

American gamer chronicles Japan's vibrant arcade culture in book

January 20 2009, By Victor Godinez

The death of the video game arcade has not, alas, been greatly exaggerated. For gamers older than 30, memories of plugging endless quarters into Street Fighter II, Mortal Kombat and After Burner cabinets are just that: memories. In most of the world, arcades with stand-up cabinets and pinball machines have been replaced by high-powered home consoles.

In Japan, though, the arcade survives and even thrives.

That's the topic of a new book by Brian Ashcraft, who now resides in Osaka writing about video games and technology for gaming blog Kotaku, Wired magazine and other outlets.

The Dallas native has penned perhaps the first coffee table book for gamers: "Arcade Mania: The Turbo-Charged World of Japan's Game Centers."

The slender, colorful volume is breezy and enthusiastic, peppered with photos and screenshots and historical sidebars, obviously the work of both a hard-core gamer and a dedicated researcher. Each chapter of "Arcade Mania" chronicles a different arcade genre, everything from fighting games to virtual mahjong to photo sticker booths ("an analog Facebook" for Japanese girls) to shooters and more. The mini-profiles of arcade-goers from celebrity professional gamers to faceless middle-aged men in suits to rambunctious kids are delightful and quirky.

It's an essential work for anyone curious about the technological and cultural evolution of arcade games in Japan.

Ashcraft spoke about the book via e-mail. Here are some excerpts:

Q. How does a good old boy from Dallas end up living in Japan and writing about video games for a living?

A. Growing up, I'd always been interested in Japan and video games. As a kid, I had a bunch of game consoles: an Atari 2600, an Odyssey, a NES, a Super NES, a Master System, Sega Genesis and a TurboGrafx 16. Of course, as with most people my age, I grew up in arcades, stuffing quarters in game cabinets and asking parents for more said quarters.

After I graduated from Cornell, I decided to go to Japan. Besides my interest in things like video games, I wasn't sure what to expect, but I felt very comfortable. The initial plan was to stay three months. That's turned into seven-plus years. This year I got my permanent residence visa, and now that I am married with two kids, I think I'll be here for the long haul.

I spent a lot of time in arcades when I first arrived in Japan. I still do. I love the vibe. I love that arcades are a place where people with a similar interest in gaming congregate. I love that I can sit down and play a game for 100 yen. If I like it, I can continue. If I don't, well, then I don't.

For the equivalent of five or 10 bucks, you can have a great night of gaming at an arcade.

Q. What inspired you to write "Arcade Mania"?

A. As someone who mourns the decline of arcades in America, coming to Japan was like being in arcade heaven. Heck, it is arcade heaven.

In big cities like Osaka or Tokyo, arcades are found near large train stations. So it's very easy and convenient for Japanese folks to go to arcades, or game centers as they're called in Japanese. Arcades are very much integrated into the Japanese urban landscape.

And even if you are not interested in going head-to-head against another player, there is the spectacle aspect where players practice a game like, say, "Dance Dance Revolution" and go to the arcade to, in a sense, display their skills. Some players often practice in their neighborhood game center and get amazingly good before daring to play and show off at famous arcades in Tokyo.

Q. Was it tough to get inside of the culture of Japanese arcades?

A. Japanese arcades are, in a way, an extension of Japanese society. Inside them, you'll find all sorts of people from businessmen to schoolgirls and everything in between. Since arcades are an extension of society, Japanese manners extend into arcades. Things that are considered polite and respectful in Japanese society at large carry over into arcades. It's a matter of being aware of social norms and then examining them in an arcade setting.

So, for example, if you go to a book store and buy a book, the book is wrapped in a brown book cover so you can discreetly read it on the train or wherever. That's the same logic behind the unspoken rule that you do not look over the arcade cabinet to see your out-of-view competitor on the other side.

Living in Japan for a while and raising a family here no doubt has helped to break down those cultural barriers.

Japanese culture is certainly different from American culture. But people are people. And gamers are gamers. I wanted to examine those

differences and hopefully point out the commonalities.

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