



BOOK REVIEW

## Alan Meades. *Arcade Britannia: A Social History of the British Amusement Arcade. Game Histories*

Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022. Pp. 336. \$30.00 (paper).

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(Received 8 September 2023; accepted 27 February 2024)

Amusement arcades were—and continue to be—part of the weave of everyday life in Great Britain. As Alan Meades identifies early in *Arcade Britannia: A Social History of the British Amusement Arcade*, amusement arcades have the same “feel” as pubs, supermarkets, and betting shops (13). Where the latter are viewed as the fabric of the quotidian and benefit from extended academic investigation, amusement arcades are places patronized by swathes of the populace but rarely investigated. Amusement arcades’ elision from histories of Great Britain is an anomaly. They have contoured the architecture of high streets and seafronts around Britain: most towns and cities around the country possess at least one amusement arcade. They are quasi-public spaces where a variety of social forces including play, leisure, work, political economy, legislation, technology, international commerce, and cultural minorities coalesce. Meades analyzes these dynamics by following a broadly chronological journey from their inception in 1897 through to the present day. He attributes British arcades with a special status in comparison with the formation of the “mythic” arcade, a neon archetype popularized during the 1980s when amusement arcades were filled with video-games, recounted and lionized in autoethnographies from Martin Amis and David Sudnow (24).

Instead Meades sites the formation of the British arcade with the showfolk, a traveling community who have entertained the British public via fairs for the past 1000 years (38). In the mid-to-late twentieth century many showfolk stopped traveling and opened arcades on seafronts around Britain, becoming known as sanddancers. An increase in leisure time, communication links, and discretionary spending meant holidaymakers could travel to seaside towns to expend their time and money on machines that were a product of the industrial, and eventually, the information revolution. At one time or another, sanddancers were assumed to own all amusement arcades throughout Britain. In their position as a cultural minority, showfolk and sanddancers faced hostility from authority. This is the beginning of the moral hazard that characterizes much of the legislation that was directed toward arcades throughout their history, most prominently in the form of the Gaming Act of 1968 and then the Gambling Act of 2005. Meades’s position expands on the narrative that legislation was designed to limit and marginalize certain communities. However, where previous work has seen this as a protection of callow youth consuming inappropriate technologies through nefarious techniques, Meades sees this from the supply side: traveling communities were an easily targeted subgroup in the changing composition of the country. Proof of this can be found in the idiosyncrasy that the UK is the “only jurisdiction in the Western world that permits children to gamble on machines” (9), suggesting that laws purporting to protect

children from the perils of gambling are not as rigorous as elsewhere and may not be the central motivation behind legislation. The long arm of the law stretches over the book: a settlement by a conglomeration of arcade owners who were accused of suppressing gross takings to the value of £10 million led to the then largest Value Added Tax settlement in British history of £2.7 million (165).

Meades's documentation of the development of the amusement arcade draws on legal and policy documents, archives, and primary interviews. Throughout, *Arcade Britannia* includes a complementary visual history with photographs of arcades from around Britain, flyers, newspaper cuttings, adverts, and snapshots of play and games. Combined with Meades's light touch with technical jargon—unfamiliar terms are explained with examples—there is a feeling that amusement arcades chime with the industrial and cultural development of Britain throughout the twentieth century. Vertical integration, a byword for success in home consumer electronics from Apple to Zynga, was a touchstone of the Thomas family who pioneered inland arcades in the 1950s (98). In spite of the almost closed communities of traveling showmen, the amusement industry was global in outlook and responsive to geopolitical shifts. During the postwar years, where Germany's economic stimulus program mandated that fruit machines be removed from circulation after three years, British distributors could purchase discarded but fully serviceable "fruits" at pennies in the pound (54–55) for use in the burgeoning—and undersupplied—British market. While Britain is typically—although not always fairly—regarded as entering industrial decline in the mid-twentieth century, Meades identifies the country as having its own Silicon Valley clustered around amusement machine manufacture. Companies from Japan and the USA including Namco and Bally tested, promoted, and sold new ideas and machines in British arcades, where, if agreeable to the discerning and demanding British consumer, translated to success in overseas markets.

Ultimately, as recession and unfavorable currency exchange rates deflated the consumer bubble of the 1980s, Britain's amusement machine distributors and manufacturers were picked off at low prices in the 1990s. They were subsequently repurposed to manufacture videogames designed in Japan for sale across the European Economic Community, cutting export costs and red tape from Japan into the single market. The zenith of this—ironically largely after the dissipation of the videogame amusement arcade "golden age" of the 1980s—was the £45 million SegaWorld theme park that opened in London's Trocadero center in 1996 (225). SegaWorld was cataclysmic for Sega, substantially diminishing development of new hardware. Less well known is the tragic effect it had on Funland, one of the largest and best-stocked amusement arcades in the country. Situated below SegaWorld in the Trocadero, it saw income drop by 70% in the weeks following SegaWorld's opening (228).

Given the impact that amusement arcades have made on everyday life in Britain, it is perhaps surprising that Meades doesn't offer greater perspicacity into the links between arcades and the health and wealth of the nation. Equally, outside of occasional critique of the sometimes insular focus of game studies—a discipline anchored in media studies and particularly cinema and television—there is little conceptualization of the social and economic currents of the twentieth century, which cast it as an age of extremes. Yet, in the plurality of narratives and documentation that convey the centrality of amusement arcades to these same forces, Meades speaks for those who are elided. In doing so he builds a plinth for future research into the uniquely British amusement arcade.