



Regional Histories of the UK and Ireland's Arcade Coin-Op Industry

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ABSTRACT

In its conception, this panel follows the continuing growth in interest local game histories (see e.g. Swalwell, 2021; Wade and Webber, 2016) where hyperlocal, local and regional influences sway the development, distribution and marketing of coin-op games at the national, international and supranational level. Each panel member will discuss the hyperlocal, local and regional aspect of games' historical formation respectively in the context of the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The opening part of the panel will explore game histories from a hyperlocal geographic perspective, considering the impact of the Isle of Thanet, South East England, and the town of Ramsgate in particular upon national and supranational coin-op development and adoption. The speaker will focus on three companies based in the area: Cromptons, Jezzards, and Harry Levy Amusements Ltd. Cromptons are best known as the inventors of the penny pusher machine, where coins or tokens land on moving platforms and eventually are pushed into pay-out slots to the player, with the release of Penny Falls (1966). The penny pusher remains a popular and steady-earning machine, the financial backbone of many British arcades to this day, and has been distributed, localized and adopted throughout the globe. Cromptons' previous machines Film Stars (1955) and Derby Racer (1962) were key in generating British amusement arcade income from the 1950s onwards creating the economic conditions that sustained arcade expansion in the 1960s, the introduction and decline of videogames through the 1970s to 1990s, and led to the patterns of public play seen in the modern British arcade. Cromptons ceased trading in the early 2000s (after becoming SEGA Europe), however their influence can be seen on the hyperlocal (and

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national) perspectives. Former Crompton workers, who left the parent company often due to the negative impacts of national tax policies, established several coin-op companies that specialized in similar game types.

Two of the most notable are Jezzards and Harry Levy Amusements Ltd. *Jezzards* became a well-regarded electro-mechanical coin-op manufacturer in the 1970s, generally focusing on making games for a national market. The company eventually pivoted towards pool-hall and arcade operation and closed in the early 2000s. By contrast, Harry Levy Amusements Ltd., founded by former Cromptons' factory workers in the early 1980s, is now one of the largest global manufacturers and distributors of penny pusher, redemption, and coin-op machines. Furthermore, the company has invested in the national British arcade infrastructure, owning some of the most desirable arcade sites in Britain (Gambling Commission, 2023).

Through telling the story of Cromptons, Jezzards, and Harry Levy Amusements Ltd. this presentation will articulate another perspective on local games history. It will show the profound impact that regions, companies, and ultimately individuals can have upon the international character of public play.

The second part of the panel will explore, through recourse to primary data (Wade and Whittaker 2023), the historical formation of coin-op videogames in the locale of the English Midlands. Of the 2200 games companies listed in the UK, the English Midlands is home to over 250 companies and accounts for 13% of all videogames ever created in the United Kingdom. (DIT 2019).

As Meades (2022) details in *Arcade Britannia*, the formation of the English Midlands' relationship with coin-operated machines is based around fraternal legacies, with firms specializing in coin-operated machines stretching over and between generations of families. This is particularly the case of the Thomas family from Leicestershire. The family employed economic structures including development, manufacture, testing, distribution and promotion in the local area. Such vertically integrated approaches were later adopted by game and computer firms around the world (e.g. Sinclair; Namco; Atari).

The early success of the Thomas family in coin-op provided a network from which external firms had a platform to enter the UK market. Atari, following the success of *Pong*'s release in the US, were based in Castle Donington, Leicestershire from 1972 onwards. Subsequently, the Stamper brothers, founders of Rare, started their commercial interest in videogames with Allied Leisure, before moving onto Zilec in Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire. Zilec was one of only two companies in the UK at that time which manufactured and sold original arcade videogames (Maher, 2014).

In forming Rare, which eventually developed and marketed coin-op videogames to the US and Japanese market, the Stampers continued a rich tradition of fraternal involvement in arcade machines whose aesthetic is still keenly felt in current releases. This part of the panel will conclude through indicating the historical and continuing importance of fraternal organisation in the means of production, distribution and marketing of coin op games through vertical integration, 'chains of approval' (Wade and Whittaker, 2023) and economies of scope to the local games' histories of the English Midlands and its wider influences on the national and international games' industry.

The third segment of the panel presentation is a regional history of the coin-op industry on the island of Ireland from the late 1970s to the present day. It examines

both the leisure and gambling targeted sides of coin-op local manufacturing and their reach both nationally and internationally.

Ireland's involvement in coin-op videogaming goes back to 1978 with the opening of Atari's manufacturing and distribution plant in Co. Tipperary, supported by funding from the Irish government. This factory was supplied in part by Murray Kitchens from nearby Ardfinnan who fabricated the arcade cabinets, and by Co. Waterford based Kromberg & Schubert who supplied the necessary wiring to support the game PCBs imported from Atari in California (Temple 2017). Murray Kitchens had a prior history working with the electronics industry, previously building wooden enclosures for Pilot radios (Complete Control Films 2013). Atari's factory in Ardfinnan was a major contributor to the local economy, employing up to 200 people, and forming a vital supply chain link to Europe (Kerr and Cawley 2012).

The business changed ownership several times over the years, and was bought by Namco in 1984, then bought back by Atari in 1990, and taken over by Midway in 1995 (2017). That year it changed ownership to Namco again, who ran the business until its closure in 1998. The Atari factory also produced arcade games under contract for Sega (Nolan 2019, 196), and so was a European manufacturing and distribution hub for several of the arcade videogame industry's leaders.

Parallel to the local arcade videogame manufacturing market kickstarted by Atari in the late 1970s are the gaming coin-op machine makers and distributors in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, including Noraut from Omagh, Co. Tyrone (Noraut 2023), and Kimble Manufacturing from Dundalk, Co. Louth (Kimble 2008). Noraut also branched into tabletop gaming in 1988 with *Deal Me In*, a unique combination of board game and card game, designed in 1988 by Bobby Evans from Banbridge, Co. Down (RTÉ Archives 1988). While fixed odds gaming machine technology has evolved over the years, the original 1980s *Joker Poker* is a survivor of coin-op history, a game design that has survived unaltered for over four decades, and is still in wide use.

The aim of this panel's research is to contribute to building a more detailed picture of local coin-op gaming histories at micro level. Our methodological approach includes significant involvement from industry voices, who provide an essential first-hand reference to the stories of these local scenes as they've evolved over the decades. By focusing on the local, hyperlocal and regional levels in the UK and Ireland we intend to expand and reinforce scholarly understanding of the wider national and global industry dynamics of the arcade coin-op gaming industry.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Dr Alan Meades is Principal Lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University. His research focuses upon British amusement arcade history, oral history, play histories, and transgressive play. He is the author of *Arcade Britannia* (MIT Press 2022) and *Understanding Counterplay in Video Games* (Routledge 2015). Meades is the director of the Nic Costa Archive of coin-op history, and is a practice-based researcher, producing artwork, films, graphic design, and interactive environments for exhibition. His interactive companion to *Arcade Britannia*, allowing players to explore amusement arcades and built into a 1980s arcade cabinet, is featured in Eureka! part of London Design Biennale 2023.

Dr Kieran Nolan is an artist and academic from Cavan, Ireland. His multidisciplinary research explores the aesthetic, material, and connective properties of games, interfaces, and networked media, through digital art, design critique, and platform histories. He completed his PhD 'The Art, Aesthetics, and Materiality of the Arcade Videogame Interface' through Trinity College Dublin in 2019. Kieran is a lecturer in Creative Media at Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Co-Director of DkIT's Creative Arts Research Centre. kierannolan.com

Dr Alex Wade is Senior Research Fellow at Birmingham City University. Trained as a sociologist he has written widely on media histories, mental health, young people and media and French social theory. He was Chair of the Histories of Games Conference Committee (2018-2022) and is Work Group 1 Lead for the Co-operation on Science and Technology project 'Grassroots of Digital Europe' (2022-2026). He is the author of two books on games histories, including *Playback: A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames* (2016).