**A Comparative Study of Game Centers in the US and Japan**

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**Abstract**

Although video game arcades were introduced to the United States in the 1970’s, their existence was short-lived due to a variety of factors - including the development and improvement of home gaming consoles.  In Japan, however, video arcades or “Game Centers,” have survived as a popular form of entertainment for people of all ages.

This project examines why game centers are prevalent in Japan while on the decline in the US.  What is the appeal of playing at a game center instead of at home?  Also, what are the most popular games in each culture’s arcade and why? In a survey, American and Japanese university students were asked about these questions.  While American arcade-goers play a greater variety of games, they prefer to play games alone or at home, while Japanese play with their friends at the arcade.  Eighty five percent of female Japanese respondents answered that they go to game centers to use picture machines with their friends.

**Introduction**

Currently, people all over the world enjoy video games in one form or another, and can even play with friends or total strangers from the comfort of their home. But before Playstation and Xbox became household names, people went to arcades to get their video game fix. In Japan, game centers, what many Americans grew up with as video game arcades, still exist, and still appear popular among Japanese people of all ages.

**１. Significance of the Study**

During my study abroad I noticed that game centers were popular among all age groups in Japan, and they always seemed quite busy. This reminded me of the arcades that I played in when I was growing up in the US, which have since become rather scarce. After visiting a number of game centers in Japan, I wanted to try and understand why game centers remained popular in Japan, while nearly disappearing from American society.

**２. Research Questions**

1. Why are game centers (arcades) so prevalent in Japan while they are on the decline in the US?

What is the appeal of playing at a game center instead of at home?

1. What are the most popular games in each culture’s arcade and why?

**３. Research Background**

3. 1. A History of Game Centers in the US

The first arcades featured pinball machines and other simple attractions. The first successful coin-operated machine was *Baffle Ball*, created by David Gottlieb in 1931. Soon after, Bally introduced a cash-payout pinball machine, which led to a city-wide ban in New York in 1942. (June, 2013) The first computer game, OXO, was created by Alexander Douglas in 1952 for his Ph.D. thesis. *Computer Space*, the first commercial video game, is created by Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney in 1971; however, it was too complicated to attain much popularity. (Dillon, 2011)

*Pong* was created in 1972, to huge success. Part of this success was due to the simple controls and instructions for the game. Unfortunately, the industry crashed in 1983, due to numerous factors. After the market had shown signs of recovery, Nintendo released the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the US in 1985, prompting an industry focus on home consoles rather than arcade cabinets (Dillon, 2011).

According to Dillon, the video game crash of 1983 was caused by the following four main factors: home computer wars, overestimation of the market for video games, poor quality products, and a growing negative perception of video games.

(Dillon, 2011)。

3. 2. A History of Game Centers in Japan

In 1974, Namco secured the rights to distribute Atari’s coin operated games in Japan. SEGA, an American company created in japan, had been doing so previously, but Namco was the first Japanese company to enter the video games market. Four years later in 1978, Taito’s game *Space Invaders* became so popular in Japan that it provoked a 100 yen (the standard cost per play in Japan) coin shortage. Space Invaders was a hit due to some technological innovation, as well as being the first game to include animated characters, as well as a “high score” display. (Poole 2000, Dillon 2011). Following Taito’s successful foray into the new game industry, Namco and Nintendo created *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) and *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981), creating new types of games, different from the shooting games found in contemporary arcades. The key to these games’ success was the use of color graphics and cute characters. This also led to the popularity of the games’ characters, which became successful video game merchandise.

3. 3. How Home Consoles have Affected Game Centers

The first home console, the Magnavox Odyssey, was created in 1972, only one year after the first video game was created. Atari began producing Pong for home use after the game’s success. In January 1981, Commodore releases the VIC-20, the first color computer and the first to break one million units sold. Commodore and many other companies were all competing in the same market, with largely the same products. Quality of the product was of paramount importance. Nintendo released the Famicom in Japan in 1983, but waited for the US market to recover before releasing it as the NES in the US in 1985, shifting industry focus to home consoles in the US market. Nintendo’s American office was very concerned about their product relating to “video games” which had recently crashed, so they purposefully worked around that label and re-labeled the console as the Nintendo Entertainment System (Dillon, 2011).

In a Wired.com article, Orland argues that “Japan’s train-based transportation culture makes it more inconvenient for those who live downtown to visit friends in the suburbs. In this kind of environment, downtown arcades became a convenient place for people to hang out and have fun before heading home for the night.” From an American perspective, it certainly is inconvenient to not have a car for your personal transportation needs, instead having to rely on public means. Further comparing US and Japan, Orland compared the limited living and personal space in Japan compared to “giant suburban basements and rec rooms” where Americans play console games, which may play a large role in whether a person goes to an arcade or stays home to play video games(Orland, 2012).

**４．The Study**

Using an online survey in English and Japanese, I gathered data from a total of 52 university students. Thirty of these students were from the US, of which 17 were male and 13 were female. Twenty-two Japanese students also took my survey, eight of whom were male and 14 females.

**５．Research Findings**

5.1. Research Question 1 Results

From Graph 1, I noticed that as children, both American and Japanese students went to game centers more frequently than as adults. Japanese students visit arcades more frequently as adults than Americans, though they tend to visit as rarely as once a month or once a year

American students answered that they tend to stay in arcades longer than Japanese students. This trend applies as both adults and children, as seen in Graph 2.

From the date presented in Graph 3, American arcades are clearly in decline, while the majority of Japanese respondents are unsure of the state of arcades in the neighborhood. However, the second-most popular response for the Japanese, “there are more arcades now” implies growth, or at least some health in the Japanese amusement

Based on the data in Graph 4, console ownership among college students is on a decline. However, this may be to students growing up, moving out of their parents’ homes, and not being able to afford a new console of their own.

The results in Graph 5 demonstrate the following: as children and as adults, Americans play console games with others more often.

According to Graph 6, how people play games together varies between Americans and Japanese. The two most popular methods for Americans are online or via WIFI connection, while Japanese prefer to physically meet and play on the same console. (multi-player)

Research Question 1 Findings:

1: Though Americans do not visit arcades as often, they spend more time in them per visit. 2: It seems that Japanese students visit arcades for a shorter period of time, but more frequently than Americans. 3: Owning a game console and going to an arcade do not appear to be mutually exclusive, though owning a console is much more popular among Americans than Japanese students. 4: Surprisingly, Americans play console games with others more frequently than Japanese students. However, Americans tend to play online or over WIFI, while Japanese prefer playing with a friend or a group using the same console.

Surprisingly, American students agreed more strongly about playing around other people and watching people play games. Japanese students indicated that they do not like noise nor the lights of arcades, while fewer Americans see noise and lights as unpleasant factors, as seen in Graph 7.

I asked participants to describe any negative experiences they might have had at a game center, and have included a number of the most common or extreme answers I received. The American responses were as follows: “[There are] *bratty children and perverts starring* [sic] *at my body when playing dance games.”*

*“Some are pretty dirty*. [I] *was at one that literally had dried blood on the Air Hockey table*.”

“[A] *friend got knocked out by a person.”*

*“There’s bullies and one* [sic] *there was a shooting”*

I also received some interesting responses from Japanese participants:

“*It was too loud and smelled strongly of cigarette smoke.”*

*“At night there are shady people (like delinquents or bikers) at the game center.”*

Of course, these negative experiences are not the norm, but I still found them quite shocking as to how some game centers were operated.

5.2. Research Question 2 Results

From Graph 8, American men play a wider variety of games at the arcade than Japanese. “Crane Games” are most popular among Japanese men, while “Shooting Games” and “Dance Games” are equally popular among the American men surveyed. Both American and Japanese men enjoy Dance/Music/Rhythm games equally.

Similarly to the comparison of the men, American women play a greater variety of games than Japanese women. The most popular game at an arcade is “Picture Machines” for Japanese women, and “Shooting Games” for American women, as seen in Graph 9.

As seen in Graph 10, Japanese respondents stated that they chose games based on them being fun to play with other people, followed by the game’s ease of play. 13% wanted a game that “Looked interesting”, while other criteria were not very important. American respondents were more concerned with how interesting the game looked, and the thrill of the game. 46% of respondents would consider whether the game could be played with others, and the game’s popularity proved the least important aspect to Americans

To recap, the findings for Research Question 2 are as follows:

1. Crane games are more popular in Japan than in the US. 2. American men and women play a greater variety of games than their Japanese counterparts. 3. Americans are primarily motivated by how interesting a game looks, while Japanese want to play games with their friends.

**６．Conclusion**

I found it interesting that Americans enjoyed playing games online or over WIFI, neither way requiring face to face interaction with another person.

Japanese still prefer to meet in person and play games together.

These findings have to do with social dynamics and ways that people in each culture regard their relations with other people.

Americans seem content to use the latest technology (home consoles)to keep in touch and game with friends

Japanese people use game centers as a way to retain their friendships and have fun together

**７．Limitations to the Study and Future Study**

Limitations to the Study included a limited sample size of participants, as well as focusing only on the gaming tastes and habits of university students. Also limiting were the demographics of my survey participants, as they were largely students from CSUMB, or one of our school’s sister schools in Japan.

In a future study, or further exploration of this topic, I would like to choose the type of person who takes the survey. For example, I would focus on respondents who like video games or some similar trait. I would also like to explore the inter-relation between game center culture and anime culture in Japan. Japan’s arcade culture seems to borrow heavily from Japan’s anime culture, especially when prizes for crane games are concerned. Finally, I would want to ask if there is enough interest to bring arcades back to the US. Or would it be possible to export the idea of a game center to the US, since there is already a significant interest in Japanese culture and anime.

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