QUARTERS AND TOKENS

"HAS ONLINE KILLED THE ARCADE STAR?"

Arcades have fallen a long way since their heyday in the '80s. Genre-driven revivals in the '90s and early 2000s appear to have given way, and with broadband Internet's prevalence over the past decade, it begs the question; is there even a place for the arcade in modern gaming society?

To the extent of actual gaming, the arcade is no longer truly relevant. Home consoles caught up to the power of arcade boards for the most part during the late '90s. By that point, previously popular genres such as fighting games had become so complex that they only truly appealed to the hardcore fans of the genre (with few exceptions). The advent of rhythm games brought on a small resurgence in arcade gaming, but those too were eventually experiences brought to the home.

Since then, arcades have gotten by in a variety of ways, usually by providing experiences that cannot be attained easily or cheaply at home. This can range from novel controls (such as a police game that requires you to move your whole body) to the whole social experience. The social experience is some-

thing that is inherent to a good arcade, and is indeed the hallmark of one that continues to exist. No matter how good an online experience can get, there's just not the same feel as being in an arcade. In my own personal experience, there are at least a dozen people I consider friends whom I would never have met if not for going to play *Capcom vs SNK 2* at Wizzards Arcade in Detroit.

There's an additional sense of competition at an arcade. When you hop onto a machine, you're putting money down to prove that you are better than other people and can stay on that game longer than they can. While that is directly obvious in a fighting game, it's also true on any game involving a high score. It's easy to brag about your score when there are other people around watching, or to find challengers looking to end your win streak in a fighter. Not everyone plays games at an arcade with that notion in mind, but even beating your own personal benchmarks involves that same mental state.

That inherent competitiveness has recently found its way into online arenas with scoreboards showing your best scores against those of people worldwide. In a sense, that aspect of the arcade has also been brought home; though even the advent of excellent netcode and online gaming programs such as GGPO, 2DF, or Xbox Live, purists and diehards always seem to go for the authentic arcade experience.

So, with arcades in decline even in long-time gaming meccas like Japan or Southern California, is there still a place for them? I believe so. The continued survival of places such as Game Galaxy in Tennessee, American Fun Center in Detroit, numerous locations in Japan, and the success of the Gameworks franchise show that although they are not as profitable as they once were (due in part to inflation), arcades continue to be the place for gamers to congregate and play. Online gaming has not yet killed the experience of real socializing, and a properly maintained arcade in the right location can continue to serve the local gaming population.