

“More Than A Craze: Photographs of New Zealand's early digital games scene”

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ABSTRACT

"More Than A Craze" is an online exhibition consisting of 46 photographs of New Zealand's early digital games scene, in the 1980s. The exhibition includes the work of some of New Zealand's best known documentary photographers – Ans Westra, Christopher Matthews, Robin Morrison – with images from the archives of Wellington's *Evening Post* and Auckland's Fairfax newspapers. These photographers captured images of games, gamers and gameplay in the moment when these were novel. These images are significant in that they offer insights into the early days of digital games. They are an important primary source material for researchers interested in the history of play and interactive entertainment.

The exhibition has been curated by Melanie Swalwell and Janet Bayly. It is an online exhibition, hosted by Mahara Gallery, Waikanae (<http://www.maharagallery.org.nz>). It is one of the outcomes of Swalwell's research into the history of digital games in New Zealand, in the 1980s.

Keywords

Games history, photographs, early digital culture, arcades, Space Invaders. New Zealand.

EXHIBITION BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

My two sons don't smoke or drink or take drugs. But they are victims of an addiction just as powerful and insidious... My sons, Williams (12) and Tom (13) and thousands of other youngsters all over the world, are mainliners, hooked on electronic games. It's the craze of the 80s. Against it, all other teenage activities pale into insignificance.

-- text accompanying Black & white 8 O'Clock image dated 23rd January 1982. In Swalwell & Bayly, "More than a Craze".

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Of course, digital games were (and are) much more than a craze. But the term 'craze' captures something of the excitement with which this new leisure activity was received, the intensity of response generated by the games. As journalist Stefan Herrick writes, recounting the moment when "Space Invaders" arrived in his small town:

The invasion happened on a Friday afternoon in 1980. A van rolled up outside Snowdon's milk bar and takeaway in the main street of Takaka. The invader lurked in the back under a sheet.

[...]

The beast was wheeled into the shop and placed between Computer Breakout and the 10c Cascade. Off came the sheet. In went the plug. The invasion had begun.

The kids stopped licking [their icecreams] and stared. Instinctively, they knew this was something amazing and that the world would never be the same again. (2001)

This arrival also marks the beginning of an everyday digital culture.

Given that most remaining arcades have been incorporated into larger retail premises (cinemas, shopping malls, theme parks), these photographs recall a moment when the arcade was a destination in its own right. Many photographs record the spatial layouts of early arcades, and the great breadth of environments in which people played early games (including a rare shot of digital gaming in domestic space). Clearly, some arcades – or 'Spacies parlours' as they were more commonly known – were more salubrious than others. Of course, videogames were not only found in arcades, but also fish and chip shops and at swimming pools and dairies, as in Robin Morrison's photograph of the Wellington Street Dairy, Freemans Bay. The images are significant in that they show how people played games and what they did in these spaces when they weren't playing games. They remind us just how much of a spectator sport gaming was, in the 80s. They also attest to the fact that the transition from electro-mechanical to digital entertainments was neither neat nor immediate.

The imperatives of news photography require remarkable images, and so where news images are included in the exhibition, we might want to wonder at the role of press photographers and the degree to which they are actively arranging and inventing images (stand here, do this), and the degree to which they are documenting an existent social reality. These photographs offer a little bit of each (for instance, is it possible people actually held hands while playing "Space Invaders", as in one image from the *Evening Post*?). Nevertheless, these archival news images are valuable historical references, particularly because of their placement. Published with informative titles, adjacent to current news stories, and reasonably contemporaneously, many provide a witty commentary on the ways in which gaming was so much more than a craze. Games were business, *big* business. They existed in a wider popular cultural field, which was both

spectacular and everyday. Games served as a lightning rod for a range of anxieties. Gaming was a 'scene', with its own emergent culture and mores. And gaming was about skill, prowess, and virtuosic play.

These themes find a counterpoint in the photographs that focus on the people who visited the arcades. Some were regulars, like the people we see in Christopher Matthews' photographs, taken in and around a single arcade, Christchurch's infamous Doghouse. Matthews spent time getting to know his subjects, in the winter of 1978. By contrast, Ans Westra's peripatetic eye and camera roam across numerous sites and environments. In many of her photographs we see groups of people whom we assume to be friends, simply 'hanging out'. We see that girls and women were a presence in the arcade, congregating, playing, watching while their friends play, and gazing at things we can't see (cf. Guins 2004).



Figure 1: Christopher Matthews, No. 13 from the series "The Doghouse". Copyright Christopher Matthews. Used with permission.



Figure 2: Ans Westra, Untitled, proofsheets 1205-2. Alexander Turnbull Library. Copyright Ans Westra. Used with permission.

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