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NEGOTIATING EMLACED AND VIRTUAL REALMS GAMING CAFÉS IN BURIRAM AS SITES OF ADOLESCENTS' COLLECTIVE BELONGING

Jona Pomerance

I slide open the door and push aside the thick, pink curtains. A long, dimly-lit room stretches out in front of me. Rows of tightly arranged computer setups divide the space into three narrow corridors, the tall chairs on each side are packed with groups of adolescent customers. I have stepped into a gaming café, one of over two dozen operating in Buriram's city center today. Flickering colors radiate from the many screens and an auditory carpet of key presses, mouse clicks, humming fans, chattering voices and occasional slang-infused shouts interweaves the room. Players are immersed in the virtual worlds unfolding before them. At least that is what I figured on my first few visits, pondering why gaming cafés were still so popular here despite widespread internet access at home and an exploding popularity of games on mobile phones. Little did I expect the answer to be only subordinately related to gaming practices, instead entwined much more strongly with local and emplaced meanings imbued into the café spaces.

attached and engaged, friendships and social connections consistently come up as a key response. While customers typically spend their time at the cafés around friends they know from external contexts (most commonly their school classes), they describe a sense of friendliness and shared collectivity that is markedly different from the suspicion and hostility with which young men frequently regard those in other social circles. An informal, "unrestrained" mode of communication is crucial to this cordial atmosphere and must be contextualized with regard to local norms of hierarchical interaction. While most spaces are overseen by adults that enforce respectful behavior and expression, gaming cafés provide certain freedoms to deviate from these omnipresent rules, gather uninhibitedly, be loud and employ slang-heavy language. "Inter-generational" friendships across varying age groups also form here, which do not usually emerge at school where cohorts are firmly separated. Most owners do not impede this informality but rather engage in it as well, assuming the roles of trusted "big brothers" for many of their customers.

gendered nature of this local discourse surrounding teenage practices presents a key reason why the cafés are mostly inaccessible to those with female or non-binary gender identities. Yet an inside effect of local youth-related discourse is likewise observable. Customers do not adopt its designations and neither explicitly "identify" as gamers, nor as members of their respective cafés. An emplaced attachment to the café spaces emerges nonetheless, one not reliant on an affirmative, discursive "identity" but rather produced on the level of players' habitual, embodied practices and everyday experience. "Activity may be meaningful even when it is not couched in words, explicated in concepts, or subject to reflection"¹, in this case evoking an affective sense of belonging entwined with the cafés' uniquely local configurations of physical co-presence and informality.

This is a warm and friendly place. You have friends [here], you go inside and they're all friends. [...] We game together, joke and tease each other. [The owner] hardly ever complains. It's loud but he's fine with that, we can enjoy ourselves.

(Gaming café customer, Buriram, 10.04.2019)

Between February and April 2019, I had the opportunity to carry out this research project as part of Dr. Benjamin Baumann's "Everyday Lifeworlds in Buriram" seminar. While visiting many gaming cafés across the north-eastern Thai city, I chose to focus on two cafés in particular, engaging in participant observation and conducting interviews with owners and customers. This article touches on a number of observations that will become part of my B.A. thesis.

It takes only few visits to notice the vast number of recurring faces each day. Loyalty to one's gaming café of choice is high, and most players visit daily. The customer bases follow a kind of cyclical, generational pattern: Adolescents, predominantly male, become regular customers at the start of their middle school years and stay until they have completed high school or vocational college. Asked about what keeps them so

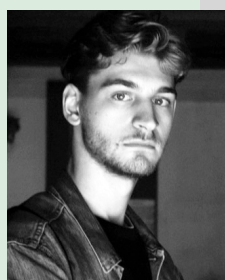
Physical proximity to one's friends is essential as groups assemble in adjacent seats. While a variety of games are popular, practically all of them are played in teams against other players online. The games' virtual realms become an extension of the physical space shared by the teammates in front of their screens, their communication during the ongoing match still firmly rooted in the local domain. All popular games additionally consist of short and independent rounds of play, suited well to the dynamic rhythms of everyday life. Group members leave as others arrive, teams move outside for (smoking) breaks, and some visitors do not play at all but simply watch, leaning on their friends' chairs from behind. From the perspective of those uninvolved, gaming cafés are frequently characterized as hubs of alcohol, drugs, violence and deviant behavior, pejorative assumptions associated with male adolescent groups and practices in general. Beside the gendered distinctions inherent in notions such as leisure activity as well as gender-specific "gamer" stereotypes, the



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About the Author:

Jona Pomerance is a student in the Area Studies Asia/Africa program with a focus on Southeast Asia (Thailand and Vietnam in particular). He is currently completing his BA thesis.



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