

# Where everybody knows your game: the appeal and function of game cafes in Western Europe

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# Where Everybody knows your Game: the Appeal and Function of Game Cafés in Western Europe

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## ABSTRACT

Game cafés are popping up in cities across Western Europe and are rapidly becoming popular places in the tangible world of the gamer. Compared to studies focused on Asia, motivations and activities of Western European visitors of game cafés are relatively unclear and not discussed in academic literature. Since understanding these motivations would contribute to explanations of why and how people play games, focus groups and contextual inquiries were organized with visitors of Dutch game cafés. The findings indicate that- similar to Asia - Western European game cafés can be seen as third places, a home base separate from home and work or school. Moreover, this research identifies why a game café and a virtual game world can both be regarded as a third place.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [Computer Applications]: Social and Behavioral Sciences – Economics, Psychology, Sociology.

## General Terms

Theory

## Keywords

Digital gaming, game café, Internet café, social interaction, third place, focus groups, contextual inquiry, social play.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Change” is a very central word in the technological era we live in today. Parallel to the rise of traditional mass media, our civilization has changed from a collectivistic to an individualistic society. Critics blame the isolating effects of media to be the cause of the disruption in our society’s social structure. This process of individualization by technology for instance was discussed by Robert Putnam [26], who argued that - in the US - new media are eliminating lively gathering spaces from society and are causing a degradation of time spent on meaningful social activities. In his

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view the availability of technology causes social disengagement, as machines are replacing real people. For instance, current media - such as digital games - keep children inside in their own rooms instead of playing outside with others, which obstructs the valuable interaction between friends or family members in their leisure time [23].

However, after exploring recent studies concerning the social impact of popular technology, this view seems slightly outdated. Within the usage of new media, trends are developing which confirm the exact opposite of Putnam’s portrayal. One of the first signs would be the notion that Internet use is dominated by communication between people for a majority of its users [1]. Research has shown that the use of new media enables users to interact even more with others than they did before [30]. Second, despite using new media people still seem to have the instinctive need to be together with others - a need to belong [2]. When using technology they often use additional communication devices to allow for personal contact with others, e.g. multi-tasking by using instant messaging programs while surfing on the Internet, or switching on the webcam while watching a favourite program on television together with mediated friends [27].

Another fitting example for this process is the path that digital games have taken to their current place in society. From the first release of games, news media were critical of computer games as being damaging for children and diminishing their social interaction [23]. Social isolation used to be a relevant topic, as digital games were designed for solo play. Yet nowadays, digital gaming is approached as a social activity that can be performed with friends, relatives or even strangers [21].

Understanding social play, de Kort and IJsselsteijn [13] argue that playing digital games brings many opportunities for frequent and meaningful social interactions between players and among spectators. Their group demonstrated that when social interaction is enabled, playing games is more fun and engaging [8,9] than playing solo. The importance of these interactions is also testified by the presence of online communities [29] and the participation of people worldwide in multiplayer online games. The appeal of multi-play is even more evident at Local Area Network (LAN) events. At these social events, gamers come together to meet peers and play their favorite games in competition or collaboration. Research revealed that participants of LAN events are primarily motivated by social interaction in terms of fun with friends, camaraderie, chatting, teasing, taunting, and joking [5,12]. Visitors themselves strongly support the assumption of gaming being a social activity, and consider digital gaming to be a shared experience with friends or strangers before,

during, or after play [10]. In hindsight, social play is not a recent phenomenon. During the mid-1980s, video arcade halls were important social environments for young adolescents where they played games and met their peers [18]. In these semi-public places, many skilled players enjoyed demonstrating their talents to peers and receiving encouragements of spectators.

Recently a new trend has emerged in the world of digital gaming, which resembles the allure of the arcade halls of the 80s. In spite of the impressive penetration of computers and consoles in private homes, again gamers are searching for local public places that give them opportunities for playing digital games. Currently, game cafés are appearing all over the world. They are Internet cafés, but with the emphasis of activities on gaming. Game cafés are places where one can use a game computer for a fee, and frequently enjoy food and drinks like in a regular Internet café. These locations offer the fastest Internet access, the most popular games, high quality computers, and a manager or other experts present at the location who immediately can solve problems with software or hardware.

In Asia, game cafés are tremendously popular, as illustrated by the twenty thousand cyber cafés dedicated to gaming in South Korea [31], the jam-packed centers with game fanatics in China, or the drastic increase in powerful PCs dedicated to online gaming in the I-Way cyber café chain in India. In North America over six hundred member centers are attached to iGames Inc. - the leading game center organization in North America since 1996 - and several legal game café chains have sprouted up, such as *Howie's Game Shack*, *the Matrix Gaming Centre*, and *eBash Videogame Center*. The same holds true for Europe, where PlayStation's *get together café* chains (in Belgium and the Netherlands) or the *WZZRD* game café chains (in the Netherlands) are examples of the rise of game cafés.

## 1.1 Game cafés as third places

It seems that the popularity of playing games in cafés has become universal. However, the academic concern is primarily oriented on the Asian game café. The interest often is focused on which aspects of these places attract visitors to be present at game cafés, since games also can be played (online) at home. Several studies argued that the appeal of Asian game cafés is mainly determined by – besides the availability of high quality hardware – the presence of co-players and peers [4,14,15,31]. To Asian visitors the café is seen as a social place, where they can meet others and can escape from daily worries. Moreover, the café may be the only public space for them to socialize and play games with their “real” and “virtual” friends at the same time [24].

Considering such social affordances, Asian game cafés can therefore be seen as a *third place* [4,17]; i.e. a home base separate from home and work or school that everyone needs and everyone is searching for in their life [22]. According to Oldenburg, third places are public places where people can gather and where social interaction is promoted. It's a place of social equality where “everybody knows your name”, which everyone can visit regularly, voluntarily, informally and almost at any time. Because people may come and go as they please, nobody plays host, like minded others are present, and the environment creates a home like atmosphere and a sense of belonging for visitors. Since third places are typically located nearby, these environments are perfect places where friends can bond with each other or where new friendships can be made.

### 1.1.1 The role of cultural factors

The explanation of why game cafés have become in demand may vary per society due to cultural differences. Asian game cafés are seen as third places. However, motivations for visiting, and the experiences & activities at these cafés could differ between European, northern American and Asian countries. Firstly, in some parts of the world having access to the Internet is not so obvious. For instance in contrast to the West, in Southern European countries - e.g. Turkey, Italy, Greece - a large group of people have limited access to Internet at their homes. Due to this digital divide [34] devotees are forced to play their multiplayer games at Internet cafés. Second, in Asian countries the tight living spaces and family dynamics have impact on where people play their games [16]. Less privacy and parental disapproval to play games force young Asian adults - who often still live with their parents until they are married - to Internet cafés. As a result, in China and Korea gaming is mostly done in Internet cafés [4,16]. Third, the meaning of playing games is different. For example gaming in Korea has the status of being a professional sport, where spectators watch games live at cafés or on television. Furthermore, other than West European countries like the Netherlands, Germany and the UK, to gamers in Korea visiting an Internet café to play games is seen as having a night out [28].

Considering these cultural differences, it is plausible that visits to Western game cafés may have different functions for Western gamers than for their Asian peers.

### 1.1.2 Online communities

In academic literature Asian game cafés are seen as third places. Similar to these physical places, online communities are seen as third places as well [29]. In a way, virtual worlds on the Internet are very comparable to game cafés. Although they lack the factor of physical proximity, they are on neutral ground, everybody is equal, social interaction is the main activity, are easy to access, have a homely character, and the mood of visitors is playful [29]. Therefore, Steinkuehler and Williams suggest that virtual worlds are structurally similar to third places as described by Oldenburg. Since all Oldenburg's eight characteristics [22] are present in online communities, they therefore can be seen as a place where people can extend their social networks by meeting new peers; i.e. a third place [29].

Regarding both places as third places is theoretically justified. Nevertheless, the differences between the two places as a result from the physical aspect are evident. For instance it is more fun and engaging to play digital games in a physical setting than in a mediated (online) setting, due to the richer social interactions when is played side by side [8,9]. Since third places have social functions [22] that depend on social interactions, it is therefore plausible to suggest that the social functions of virtual worlds and game cafés are different. To our knowledge, no literature has been found that compared the differences between these places in light of their social functions.

## 1.2 Aim of the study

In academic literature most interest has been given to Internet cafés in Asia. However, little is known about the appeal of game cafés in Western Europe. One could suspect that the primary motive is the high quality of the available hardware, Internet connection and services offered. However, as these affordances are becoming more and more available for Western European households everyday - especially among gamers - they

cannot be the sole determinant of the increase in popularity of game cafés. Since in most of these households the possibility to play in the living room, bedroom or study is present [25], privacy may also not be the most logical explanation. It therefore is more plausible that – similar as in Asian game cafés – visitor's motivations to play in these central places may lie in the social affordances a game café offers; as Western game cafés also may be seen as a third place.

To explore motivations to visit game cafés, we performed a field study in a Western European game café. We chose the Netherlands as one specific Western European country. Focus groups and contextual inquiries were employed to unravel the key factors that explain the appeal of Western game cafés and compare results with similar Asian orientated studies. Furthermore, this research is set out to identify that game cafés and virtual worlds both can be third places, although they slightly differ in their (social) functions.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Design

To understand the motivations of gamers to visit game cafés, two qualitative techniques for gathering information were used. Both tools, the focus group and the contextual inquiry, are common techniques for exploring how and why people use existing technology. Both techniques complement each other and together make a strong method to get access to unexpected issues raised by participants [6].

A focus group is an exploratory form of qualitative research in which a group of participants is asked about their experiences or beliefs about a complex phenomenon [19]. In an interactive group setting, which ideally consists of 6-10 participants, topics are discussed about experiences and thoughts. Guided by a limited number of questions, the moderator furthermore is free to probe further when an interesting issue is mentioned, and is able to acquire relevant background information directly from the participants. Due to the open discussions, focus groups often reveal topics that might not be discovered through other means [20].

A contextual inquiry is a process of engaging in conversation with users in the context of their task [11]. This technique is grounded in observation of behavior, and its value lies in the opportunity to reveal inconsistencies between what people say (in e.g. a focus group) and their actual behavior [3]. Furthermore, contextual inquiries enable dialogues between moderator and participants in the context of the task, which makes actions of participants visible and therefore reveals topics which otherwise would be hard to discover.

### 2.2 Participants

Three focus groups were organized with Dutch (all male) gamers who frequented the *Starbuzzgames* game café in Amersfoort, the Netherlands. Interviews were performed in a game café, which would prime the participants in their role as gamers. Two focus groups (FG1 and FG2) were conducted during the afternoon, both with eight high school students as participants. The last focus group (FG3) consisted of six participants, high school students and working people, and was held in the evening. Ages of participants ranged from 14 to 20.

Three contextual inquiries were organized with (Dutch) visitors of a gaming tournament at the *WZZRD* game café in Enschede, the Netherlands (see Figure 1). In each contextual inquiry (CI) one member of a group was observed while he competed with his group against another group; afterwards the participant was interviewed individually. The participants were 17 years of age, male, and high school students. All participants were approached by the game café managers for participation, and were paid 10 euros per hour. They received consent forms for themselves or their parents to fill in for giving permission to use their data.



**Figure 1:** LAN-based play setting (left picture) and a living room based play setting (right picture); both at the *WZZRD* game café.

### 2.3 Procedures

#### 2.3.1 Focus Groups

The focus groups were structured in four parts:

*Introductory round:* First, after gathering around in a circle of chairs the moderator introduced himself and explained the purpose of the session to the participants. They were informed that the session was to explain outsiders about the activities within game cafés. Subsequently, they were given consent forms to fill in and were asked to introduce themselves.

*Individual task:* Second, each participant was asked to individually write down three advantages and three disadvantages of a game café compared to a home. After three minutes, the moderator copied their answers to a white board. The white board would be visible throughout the whole session; additional (dis-)advantages that emerged during the interviews could be added if necessary. After constructing both lists, the group discussion was started.

*Group discussion:* The largest part of the session was the group discussion. It consisted of a discussion about all the responses to the individual task, and three core questions: (1) 'Can you describe why and how you decide to go to this game café?', (2) 'Which steps do you take chronologically after you enter the café?', and (3) 'Can you describe why and how you decide to leave?'. Participants could freely talk and discuss their opinions with each other. Besides the core questions, additional sub questions could be asked by the moderator to clarify remarks or views of the participants. The group discussions lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

*Ordering task:* Lastly, after the main group discussion participants (in groups of 2 or 3) were asked to order all advantages and disadvantages mentioned according to their importance. Discussion between the groups was not allowed.

After ordering the lists, participants received 12 euros for their participation, and were debriefed. The focus group interviews were taped with a voice recorder and video recorder, and later transcribed for analysis.

### 2.3.2 Contextual Inquiries

It was decided to use a post-observation inquiry, where the interviewer watched the gamer play games for forty-five minutes and recorded events that took place and any questions associated with the events; then afterwards, the gamer was interviewed on the basis of the recorded notes. After all, gaming is an activity that requires much attention and therefore ideally should not be interrupted by the interviewer. The inquiries were structured in four subsequent parts, in which the introductory round, individual and ordering tasks<sup>1</sup> were identical to those on the focus groups; the group discussion however was substituted by the reflection task.

*Reflection task:* During this task information was gathered about what the participant said and did while starting, playing, and ending a game. The same core questions as in the focus groups were asked, however with the difference in the opportunity of demonstrating certain actions and clarifying them.

After ordering the (dis-)advantages, participants received 10 euros for their participation, and were debriefed. Due to restrictions set by the game café owners contextual inquiries were only taped with a voice recorder.

## 3. RESULTS

This results section is structured according to the three core questions and ordering task from each interview; results for the focus groups and the contextual inquiries are merged in this section. Responses to the individual task are discussed throughout the text, and results of the ordering task are given in the last paragraph

### 3.1 The appeal of the game café

First of all, participants concluded that their decision to come together at the game café was always a result of having spare time. Their attendance was never car planned long in advance, although they did indicate that at the end of the week they expected the others would be present.

*...no, I just go when I feel like it...actually when I'm free. For example on Fridays, we come together here more often than on other days. You know, everything on the other days is planned... on Fridays though, we have more free time. However, when something is rescheduled during the week, and we do have some spare time, we also try to come here... (FG1, 16 years)<sup>2</sup>*

Once the decision to visit the game café has been made, appointments are arranged via e-mail, chat or SMS. Participants indicated that they often traveled to the game café together by bus or bicycle and waited for each other at crossroads, and never liked to enter when only strangers were present; however, the latter rarely happened.

The motivations to decide to play at the game café were in general similar within all interviews. All participants indicated that they wanted to meet their friends and have fun with them. They saw the game café as a central point to meet each other, away from school, work and home. Next to discussing in-game moments, the opportunity to socialize about real-life topics was

mentioned as a big advantage of playing at the game café instead of at home.

*...it's just that, here we are pleasantly together with each other.... we can sit here as one group, talking to each other and gaming with each other.... that's the part I like best... (FG1, 16 years)*

*...look, at home I have an even better computer than we have at this game café, but still.... here it is more fun, because of the atmosphere.... to be together with your friends and others, it is so much fun to play with each other... you can not find that at home...(FG3, 14 years)*

Some participants referred to the game café as their second home, and considered the owners as confidants or even family. Being there made them feel carefree from problems at home and brought them the (physical and mental) rest they need.

*...of course, the owners... they always remember what they talked about with you, and the next time you come by, they will ask you how you are and ask about the thing you mentioned last time....they really show interest, as if they are some kind of second parents...(FG3, 18 years)*

*...well, when I step into this café I just enter another world, far away from my daily worries... (FG2, 19 years)*

Furthermore, participants pointed out that in game cafés, people share the same interests, in contrast to their relatives at home who typically don't show much interest. This was also a powerful motivator for them to play in these cafés. Related to this, they all confirmed the enjoyment they experienced while playing with each other, while other visitors watched and commented on in-game events.

*...well, everybody understands each other, we all want the same and that is to have some fun together...you also can make inside jokes, which somebody outside will not understand... that makes it so special to be here... (CI2, 17 years)*

*Ohh, yeah...the reactions of the others....you know, what just happened earlier, the "ooohhwww" ...we played a session of an online first person shooter (FPS). We started with eight persons, and one-by-one players were eliminated. However, when you're eliminated you still can watch the game. So, when there are still two or three players left... the others still are absorbed with the game as spectators, cheering and shouting after great moves.... That makes it even more fun... (FG1, 16 years)*

The experience of being together, sharing thoughts and emotions is distinctly reflected in the following quote:

*...at home, you just talk into a microphone, and that's it... here, we actually talk to each other...directly...you can better feel the other's emotions.... (FG1, 16 years)*

The presence of co-players also affords social control and conformity and compliance to shared social rules. Acts of cheating, aggression and/or annoyance, are easily sanctioned, as players would refuse to include the offender in a new round.

*...you actually can't find cheaters here; because everybody here knows the rules and is furious when they are broken...we*

know that of each other...otherwise you wouldn't come here... (C11, 17 years)

*If someone is cheating, we just refuse to play against him and he will be excluded from co-playing. The same holds for people who use inappropriate words or have an aggressive attitude... (FG2, 18 years)*

As expected, participants unanimously indicated that the superb quality of the available hardware in game cafés was also a reason to decide to play there. Next to the high speed Internet connection, powerful computers, large screens and game oriented adjustments for the mouse and keyboard, the number of available popular games to choose from is attractive for many gamers.

*...here you have a lot of games to choose from, and it always works. You just sit down, choose the game you like, and play against anyone you like. At a LAN-event you have to install several things, and then people don't have the same game as you have....here, you just sit down with your friends and play...instantly... (FG2, 17 years)*

To elaborate further on hardware, participants reported team-play to be much easier and better due to the physical nearness of co-players. They refused to use indirect communication via microphones and preferred direct communication for in-game tactics and reactions.

*...furthermore, strategies are communicated faster than at home, where you are just sitting alone in stead of in a group of fifteen players... (FG2, 17 years)*

The importance of streamlined team play can be attributed to the significance of competition and performance for players in game cafés. The physical presence of co-players results in even more peer pressure than during online play. This reinforces player enjoyment as the performance is directly monitored by co-players and spectators.

*...here, the pressure is higher, because they sit next to you. At home, excuses for playing badly are easy to make, and you just can stop immediately. Here, if you quit the game due to bad performance you will lose status. You have to prove yourself, you have to perform... and if it's going badly, you have to cope with that... but this pressure at the same time is part of the enjoyment, without it...it wouldn't be that much fun to play here... (FG3, 17 years)*

*...if you shoot someone in a nice way, or you just walk behind a player while he has no clue that you're walking behind him....yeah that's fun, and you can show that here to others... (FG1, 16 years)*

### 3.2 Activities at the game café

When gamers entered the game café, they often behaved similarly. First of all, they entered the café in a way people would enter their own living room returning home from work or school. Then they searched for an available place where they could sit as a group.

*...I always say "hi" to the people who are present, then I will pet the dog, and search for a place to sit down and game...I*

*always get the feeling that I'm coming home when I enter the café... (FG3, 20 years)*

Once they were logged on and their group-territory was marked out with coats and rucksacks, matches were arranged by walking around, looking for other groups to compete with. If their own group was too small, they would ask others for permission to join their game. As most desks and seats were organized in a socio-petal rather than a socio-fugal way, making contact with others was easy to accomplish. Participants stressed that they never experienced exclusion, since it was always more fun to play with a larger group and meet new people.

*...firstly, you ask around who wants to join or whether you can join. We are very reasonable, nobody will be rejected because everybody is welcome... the more players the better... yes, meeting new people, isn't that what it's all about?... (FG1, 19 and 17 years)*

Game selection was often determined by what the other players already were playing. The highest preferred genre was the FPS, although it was observed that sports games were also frequently played.

*...it depends on the mood you're in you know...sometimes you feel like playing a round of FIFA, and sometimes you feel like playing a shooter game... (C11, 17 years)*

*...at home I also play strategy games, but not here, because they take too long. We always play shooters, because of the action and short rounds... (FG2, 18 years)*

After this decision, the players returned to their computers and started to customize settings, e.g. accuracy of mouse, volume of sound etcetera. While waiting for the game to load and for others to customize their settings, the waiting period was filled with joking around, challenging each other, or selecting radio channels together for background music.

*...I always customize settings, because I'm used to a particular setting. It's very annoying to have a slightly too fast or slow mouse. Some of us also take their special game mouse with us to the café... (FG1, 16 years)*

During the game, a lot of communication took place between both collaborative and competitive co-players. Communication between players in collaboration was mainly focused on in-game strategies, whereas communication between opponents was mainly focused on challenging, teasing, and joking.

Breaks were an important part of the game café visit, and gave visitors the opportunity to chat with others and to watch others play. Participants indicated to take far more breaks at the game café than at home, and always to take breaks with others.

*...well here it is more fun to have breaks and watch others play...at home you only can watch the ceiling or the walls, but here you can enjoy yourself being a spectator... (C13, 17 years)*

*...when you think that you have gamed enough, you can take a break, drink something, breathe some fresh air... there are always others who want to join you when you're going for a walk*

*outside, they then also take a break, maybe for smoking a cigarette... and most of the time you talk about the games you played... (FG3, 16 years)*

When a game ended, opponents shook hands and discussed the game. Discussions sometimes even took more time than they played together and often resulted in rematches. Occasionally, discussions attracted other visitors who then interfered, which eventually led to an even larger group that collectively started a new game.

Participants mentioned three main reasons for ending game sessions and leaving the game café. First of all, they explained that playing at the game café can become very expensive as one has to pay a gaming fee per hour, pay for drinks and pay for snacks. After all, most visitors were young adolescents who still went to school, received allowance from their parents, and perhaps had a job on the side.

*...the biggest factor is money. I have no intention to spend a lot of euros for this. But we eat, drink, and play an hour or an hour and a half... and then it quickly becomes very expensive... (FG1, 19 years)*

Second, the desire to play at the local game café often depended on the presence of friends or familiar others. Participants emphasized the importance of being surrounded by acquaintances and indicated that the sole presence of strangers was a reason to leave or not enter the game café.

*... oh, when there aren't people here who I recognize, then I just turn around and go home...it's not so much fun to play with strangers. It doesn't go that well... (FG2, 19 years)*

The last reason for leaving was that other engagements were scheduled such as homework, appointments with friends, dinner or catching the train/bus. Notably, participants never mentioned leaving on account of boredom.

Most of the time visitors left simultaneously so they could cycle home together, stop by the local snack corner for a sandwich, go to the gym, or go out for some drinks. Their conversations often started about the activities in the game café, but soon would switch to non-game related topics.

*...we always have a chat after we leave, but not necessarily about gaming...it can be about everything you know... (FG2, 17 years)*

Interestingly, participants mentioned never to play games at home after they had visited the game café; even when they hadn't gamed a lot.

### 3.3 Pros and cons of game cafés

At the end of the interview, participants rank ordered a list of advantages and disadvantages of visiting a game café over playing at home.

The presence of co-players and spectators was the primary reason for preferring game cafés. It related to many perceived advantages such as an atmosphere of coziness, conversations, shared interests, better team-play, visibility of game performance, and higher pressure to perform. Second important advantages

involved the escape from the reality of home, having time for oneself, having some privacy (e.g. from family), no commitments, relaxation after school/work, and distraction from problems. The presence of high quality hardware and many popular games that attracts gamers towards game cafés was revealed as the third category of important advantages.

All participants mentioned the amount of money they had to pay as a big disadvantage. Addiction was also mentioned, although none of the participants considered themselves as addicted. Apparently, mentioning addiction was largely inspired by the media and not by personal experiences. One participant confessed he used to have some problems with addiction and gaming. However, due to his visits and experiences in game cafés these problems disappeared.

*...if I'm really honest, at home I gamed too much. However, when I was introduced here, I actually gamed less, most of the time I was just having a good time with others chatting or watching others play. If my friends were not here, I probably would be at home, playing alone... (FG2, 20 years)*

In general, advantages were far more prominent than disadvantages; in most interviews the same examples were used by participants to explain the (dis-)advantages.

## 4. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

To evaluate the appeal and booming popularity of West European game cafés, the current study employed qualitative research methods to explore the motives of frequent visitors to play there. We observed Dutch gamers and asked them about their reasons to visit game cafés, their activities in the café, and what made them decide to leave the café. Principal motivations for deciding to visit game cafés were the opportunities to maintain or build social contacts, to share the same interests, to play in a carefree and cozy environment, to use hardware of superb quality, to exhibit one's performance and to ensure streamlined team-play. Once settled in the game café, matches are scheduled, settings are customized and games are then played with other co-players. During play, in-game situations are the most important subjects for conversation between co-players; conversations more often seemed to be about winning and losing. Breaks are taken frequently, as chatting and joking with others is equally important as playing a game. Leaving the game café is largely determined by monetary motivations, partly by the absence of friends or familiar other, and occasionally due to scheduled appointments with others.

### 4.1 Affordances of game cafés

In general, the results from the interviews reveal three important classes of affordances that are offered by West European game cafés and throw light on the secret of their success. The first is the opportunity for social interaction with other visitors, especially with friends and familiar others. As with Dutch LAN-events [12], visitors indicated that playing, talking, and being surrounded by (familiar) co-players and spectators is the most important part of being at the game café. In line with arcade hall studies [7,32] and other Internet café studies [14,15,31], visitors argued that the presence of others induced a higher peer pressure and therefore enhanced their player

enjoyment. They collectively indicated that without the presence of (familiar) others they would not frequent a game café, since it is a place to socialize. In game cafés friendships are built and maintained.

The second category of affordances is escape from the hassles of home, school and/or work. Visitors mentioned the carefree and cozy atmosphere, which offered them distraction from their daily worries. Both cafés included living-room furniture where visitors could chat, read, or just sit down to have some relaxed moments. In line with results of other teen centers [33], the café also functioned as a safe place where daily problems could be shared with peers, and especially with the owners who were often treated as confidants and by some even regarded as substitute parents.

The last category of affordances is the use of high quality hardware, such as high speed Internet connection, powerful computers, large screens, game oriented adjustments for mouse and keyboard and a large offering of popular games. Furthermore, problems with hardware are rapidly dealt with by experts who are always present. However, since most participants indicated that they had the same quality of hardware at their homes, this category does not answer the question why visitors chose to play at these cafés and not chose to play at home; as the first two do.

## 4.2 Game cafés as third places

Interpreting our results, the appeal of Dutch game cafés is - as expected - partly determined by the availability of high quality hardware in line with research about Asian Internet cafés [4,14,15,31]. However, the results revealed that these places especially owe their attraction to the presence of co-players and like minded others. Similar to Asian game cafés [4,17], to visitors it is a social place where they can meet other people and can escape from their daily hassles.

Considering these results, also Western European game cafés are entitled to be seen as a *third place* [22]<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, in Asia games are mostly played together in PC game rooms, since entertaining friends is rarely done in the home. In Western society however, it is normal to invite friends over to play games. All the more striking that these results are similar, as West European gamers in general are not forced to play their games at game cafés when is preferred to play with others.

Additionally, almost all affordances found in the present study are in line with outcomes from LAN-events studies [5,12]. Nevertheless, LAN-events cannot be considered third places since these events are only organized a few times per year alternately in different cities across the country. Conversely, game cafés can be visited regularly, at any time and are often situated nearby, which makes them an ideal home base for gamers to come together on a weekly or even daily basis. Perhaps even more important, it makes it much easier for gamers to build or maintain friendships and feel themselves at home, since it is a *permanent* social gathering space. The findings clearly underline the fact that digital games need not be isolating, but can be enjoyed collectively - before, during, and after play - and work as a catalyst in creating and maintaining social ties.

## 4.3 The bonding function of game cafés

Besides game cafés, virtual worlds are seen as third places as well [29]. These game places are put in this category since they both answer to Oldenburg's eight characteristics [22]. Despite of

this similarity, a clear distinction can be made between virtual worlds and game cafés in terms of the presence of co-players. In game cafés co-players and others are physically present, while in online communities they can be physically located on another continent. As a result, types of social interaction can differ between these typical game locations [13]. Since third places have social functions [22] that depend on social interactions, this dissimilarity may point out that a third place can have more than one (social) function; and therefore can be subdivided.

In virtual worlds, players create an in-game avatar. This anonymity provides a safe haven beyond the reach of one's real (offline) life. As a result, large but weak social networks are present in virtual worlds; i.e. visitors do interact and meet a lot of new people, however their relationships more often will remain superficial. Steinkuehler and Williams [29] therefore argue that virtual worlds function better as bridging [26] mechanisms. However, game cafés are mainly visited by friends who frequently are in touch with each other; e.g. before and after their visit to the game café. By spending a lot of time with each other, private conversations – about school, work or the home – are common. As a result, small and strong social networks are created and maintained in the game café. Considering our and other research [4,17], we therefore argue that game cafés function better as bonding [26] mechanisms.

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## 6. Notes

1. The ordering task for contextual inquiries was performed individually, whereas for focus groups it was performed collectively in groups of three participants.
2. All citations were translated from Dutch.
3. Interestingly, Oldenburg himself claimed that “*a room full of individuals intent upon videogames is not a third place*” (p. 31). Apparently he focused on playing digital games as a performance orientated form of activity, and was not fully aware of the activities within Internet/game cafés.

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