (walking distance); involves regulars – those who habitually congregate there; welcoming and comfortable; both new friends and old should be found there [8].

In this article I will present an ethnographic study of a game café that is located in Stockholm, Sweden. The aim with the article is to explore the meaning and function of the game café for the players who regularly visit the game café. What are their motives to visit the game café? What needs does the game café serve for the players who regularly visit this place? Who are the visitors who attend the game café? How do their common interests for games enhance, facilitate and support social interaction and contacts between regulars and occasional players in the game café?

As most academic studies of game cafés have been focused on the appeal and function of game cafés in Asia [9] there is a lack of studies of game cafés in Europe. This paper is a contribution to this research gap.

The text is organized in five sections. After the Introduction I will situate my work within previous studies of Internet cafés and game cafés in Europe and Asia and then introduce my notion of the term ‘the third place’ as a public place of their own. As a next step I present the methodological approaches undertaken in this study. Thereafter I present the findings and discuss these in light of other studies of game cafés in Asia and Europe. As a final step I give a conclusion of the findings.

RELATED WORK AND CONCEPT

The game café with its origins in the Internet café can be described as an Internet café providing computer games and game machines. As described by B.J. Gajadhar, Y.A.W. De Kort, IJsselsteijn and K. Poels. These places share some common traits such as being places where one can use a computer for a fee, offering fast broadband access, the most popular games and high quality computers. There is also the staff present, who solve problems with hardware and software and maintains the facilities [9]. Despite common features, studies of game and Internet cafés in various countries have showed cultural variations among these places. For example Tony Salvador, John W. Sherry and Alvaro E. Urrutia [10] who studied Internet and game cafés in six different countries found major differences in usage, online services, spatial layout, architecture and customers. Some of the Internet cafés emphasized computer usage while others highlighted the social aspects. Sarah Lee [11] found in her study of an Internet café in South East England that the consumption of computers was an individualized and discrete act rather than a social act. This study will show that the consumption of online games was enjoyed largely with other people.

A core concept in this article is 'the third place'. Third places are described as places where everybody knows your name which one can visit regularly, voluntarily and almost at any time. Because people may come and go as they wish nobody plays host and with like minded others present the environment creates a homelike atmosphere and a sense of belonging for visitors [9]. Salvador, Sherry and Urrutia [10] argue that traditional cafés have long been recognized as one kind of "social space" relied upon for conversation and general conviviality among groups of people and within communities.

If the third place refers to public places such as cafés, bars, pubs and restaurants what then are the "first" and the "second" places? The "first place" is the home and those that one lives with. The "second place" is the workplace — where people may actually spend most of their time.

When Ray Oldenburg described the third place he referred to public places such as bars, restaurants and cafés but did not take into account public places which gathered people with a shared and common interest. The third place of the game café can be described as a public place of their own for young men who play online and network games.

In contrast to the idea of the third place as suggested by Ray Oldenburg [8] as a place where conversation is the primary activity and which is inclusive and accessible to the general public the notion of the third place will be extended to include public places that are fairly restricted and gather like minded around a common and shared interest and activity.

The idea of game or Internet cafés as a third place has been highlighted by several scholars [6, 9]. For example B.J. Gajadhar, Y.A.W. De Kort, IJsselsteijn and K. Poels.

[9] underline that game cafés in Western Europe can be seen as a third place as they are home-like environments but are not home and not school and that they promote social interaction between people. Chee [6] notes that the third place of PC bangs in South Korea provides people with social and psychological comfort. The social appeal of PC bangs have also been emphasized by Salvador, Sherry and Alvaro E. Urrutia [10]. They note that for many users, PC bangs are - and seem increasingly to be - social destinations in and of themselves for couples and groups. They assert that PC bangs are at their best when groups of kids (i.e. school age), teens or young adults out for the evening come in and play networked games with each other. 'It is akin to a computer "playground"'. They are places one goes for diversion, after school, before they go out drinking or afterwards to sober up'.

Being a public place for online gaming one can also think of online game worlds as third places. According to Gajadhar et al [9] referring to Steinkuehler and Williams they note that virtual game worlds are structurally similar to third places as these fit the eight characteristics of what constitutes a third place according to Oldenburg.

Florence Chee [6] asserts that online places are fourth places as people are partaking in creating communities online and offline. However I argue that it is more fruitful to think of online games as a third place located within third, second or first places.

As highlighted by Gajadhar et al [9] the appeal, activities and motives to visit game cafés differ in East Asia and Europe due to cultural conditions and factors. Referring to studies of game rooms in East Asia they note that the social appeal are structured by tight living conditions and family structures, infrastructure barriers since not everyone has access to fast broadband, and the cultural status and significance of playing online games which are regarded as a sport. Whereas, in Europe youth have the social opportunities to play games at home with friends and most of them have the technical resources such as access to fast broadband [4, 5] at home but playing games is more equal to go out for the evening.

DATA COLLECTION

This paper is based on an ethnographic fieldstudy at a game café in Stockholm. The game café, which is located in a busy area of shopping streets, department stores and restaurants belongs to one of the more popular game cafés in Stockholm. Although this setting is labeled a 'gaming center' in Sweden I will in this paper refer to this place as a game café since this place besides providing advanced game computers and a large selection of the most popular online and PC games offers coffee, soda, cakes, fast food and candies for purchase.

I used closed observations and interviews to collect the field material. I was taking field notes when I was doing the observations and a tape recorder during the interviews. I was often sitting side by side with a group of players talking to them while watching them play. The game café is

called Phantasy in this article. I visited the game café regularly, about one or two times a week, during a period of five months in 2005 and three months in 2007. Each time I stayed there between two to four hours. I visited the game café in the mornings, evenings and on a few occasions at night time.

FEELING AT HOME AND AWAY FROM HOME

In contrast to studies of game cafés in Asia young male players at Phantasy were not restricted by infrastructure limitations such as lack of broadband access that “force” them to leave home and enter the game café. While a few had restricted economic resources since they had to share the home computer with siblings and others lacked access to game computers with a powerful processor and advanced graphic cards there were other far more pressing limitations that forced young players to play games in the game café. Playing network games in the game café was more convenient than playing at home as they did not have to bring their own computers than when playing at home.

Phantasy was the home base for the young players who regularly visited the game café, a place where they stopped by, left and returned to. To this group of players the game café was more than just a game café but their local hang out, where they used to hang out on a regular basis with friends and peers who liked to play online digital games. In the game café they felt at home despite being away from home. The home-like atmosphere was created through the informal and casual interaction between regulars and staff. Often I could see staff hanging around players’ computers chitchatting and commenting on the games while they were playing, or players who were calling for staff to come and watch their gameplay.

I could not always distinguish the staff from the customers unless they wore their work uniforms, a black t-shirt marked with Phantasy on the back.

For some of the regulars their relationship with the staff has evolved into a familiar and informal relationship. Fredrik 19, a regular for more than seven years knew the staff and nearly all the regulars at Phantasy. When I asked him what he liked about Phantasy he emphasized the staff and the friendly atmosphere of the setting. He told me that his favorite place was close to the cash register where he could easily talk to the staff. For regulars such as Fredrik the game café was not just any game café but a place of their own to which they had created a personal bond. The informal and familiar relationship between players and staff [9] can be defined as an anchored relationship.

Exploring social relationships in public places Morrill and Snow [14] define anchored personal relationships as relationships which involve recurring interaction and interdependencies that develop between individuals over time but are tied to a particular public space and do not spill over to private households. They quote Peggy Wireman who points out that these relationships have dimensions of both primary relationships such as warmth, rapport and closeness as well as secondary relationships,

for example intense involvement, sense of belonging, mutual knowledge of character, a commitment that is limited in time and scope.

Chee [6] notes that PC bangs as a third place are especially important for young people in Korea because entertaining one’s friends is rarely done in the home. This has also been reported in a study of game cafés in Taiwan by Holin Lin in a study of game cafés in Taiwan [4] She reports that for young people in Taiwan playing at home is usually not a group activity.

In contrast to these findings my informants had the social opportunity to play online games with friends at home. However in other aspects my study confirmed the findings of Asian game cafés. For instance Holin Lin [4] in her study of playing at home and at Internet cafés in Taiwan notes that almost all parents set up specific rules for their children’s computer gaming activities at home. Florence Chee [6] in her study of the role of PC bangs in young Korean lives notes in her study [6] that the PC bangs offer young players an escape from various constraints at home. Less privacy and parental disapproval force players to play games at the game cafés. For my informants home functioned as disciplined spaces where young people’s time spent on games was controlled and regulated by their parents. A majority of the young players were in conflict over how to and when to spend their time on games with their parents at home.

Despite variations in terms of regulations and restrictions regarding time spent on games, for example: one boy told me that he was not allowed to play at all during the week, another boy told me he was not allowed to play more than two hours each day, while another young man told me that he was not allowed to play games on weekends as he had to spend time with his family. Another boy told me that his parents valued outdoor activities or non media activities as more meaningful activities than playing digital games, watching TV or using the computer, which had resulted in his mother taking the TV away for a while, none of the informants were allowed to play unrestrictedly, limitless.

Within the local community of like minded young players game interest was accepted and appreciated as they were sharing a common interest for games. As such this place provided players with an emotional comfort zone as young players’ interests for games did not lead to conflicts and battles as their game experiences were recognized. In this they gained crucial self respect.

Although the young people faced restrictions at the game café these restrictions did not impact on their gaming. Snow and Harrison note that despite the regulations young people can face in public places they face far more potential for regulations at home and in school. The game café became thus a free zone and an escape from the disciplined spaces of the homes [4]

Fredrik 19: This is a good place for me to relax. If my mum is home I stay here for some time. She has her time and I have my time here.

Me: Does she know that you spend time here?

Fredrik: Yes. She used to come by and see me before she goes to work. And she comes after work. We talk a bit before she leaves for work.

By staying at the game café this young man was exercising a level of control and self – government towards his mother's norms and values. By spending time at the game café he did not have to get into a conflict with his mother over how to spend and organize his leisure time. In the game café he was ruling over his 'own' time. At the game café he gained autonomy and self government and independency towards his mother. It is also worth noting that his mother approved of the game café as a legitimate place for her son to spend his time when playing online games. Her approval seems to reflect a more positive attitude among informants' parents towards their kids playing games at the game café. This is a paradox as parents disapproved of their children's gameplay sessions at home. This paradox might be explained by different associations to playing games at the game café and playing games at home. Some informants told me that their parents considered playing games at a game café as a group activity while playing at home was associated with immersion and compulsiveness.

The fact that the game café is a rather safe place for teens to be as compared to other public places such as the streets, as they are not allowed to drink alcohol, use drugs (except for snuff) and surf porn sites. Being monitored by adults might also explain the positive attitudes towards the game café as a gaming place. The positive attitudes also reflect a more general positive attitude towards game cafés in Sweden in the popular media who portray them as versions of civic youth centers.

The positive attitudes among parents towards game cafés in Sweden stands in contrast to the attitudes held by parents in Asia. For example Holin Lin reported in a study of game cafés in Taiwan that game cafés are portrayed in the popular media as dangerous places [4].

THE LOCAL HANG OUT

Like other game cafés in Stockholm [12] Phantasy attracted a homogenous group of players, young men between the ages of 14 and 25 who like to play network and online games, mostly first person shooter games, strategy games and massively multi player games. Although there were women at Phantasy they hardly played games and those that did came with their boyfriends, male friends or alone but never in groups with other women to play games. This observation is notable and fascinating and deserves some attention as previous studies of Internet and game cafés in Asia [4,6] just glance over this issue without discussing it further.

Why do young men go to the game café to play network and online games? Referring to Ray Oldenburg [8] public places have been historically places for men. Women have been restricted to the home and care of children. Oldenburg [8] notes that the survival of the whole has depended far more on male co-operation and comradeship. The explanation to the lack of women in this setting might suggest that girls and young women prefer to play online games at home since there are limited amount of women who game in peer groups because gaming with peers is still a predominantly male activity.

The customers at Phantasy spanned from the regulars, who used to visit the game café on a regular basis, the occasional customers that dropped by once in a while to the customers that visited the café for specific occasions, such as tourists and occasional visitors.

The regulars had usually visited Phantasy for years. Knowing the place, the staff, the other regulars Phantasy was their place to which they were emotionally connected and that had a central place in their lives. For them participating in online gaming at a game café was a way of life. For the regulars usually no advanced planning was needed. Their relaxed approach turned their visits into causal plans. Usually they dropped by the game café spontaneously if they happened to be in the area or if they were bored and needed to kill time. As regulars they always expect to run into or meet someone they knew. Tom 15 a regular explains to me:

"You come here alone and when you come here you see who is here. You come here when you feel like it".

Since no detailed plans with friends and peers had to be made in advance, the regulars dropped by the game café at any time, to see if anyone was around. Regulars usually asked each other when entering the game café who was around and greeting each other by saying: So you're sitting here and playing.

The game café functioned as a crucial hang out for friends and peers who liked to play games, similar to the street corner or the local kiosk where they got the most recent information about each other's statuses in their everyday lives, for example school, work, vacation, or families. This way of interaction; hanging out, kicking back, or having a good time with peers is not unique to this setting but characterizes public places that youth enter and dominate. A more clear definition of hanging out is provided by Tyler Harrison and Susan Morgan [13]. They define hanging out 'as an interaction order that simultaneously reflects and resists adult interaction orders. Within their interaction orders, youth manage personal relationships that are "anchored" primarily in the social and physical contexts in which they hang out'. In this context hanging out was not mainly about resisting adult interaction orders but was rather about escaping adult intervention from control of games.

Also new friendships emerged at the game café due to simultaneously being present in the online game space and the physical setting of the game café. One boy told me how the friendship between him and another player had evolved by sitting in the game café playing the same game World of Warcraft and staying on the same server. When they found out that they were staying on the same server this became a springboard for socializing further which resulted in a friendship between the boys. This example illustrates that not only did a common game interest facilitated contacts between players but by being located in the same online and offline place the friendship between boys could evolve.

Florence Chee asserts that games are not often the prime motivator for visiting the PC bangs. People go there to interact with friends, some use the PC bang as a place to spend the day at for unemployment. Chees' study of the social opportunities of PC bangs resonate with studies of game cafés in Taiwan [4] and Europe [9] which show that the main reason to visit these places is to play games in the presence of friends and others. Jonas 16 explained the social advantages of hanging out at the game café.

Me: Why are you here?

Jonas: We are here because it is more social. You meet people, you do not feel alone. You do not stay alone.

The social appeal of the game café was also illustrated by the fact that most of the young players entered or were staying in pre-established groups in the game café. When I asked the players why they preferred to visit or play games in the game café with friends they seemed puzzled as if this was the most 'natural' thing to do. Kristian 15 replied to this: *The thing is to be together. Or else I can play at home. Here you can talk rather than chat. It is more fun to sit close like this.* This answer was not unique to him. Most informants preferred to game with friends and stay in pre established groups.

Sitting side by side while playing games was an appreciated activity among players at the game café. Not only did this way of being seated facilitated online gaming collaboration but did also support and created face to face togetherness among players. Unlike online-togetherness which was formed through mediated online communication, voice chat and representations, the game café allowed for a togetherness created through physical proximity and face to face-communication. Gottfrid formulated this as

Me: Why do you go to Phantasy and play games? I mean to a game café instead of playing at home?

Gottfrid: I don't know. I guess, I can sit here and poke him. He pokes his friend. You are together but in another way. At home, you can talk to each other on the Internet, chatting. We do that. You are together in a different way. But when you are here (he pauses). When you are here like this. It gives another feeling. It feels like you are a small

peer group playing together. It's like playing in a LAN (Local Area Network).

For Gottfrid the pleasure of playing online and network games with friends at the game café were motivated by enjoyment of sitting close with friends. Hege Nordli [5] who studied the culture of a LAN party in Norway found that the visitors liked to sit together, sitting side by side since it was cozy and safe. As such the game café provided not only with social comfort but also with physical comfort.

At Phantasy drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes were not allowed. However, during my stay I noticed that many of the young players were snuffing. Snuff which is a piece of tobacco that is molded and put under the lip of the tobaccos user is an old tradition in Sweden. Young men were usually sharing a box of snuff with each other while playing games in the game café. One time I witness a situation in which a young man was offering snuff to his friends. In an adult tone he said 'Guys the snuff is on me. Take some'. By sharing the snuff with his close friends the snuff manifested their relationships as close and personal. As such this example shows how the young players by copying the social rituals from another third place, the pub they defined the role and function of the game café similar to going with friends to the pub and go one round with the beer. It also shows that in this setting they experiment with roles and relationships as being in a transition state of not being children nor adults.

THE ROLE OF THE GAMES

The game sessions, the spatial layout and game experiences facilitated, structured and opened up for social interactions and encounters between friends and peer groups, strangers and regulars at the game café. For already established friends staying in the game café nurtured and manifested their already established friendship.

One evening I was staying with a group of friends who were playing World of Warcraft (WoW). The group was constantly shifting in size as people were leaving the group, and new people arrived while others returned. I became witness to a conversation between a group of two young men who had just arrived at the game café and a boy who was already there.

Jens: Hello guys. What are you doing?

Ferdinand: We are heading to lvl 60.

Jens: Nice

Tom: Hello. Whats up? Have you got TBC? How are things going with TBC?

Ferdinand: Fine.

Jens: Is it more fun than playing the old one?

Tom: What level are you on?

Kalle: 62

Jens: Holy Shit. 62 since I left yesterday?

Kalle: The new races are so ugly.

Jens: Which ones?

Kalle: The new Alliances.

Jens: Are there many on level 70?

Kalle: There are some.

Jens and Kalle were engaged in a conversation about the new game such as commenting each others gameplay and got information about each others and other players statuses and location in the online game world. This example shows that being engaged players and friends, chit chatting with friends in the game café centered as much about their statuses in the online games as in their everyday life.

Unlike third places such as cafes and bars, small talk and chit chat among strangers and regulars in the game café did not primarily focus on everyday matters, the weather or the latest local or national news but on the games and game play. Game experiences facilitated conversations and interaction among strangers in the game café. One night I observed a boy strolling around in the main room. He wore black jeans, a worn out leather jacket and black shoes. He was walking around slowly while glancing at the other players' computer screens. He did not interact with anyone, just watched what they were doing. No one in the room seemed to be annoyed or disturbed or seemed to pay attention to him. I was sitting next to a group of boys, Anders, Gottfrid and Max when the boy stopped by. At first he was quiet, just stood behind them and looked at their screens, observing what they were doing. He gazed over the boys' shoulders while listening to what they were saying. The other boys did not seem to care about him. Then when Gottfrid was asking one of the other boys a question the guy replied to Gottfrid without being the slightest bit shy. None of the boys seemed to be disturbed or annoyed by his interference. They started to chit chat about the new game content and the new features. Gottfrid and Anders who were still rather unfamiliar with the new features seemed to appreciate the boy's effort to inform about the new features. The boy seemed rather familiar with the new game and willingly shared his experiences with the other boys. They were laughing and telling funny anecdotes.

The new game expansion tied a group of strangers together for a brief moment. Being an experienced player the boy were able to join in and intervene in the other boys conversation. During this moment of conversation they were sharing game experiences, informing each other about the new game, supporting each other with cognitive and moral support, exchanging advice and telling funny anecdotes. they got emotionally engaged in each other and their relationship took on a casual, warm and friendly character. This relationship which can be described as a fleeting relationship is common for public places.

Morill and Snow [14] define fleeting relationships as: social encounters in public that do not constitute personal relationships. They note that these relationships are

emotionally colored and evince a level of interdependence between individuals and have a transient nature. Moreover they suggest that fleeting relationships lie beyond the familiar stranger as it includes social interaction. Individuals can be quite attached to the partner of a fleeting relationship for momentary, emotional and cognitive support although not based on mutual and ongoing long term relationship.

This example shows how a fleeting relationship evolved among a group of strangers in the game café. By talking and chit chatting about the games in the moment of interaction their relationship took on a rather personal character. Their game interest existed as long as they interacted and there were no obligations or attachments beyond the moment of their social interaction. But in that moment of their interaction they had a good time, sharing game experiences and telling funny anecdotes.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Like other scholars studying game cafés in Asia and Europe this article has shown that the game café in this particular study can be understood as a third place as suggested by Oldenburg as it is a place for sociability and conviviality among regulars, a place which feels at home but is away from home and which provides people with social and psychological comfort. However being a third place for like minded who share a common interest in playing online and network games and which is structured and defined by a common activity the function and motives of this particular third place goes beyond the notion of the third place as suggested by Oldenburg where its main activity is conversation and a public place open for anyone to attend. The notion of the term is extended and redefined.

To be able to understand the game café as a third place this article has showed that one can not limit the study of the game café to the activities in the game café but also take into account the limitations, regulations and constraints of the home, the places which Oldenburg refers to as the first places. By analyzing the restrictions and constraints that young players face at home one can gain a deeper understanding of the social and emotional meaning and function of the game café.

In this article I have argued that the game café functions as a public place of their own for young male players as it is an escape from the restrictions and regulations they face at home. In this setting the young players exercise a level of self government, independency and autonomy from parental restrictions and regulations at home and gain self respect and emotional comfort. As such the game café provides this group with necessary emotional and social comfort and well beings at which they lack at home.

It is also functions as a public place of their own for a group of like minded of the same gender and with similar age who share an interest in playing online and network games. Being a public place which fosters and nurtures a local community of like minded of the same age and gender it is a rather restricted and exclusive third place

sharing more similarities with a sports club than a traditional café. As the game café fosters a local community of like minded people, which does not extend beyond this particular group of players the game café can be described as a public place of their own rather than a public place inclusive for anyone.

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