

Arcade memories

Mainstreaming of video-game culture misses out on true spirit of being a gamer



A seedy portion of the underworld, kept behind closed doors, a shadowy place inhabited by geeks, freaks and other odd denizens, blips and tweets can be heard outside the doors, but rare is the brave soul who will steel up and slip inside.

The arcade.
When I was young, the arcade was something of a sacred place, a church for those of us three steps ahead in the digital revolution.

The children of the arcade.
The followers of technology. Sure, a lot of you have been in arcades but probably only in the past few years. See, video-gaming has gone mainstream in recent years, much to my dismay.

Gamer society used to be an elite club, a tiny minority of people in the Omaha area. Vagabonds roaming from arcade to arcade - W.C. Franks, Jolly Time, Family Fun Center - the Omaha gamers were like a family.

A lot of them had nicknames, but more often than not, they were known by their initials. If you got into the high scores, you only had three little letters as your claim to fame.

When I was 13, I squared off in a pinball marathon over who got to use the initials "CAH." He won, and since then, I've always used the mirror, "HAC."

It's the pain of losing a duel. But even when you lost, the victor would offer to buy you a pop and treat you to a game of *Tron* or *Kung-Fu Champion*.

My habit infected every portion of my daily life. Images of *DigDug* and *Roadblasters* filled my daydreams when I should have been studying. I picked up a few phrases of Japanese from *Samurai Showdown*. Every so often, I'd hum the theme to *Mr. Do* in class, much to my shame.

Many people thought of gamers with disdain back then. It was a

stigma, a cross we bore for the entertainment we chose.

While the masses listened to their Poison tapes, we plunked down quarter after quarter into a *Gauntlet* machine and took down another squadron of fighters in *Afterburner*.

Instead of spending hours drooling over car magazines, we found ourselves hoarding electronics and computing magazines like pornography, stashing them under our beds to keep our hobbies secret from our parents.

Our families wouldn't have understood. Gamers weren't yet out of the closet.

But time changes all things. Once we were rebels, the outcasts reveling in our technological afterglow. Now we've become prophets, visionaries.

Dammit, we're becoming cool.

This does not please me.

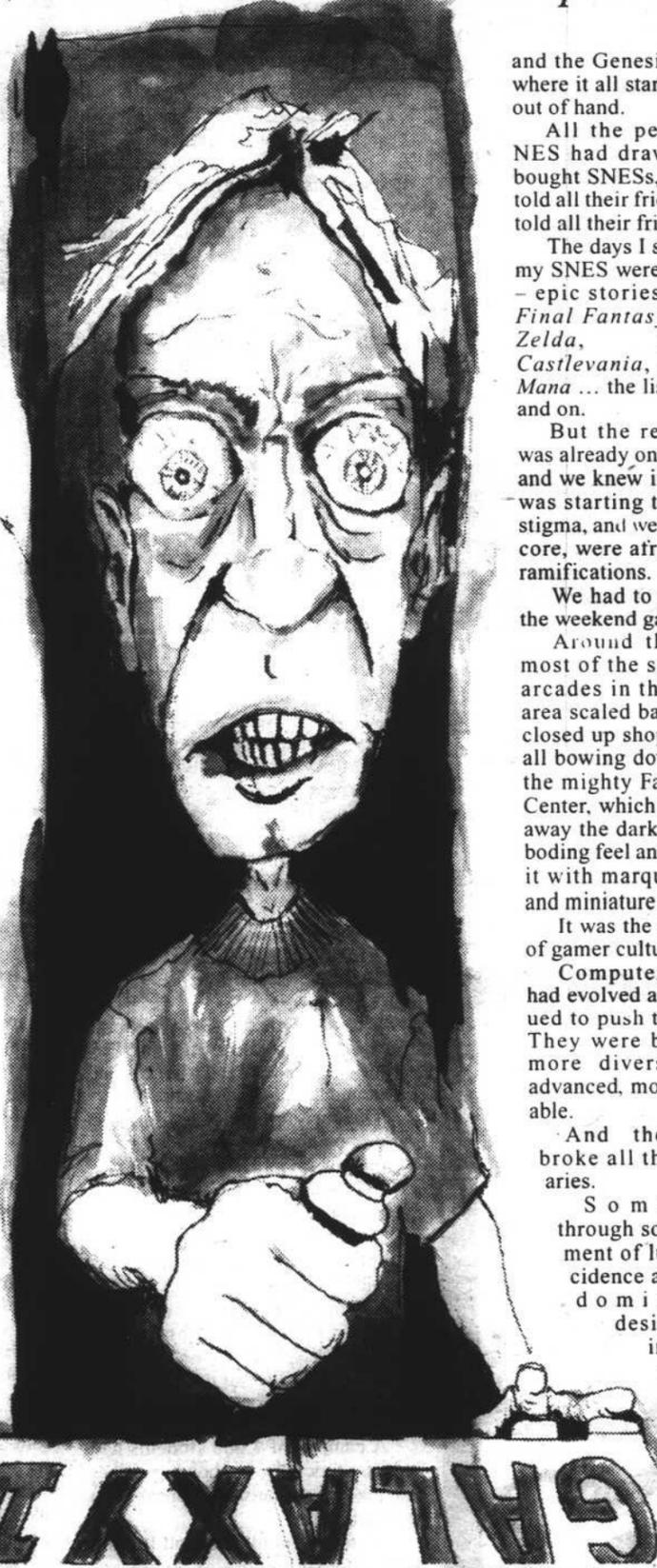
I'm not sure exactly when everything started to change, but my guess is it was about the time Nintendo and Sega each launched their home systems.

Sure, the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and the Sega Master System (SMS) are the golden ages of gaming for some, but they weren't the first home systems.

Before the NES, there was Intellivision. Before the Intellivision, there was the Atari 2600, my first home gaming system.

You couldn't do a lot with a 2600 - I think I played *Pac Man*, *Joust*, *Pitfall* and *Defender* until the joystick was nearly unusable. It only had one button. Sure it was simple, but it was the beginning for me.

When the NES and SMS started to do well, each company introduced its new system, the Super NES



Cliff Hicks is a senior news-editorial and English major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

and the Genesis. Here's where it all started to get out of hand.

All the people the NES had drawn in all bought SNESs, and they told all their friends, who told all their friends.

The days I spent with my SNES were fantastic - epic stories like the *Final Fantasy* games, *Zelda*, *Metroid*, *Castlevania*, *Secret of Mana* ... the list goes on and on.

But the revolution was already on the build, and we knew it. Gaming was starting to lose its stigma, and we, the hardcore, were afraid of the ramifications.

We had to deal with the weekend gamers.

Around this time, most of the secondary arcades in the Omaha area scaled back or just closed up shop entirely, all bowing down before the mighty Family Fun Center, which had taken away the dark and foreboding feel and replaced it with marquee lights and miniature golf.

It was the defanging of gamer culture.

Computer games had evolved and continued to push the limits. They were becoming more diverse, more advanced, more acceptable.

And then Sony broke all the boundaries.

Somehow, through some alignment of luck, coincidence and world domination desires, Sony introduced the Sony

Playstation. The world shook in fear.

Not long ago, I read that more people play a Playstation daily than read a daily newspaper.

During my freshman year, one of my roommates got a Playstation. There were only four games out for it then, none of which seemed that great. But a lot of people on the floor of our residence hall came to ooh and aah.

Six months later, there was a Playstation in more than half the rooms on our floor.

The outcome was inescapable. You can't fight fate. You can't beat the odds.

Strangely enough, though, instead of being perceived as outdated and obsolete, the older gamers generally get afforded a little more respect than the scrappings.

We get asked to tell stories about the days when no game cost more than a quarter and the name "3D" related more to '50s movies than computer games.

For years, *Star Wars: The Game* and *Battlezone* were the only 3D games, and they were mere wireframes, hints of the future. The term polygon meant nothing to anyone.

Nowadays, we share the arcades with any schmoe who wanders in off the street, many of whom think the world began with *Mortal Kombat*. They lose their tempers when they get beaten, and they scream and dance when they win.

Show some respect.

Casual gamers even killed pinball. The pinball machines weren't bringing in enough quarters, so almost all the pinball manufacturers closed up shop. I'm going to buy my own table to keep the spark of pinball alive, but it's a futile effort.

Pinball is dead.

Weekend gamers killed it. Video-gaming is only getting more popular, too. Computer game sales have been on the steady increase. Sega's Dreamcast has sold more than a million units already. Sony's Playstation2 hits stateside this fall.

And in my dreams, I'm playing *Spy Hunter* and reaching for my next quarter. And in my dreams, the arcade is a mystery once more.

Mixed media

Image of gays, lesbians gaining ground on TV, but homophobia is still prevalent



In media circles, 1999 will be remembered as the Year of the Queer. Gays and lesbians seemed to be everywhere on TV.

Calista Flockhart shared a passionate kiss with Lucy Liu in highest-rated "Ally McBeal" episode ever. "Will & Grace" became one of NBC's highest-rated shows. Teen heartthrob Jack on "Dawson's Creek" came out of the closet.

In fact, there are now 27 gay and lesbian characters on prime-time television, nearing the number of characters from all other minority groups combined (Minneapolis Star Tribune, Nov. 7, 1999).

But the prospect of gays on TV might not be as bright as it seems. Recently, for example, conservative radio talk-show host and syndicated newspaper columnist Laura Schlessinger was offered her own hour-long, weekday television show by Paramount. Schlessinger, a recent convert to orthodox Judaism, is famous for verbal tirades against single mothers, gays and others who call into her show for "advice."

Schlessinger believes homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders by the American Psychological Association 30 years ago only because of pressure from gay lobbyists, not because of scientific evidence. Schlessinger is a huge proponent of reparative therapy - the belief that gays and lesbians can be "cured" through psychological treatment (Schlessinger's own Ph.D. is in physiology, not psychology).

Discussing equal rights for gays and lesbians, Schlessinger says: "Rights? For sexual deviants, sexual behavior, there are now rights? That's

what I'm worried about with the pedophilia and the bestiality and the sadomasochism and the cross-dressing. Is this all going to be rights, too? Why does deviant sexual behavior get rights?" (Advocate, Feb. 15, 2000).

Now, in addition to being on 500 radio stations and in 100 newspapers, Schlessinger will be able to bring these "enlightened" views on gays and lesbians to millions of television viewers nationwide in the comfort of their living rooms.

Pat Buchanan is another anti-gay media star. Buchanan got his start on CNN's "Crossfire." Although he's now on leave from the show for another run for president, Buchanan called for a "culture war" on gays and other "threats" to the "American family."

In a column written in June 1983, during the first months of the AIDS crisis, he said, "The poor homosexuals. They have declared war on nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution."

Buchanan has also said, "It was

militant homosexuals who first stormed across society's old borders. And it is they who are assaulting positions while painting themselves as victims of social and legal persecution ... Their conduct cannot command our respect, because it so violently contradicts our beliefs. If that be 'homophobia,' make the most of it." (San Francisco Examiner, Sept. 17, 1994)

This is not "compassionate conservatism." Now this man is running for president in the third-largest political party in America, with tens of millions of dollars in federal matching funds at his disposal.

Much of the media, though not anti-gay, remains plagued with confusion about the gay community. Recently, for example, in what was meant to be an objective analysis of the military's ban on openly gay soldiers, a column in the Omaha World-Herald titled "Gays in military: Both sides err" listed as one good argument against allowing gays to serve openly is "Would grizzled Green

Berets, for example, be permitted to sashay around in drag during off-duty hours?" This glaring failure to grasp the distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity is a good example of how far the media still has to go.

Still, the trend towards having visible gay characters in television, movies and other media bodes well for the future. Too often I hear from gay friends that they thought they were the only ones in high school.

Seeing gay characters will help gay adolescents realize they are not alone and that there is nothing wrong with them. It will also show straight teens that being gay isn't such a big deal. The gay teens of tomorrow will be happier and less neurotic than my previous generation, and the straight teens of tomorrow will be more tolerant and accepting.

With these prospects for the future, my only regret is that all the gay media in the world won't have any effect on the bigots already in place.

Jeremy Patrick is a first-year law student and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.