

Seniors take over Japan's arcades

Once the preserve of rowdy teenagers, game arcades in Japan are rapidly becoming the hippest place to hang out for a whole new generation—their grandparents. With plenty of time on their hands and cash in their pockets, well-behaved elderly customers make up a significant and growing number of those prepared to feed coins into machines. The so-called “silver market” is increasingly important for industries in Japan, where a plunging birth rate and a long life expectancy is leaving society increasingly top-heavy. And for the elderly themselves, arcades offer a chance to find fun and friendship away from the more traditional pursuits of old age.

10 Rather than the fast-paced shoot-em-ups or the hand-to-hand combat video games their grandchildren play, older gamers are more likely to splash their cash on “medal games”, in which players drop coins into slots where they hope they will knock over other piles of coins.

15 Noboru Shiba, 68, said he began visiting the arcade at a shopping mall near his home in Kiba, Tokyo after he retired from his job as seven years ago. “I used to stay home, and just watch TV. I would have gone senile if I had kept on doing that. I needed to get out of the house,” he said. Shiba says during his three- or four-hour visits he usually uses the piles of coins he has previously won, but has spent as much as 20,000 yen some months. “When my grandson comes to visit, I show him my bag of coins. I drop the bag on a table and it makes a really loud ‘thud’. He gets a kick out of that,” he said.

20 There are no official statistics for elderly game players, who occupy a minority share of an overall 500 billion yen Japanese arcade sector, a market still dominated by teens and pre-teens. But industry professionals all agree that the number of customers in the autumn of their lives has been steadily increasing for the past five or so years. With around 25% of Japanese now aged 65 or over—a figure projected to rise to 40% by 2050—everything from karaoke clubs to stock brokerages are chasing the “silver yen.”

Arcades, which have the advantage of being in places like shopping malls, where elderly people go regularly, are actively chasing older gamers, especially during the school day when younger players are busy.

30 Namco spokesman Yuji Takano said today’s elderly have grown up around such entertainment and feel comfortable with it. “In the 1980s, we saw an explosion of household video game consoles. Baby-boomers have seen that, and they are more familiar with games

than the elderly of the past. We are making our game arcades into places that engage a broad range of customers by using bright, pop decorations and setting up wide aisles for people to move around easily,” he said.

35 Some arcades have installed more comfortable chairs to cater for those who cannot cope so well with hours on hard seats. Others have instructed their staff to do regular rounds of the parlour and talk to elderly customers to make them feel welcome.

Developers tout the possible benefits of playing their products. “Some customers say games force them to use their fingers and think strategically. That might help keep them in good
40 health and lessen the impact of growing old. We are mulling ways to better attract the senior generation” said Sega spokesman Hiroyuki Tanaka.

In some cases, arcades have become a place to meet new people.

“Here, I see people from different towns and can talk honestly about the troubles in my life,”
said Mitsuko Nishino, 63, who visits a game arcade every day. “I used to play tennis. But
45 for that, you need to ask your friends, set a time and reserve a court. It was a pain to do all that. I can play games whenever I want and not bother with other people. When my two sons were young, I always told them not to go to game arcades because they could be a bad influence. But now I come here every day and enjoy it. I talk to people. I spend the day just having fun.”

Questions

1. Do you play arcade games? Why? Why not?
2. Mitsuko Nishino said that she used to tell her sons to stay away from game arcades as they could be a bad influence. Do you agree? How about now?
3. Do you play games at home? What do you think about the trend for playing games to maintain mental abilities (DS brain-training etc)? So you think they help to improve or maintain our abilities?
4. Are arcade games different to pachinko? Why? Why not?
5. The Namco spokesman says that the baby-boom generation feels comfortable with video games. If you are from this generation, is it true for you?
6. Do you agree with Mitsuko Nishino that arcade games are a good way to spend the day? How do you spend your days off?