Only a Third Place? Rethinking Gaming Venues through Playable Public Ecologies

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INTRODUCTION

Internet cafés, LAN centres, and cybercafés are commonly interpreted through the third place model as informal sites beyond home and work that support sociability and community formation (Oldenburg 1999). I argue that this vocabulary is insufficient for contemporary gaming venues and propose playable public ecologies, which model these spaces as dynamic configurations of infrastructure, affect, regulation, and social rhythms. This conceptual shift builds on scholarship that moves from typological labelling to relational accounts.

One influential strand of research presents internet cafés as liminal spaces at the interface between mainstream culture and its margins, nurturing relaxed sociability and regular patronage (Beavis et al. 2005). Across diverse settings—from Korean PC bangs to European game cafés and Turkish internet cafés—studies portray these venues as valued sites where urban youth socialise, unwind, and occasionally seek refuge, aligning with third-place criteria (Beavis et al. 2005; Chee 2006; Cilesiz 2009; Gajadhar et al. 2009; Jonsson 2010; Jonsson 2012; Lee 2007). Running alongside this, a second strand moves beyond venues' social attributes and emphasises the interplay among technology, spatial design, and social practice. These studies do not rely on the third place framework; instead, they frequently combine it with Foucault's heterotopia, micro-level perspectives on sociotechnical shaping, or macro-level urban sociology. This analytical orientation, which treats internet cafés as sociotechnical spaces, was articulated collectively in the 2003 New Media & Society special issue on cybercafés through investigations across Commonwealth and European contexts (Lægran and Stewart 2003; Liff and Lægran 2003; Liff and Steward 2003), and it has been extended and enriched globally over the subsequent decade and beyond (López-Bonilla et al. 2016; Puel and Fernandez 2012; Qiu 2013).

Scholarship on gaming venues in China has emphasised the influence of state regulation and public discourse (Qiu and Zhou 2005; Shao 2010; Zhang 2016). Regulatory instruments—licensing regimes, youth access restrictions, and intermittent crackdowns—have shaped internet cafés over three decades of urban transformation (Wei and Chen 2015). At the same time, official and media narratives have framed cafés as sites of youth "internet addiction", deviance, and crime, legitimating intensified oversight (Qiu et al. 2009; Szablewicz 2020). In response, ethnographic studies trace competing pressures inside venues and the everyday negotiations with regulatory constraints and moral discourses (Lindtner and Szablewicz 2010; Liu 2009). Player groups and local cafés develop situated norms,

workarounds, and small collectives which, alongside state regulation, jointly produce the meaning of public play (Lindtner and Dourish 2011).

Taken together, these threads illuminate different parts of the puzzle; considered separately, however, they do not fully clarify the mechanisms at work. Third place theory accounts for routine conviviality yet overlooks material and legal constraints. Sociotechnical analyses offer a more comprehensive account of how layout, device classes, bandwidth, pricing, staffing, and local scripts organise participation, yet, like studies focused on China, they downplay the sensory and rhythmic dimensions of gameplay itself (Jonsson and Verhagen 2011a, 2011b). An ecological model integrates these planes by treating venues as relations among infrastructure, rules and pricing, temporal rhythms, and affect/atmosphere rather than as fixed place types (Apperley 2011; Lindtner et al. 2008). Read this way, the framework explains the fragmentation and fluidity of venue ecologies, linking embodied, socially authored play to classed and identity-marked distinctions and to the broader leisure geographies of communities and cities.

Building on these insights, this study proposes playable public ecologies shaped by four interacting dimensions: Material infrastructures (hardware, software, bandwidth, furniture, spatial layout, and location) interact with affective atmospheres (feelings of excitement or comfort in the room, the immersion produced by lighting and sound, and experiences of freedom or community belonging). These elements are further conditioned by regulatory and economic factors (state policies on access and content, age restrictions, commercial licensing, and market competition) and are expressed in social patterns (who gathers there, how norms and friendships form, and which activities are prioritised). This conceptual article synthesises more than thirty studies on the cultures and functions of internet cafés and draws on spatial theory, including rhythmanalysis of temporal practices and co-present rhythms, as well as affordance-centred accounts of layout and atmosphere (Apperley 2011; Sjöblom 2011). The framework offers a portable vocabulary for game studies to analyse public play across venue types and regulatory contexts, making visible how specific design and governance decisions influence who appears, where they sit, how long they stay, and what forms of interaction they enact. In short, it clarifies how particular configurations of infrastructure, affect, rules, and rhythms generate distinctive publics in shared play spaces.

BIO
Taoyue Wang is a PhD student at the University of Melbourne, specialising in architecture and media studies. His current work investigates the forms and spatialities of gaming venues, with a primary focus on internet cafés, and examines their interactions with social life and player behaviour through frameworks drawn from cultural studies, anthropology, and science and technology studies (STS).

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