

Revisiting the project of an observational study of a museum, library, or cultural space's users and visitors, I chose to look at a venue which would be a departure from my prior study of the Neue Galerie and the NYPL Library for the Performing Arts. For this project, I surveyed the Chinatown Fair Arcade, located at 8 Mott Street in Chinatown, as well as paying visits to other arcade-like institutions in the city. Chinatown Fair is a video arcade, in the traditional 1980s model, which I have frequently heard referenced as the "only real arcade in New York City". At the height of their popularity, the mission of video arcades was to provide all of the newest and most entertaining videogames available, but also involved incorporating the quickly developing cannon of "classic" games and enduring games requiring physical skill (such as air hockey or skeeball). With the increasing capabilities of home gaming systems, video arcades have lost much their primacy as showcase venues for new game titles. However, a canon of arcade game classics has developed--these are games which were either never released on a home gaming system or where the arcade version is considered the best embodiment of the work (along criteria such as graphics, game narrative, controller interface etc). Several of the spaces I visited consciously offered a curated selection of these historic game titles, thus serving as functional museums or archives of the arcade game experience.

Nostalgia and respect for these arcade classics has recently led to the formation of arcade-like "video game museums", where a functioning collection of classic games are assembled (sometimes in the form of a bar, serving the adult audience who grew up with these games). I would argue that a purposively curated collection of "historic" games dramatically alters user perception, and experience when compared to say, a

classic game randomly placed in a bowling alley or student union. Having a collection of games that the public can play is crucial to the idea of a coin-operated video game museum. One such establishment is Barcade in Brooklyn, whose name makes clear its dual function. Barcade has a curated selection of games, mostly ranging from the early-80s to the early-90s. Their most recent game titles were, at the latest, from the early 1990s. The fact the Barcade operates as a bar restricts its clientele to those over 21, and on several visits there I have never observed anyone who appeared under 21 years old playing the arcade games. The layout of Barcade features a bar area, with the classic arcade games lining the walls of the room. There are only console-style arcade games at Barcade (no pinball, air hockey, etc). Being a bar, there are drinks for sale, and game consoles have small wooden tables between them where you can place your drink while you play. There is a large chalkboard, ostensibly displaying all-time high scores for individual arcade games, but these do not appear to be rigorously maintained. Through personal gaming experience, as well as inquiring with the staff, I have discovered that the older console machines are not particularly well maintained-- machines often eat quarters, or have broken joysticks or buttons. The employee I spoke with said that one staff member was especially skilled in fixing button or control problems, but that they did not have a "game tech" to regularly maintain machines. The employee noted that he commonly refunds quarters for games that have eaten money. Particularly notable arcade games in Barcade's collection include a double-monitored version of *Punch Out!* (1985), *Tapper* (1983), the 4-player game *Gauntlet* (1985), and other mid-1980s titles.

During my observational trip to Barcade at roughly 5pm on a Thursday, I found 8 patrons there, three of whom were sitting at the bar and not playing arcade games. Of the 5 patrons, 3 were solo males in their mid-to-late 20s, with one mid-20s couple (the

woman was mostly observing her partner playing). The 3 single male gamers played the same console for the entire 45 minutes I observed, while the couple moved from game to game, with the woman only occasionally playing. The solo males seemed to be fairly engrossed in the games they were playing, as if semi-seriously pursuing the game's narrative and goals rather than just casually playing for a short time. As noted above, much the demographic audience of Barcade seems to consist of nostalgic adults (mostly male) who played these games in their childhood and adolescence. However, it definitely serves the function of acquainting a new generation of gamers with classic titles, presented in their original interface. For instance, I saw several patrons in their early-20s playing the game *Centipede*, originally released in 1980, likely before they were born. In searching for equivalent metaphors for collections of "obsolete" arcade game titles, I returned to the distinctions between the functions of museums, libraries, and archives. Barcade can be said to have a fully-accessible on-site collection. It does not hold any new, commercially-available console titles, rather it is a collection of "out of print" games. However, Barcade does not have any archivally unique items, for instance extremely rare consoles of which only a handful of working machines exist (some museum-like collections of arcade consoles do hold these items).

Another arcade-like space I observed users at was Dave & Buster's, a restaurant/bar/gaming chain which has a location in Times Square. Dave & Buster's could be seen to function similar to public libraries offering new hardcovers, as its collection of games is exclusively new releases. Dave & Buster's has no aspirations to being a museum or archive of video games, and in many ways represents the new format and purpose of contemporary arcades. Their collection is very heavy on interactive, movement-based games, and the only "classic" inclusions are novelty games like pop-a-shot basketball and air hockey tables. These immersive games with elaborate

technological interfaces strive to offer gaming novelty, in order to have a competitive advantage over home gaming consoles. My observational visit to Dave & Buster's occurred at about 10pm on a Thursday evening, and the users I observed were shaped by this timing. There were many couples in the mid-20s, and no children present. Presumably there would be a less adult audience had I gone much earlier in the evening, when the restaurant was open and the crowd might have consisted of families eating, then letting the children play games (in the mode of Showbiz Pizza). Many of the couples were playing basketball or air hockey together, or groups of boyfriends were competing while being cheered on by their companions. Dave & Buster's is very much focused on gaming recreation, without any of the nostalgia or nod to gaming history found in the other arcades I visited.

Finally looking at the Chinatown Fair Arcade, we can see it as a fusion of the two tendencies seen in Barcade and Dave & Buster's. Their collection contains both the newest commercially-available games as well as curated selection of games stretching back to the early 1980s. There are no non-video games, however there are several physically-interactive games, including *Dance Dance Revolution* as well as another Korean-imported dance game. The vast majority of the games are 2-player fighting games, drawn from diverse time periods. There are no longer any pinball machines at Chinatown Fair--the last several were removed about 2 years ago, and I found several internet comments lamenting this. These pinball anecdotes were found in Chinatown Fair's user reviews on the web site Yelp, which I found to be an useful and informative source of highly-subjective descriptions of users experiences. Many of the Yelp reviews touched on why Chinatown Fair was a unique arcade space in New York City, with many also waxing nostalgically about how long they have been coming here to play games. The main attraction on both visits were the *Street Fighter 4* game consoles. This is a

newly released version of a classic game, which has been imported from Japan, and apparently Chinatown Fair is one of the very few places in New York City where one can play this title. *Street Fighter 4* proved an interesting example of a game which was both new and commercially-available, though rare and creating a unique draw for the arcade. Another very popular game, with 8-10 people gathered around spectating and waiting to play on both of my visits, was the 1997 Japanese game *Puzzle Fighter*. This is a good example of a historic title, in the collection because of its cult status and popularity, which also acted as a recreation experience probably unique to Chinatown Fair.

I visited Chinatown Fair twice, the first time around 4pm on a Saturday afternoon and the second around 8pm on a Tuesday evening. Both visits found the arcade to be extremely crowded, with roughly 35 people there on the Saturday and nearly 50 on the Tuesday night. On both visits, there was a predictable majority of teens, most of whom were Asian. However, on Saturday there were 3 or 4 caucasian couples who were in their mid-20s, who seemed to not live in the neighborhood and had seemingly made a special trip to come to the arcade. The *Street Fighter 4* console had crowds of 20-30 people milling around observing, cheering on the current fighters, and waiting their turn to play. On the Tuesday night visit, this crowd made up for about 80% of the people there, and was undoubtedly the social focus of those hanging out at the arcade.

In all, this was an interesting chance to revisit, compare, and contextualize the main spaces in which one can currently place arcade games in New York City. As historic arcade consoles become more and more rare, I feel that spaces like Barcade will continue to crop up, as these games offer culturally significant recreation experiences which are not available elsewhere. Spaces such as these will require somewhat technically-skilled staff which are able to curate and technically maintain collections of obsolete arcade games, but the nostalgia and inherent fun these games offer make

them intriguing items to collect and make accessible.