

# The Sacred and the Mundane: Video Games in the Convenience Store

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes the play spaces constituted by the coin-operated video game cabinets found in corner shops, bodegas, and convenience stores. Often located at the back or threshold (Guins 2004) of the shop, players and hangers-on gather around these game cabinets, purchasing play along with food, drinks, and knick-knacks. I suggest that these cabinets in these settings produce a particular mode of consumption that has an intimate, ludic, sacred quality. In so doing, this paper is an argument for a spatialized approach to digital game research.

The convenience store coin-op game can be conceptualized by focusing on two of its facets: its cabinet and screen; and the gameplay practices it offers. The cabinet in a convenience store is akin to a small shrine or altar, sacred and apart from, and yet enmeshed in everyday life. At the same time, the gameplay offered by the coin-op machine is akin to the goods on the convenience store shelves: small, consumable indulgences and necessities.

## SACRED SCREENS

Play has long been connected to the sacred (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 2001). In this paper, I explore how sacred objects can serve as a model for how coin-operated cabinets work in a space as seemingly mundane and profane as a convenience store. I draw on Anna MacCarthy's work on ambient television (2001), work in which she draws parallels between tiny shrines and televisions in public commercial spaces (including convenience stores). MacCarthy shows how television and shrines, while competitors in some sense for space, operate in similar ways in such commercial settings, and often act together to create a particularly charged sacred/profane semiotic space. Dominic Pettman (2013) describes arcades as temples made out of time, as spatialized Sabbaths, dedicated sacred play sites of not-work. Convenience store game cabinets act as distilled possibilities of play, combinations of Pettman's Sabbath arcades and MacCarthy's commercial TV/shrines.

The game cabinet, with its ludic qualities, seems an even better partner for the *bodega* shrine than the more open-ended (in terms of content) television. Like small shrines, and unlike televisions, coin-op games are "on" even when not in active use. These cabinets

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were not and are not the only forms of ludic ambience in such shops. These stores are also filled with lottery tickets, packs of playing cards, and cheap toys, and perhaps an ongoing dominoes game on a table in front, and some illicit gambling in the back. Ludic play, like the sacred, is often conceptualized as being either radical and powerful, or weak and needing protection. However, in the convenience store, the coin-op video game is tough, flexible, contingent, and ever ready. The cabinets, even in their attract or demo modes, like mini-shrines in the shop, suggest this space of commerce is not only that. The attract mode says “You need not only shop or browse here; you could be playing,” much like the “you could be praying” message of the shrine nestled on a shelf next to the television.

## **GRAB AND GO**

We can also see the games and play experiences these cabinets offer as consumables, as part of a mode of consumption typified by these corner shops, and thus more like snacks or toilet paper, than like virtual worlds or grand narratives. My suggestion that such coin-op game play should be seen in the context of a kind of shopping and consumption is in tension with the sacred quality of play I invoke through the figure of the *bodega*-shrine. However, I suggest that this contradiction is inherent in the convenience store’s coin-op cabinet, which is at once an object of consumption and of potentially transformative play. This is an object that offers play as an alternative to the mundane, while at the same time selling play as if it is just one more thing to be bought and consumed on the go, a quarter at a time (Kocurek 2012).

Their consumable quotidian nature doesn’t mean that these games and play experiences weren’t and aren’t important. Like the comic book, bundle of diapers, or cold drink purchased at the right time, these games in the right contexts might be really significant or merely reassuringly comforting. The convenience store game cabinet, like the convenience store shrine or *bodega* television, reminds us of how contingent and yet meaningful everyday life and play can be. This paper calls for more work on the cultural formations, practices, and ideologies which came out of places like arcades (Kocurek 2015, Skolnik and Conway 2017), and for extending such analyses of game playing from the dedicated space of the gaming arcade to gaming in commercial spaces like the corner store, bar or pizzeria. Finally, we should be careful that in following a space based approach to game studies (Tobin 2016), we attend not only to the similarities, but also to the differences between how video games are played and consumed in different contexts.

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