

# The Liminality of Subcultural Spaces: Tokyo's Gaming Arcades as Boundary Between Social Isolation and Integration

Heide Imai <sup>1</sup>  and Lisa Woite <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Intercultural Communication, Senshu University, Japan

<sup>2</sup> Department of Imaging Arts and Sciences, Musashino Art University, Japan

**Correspondence:** Heide Imai ([heide.imai@isc.senshu-u.ac.jp](mailto:heide.imai@isc.senshu-u.ac.jp))

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## Abstract

This article explores the concept of liminal spaces in Tokyo, specifically focusing on gaming arcades as transitional spaces between social isolation and integration. The decline of the once-popular arcades since the 1990s raises questions about their usage, accessibility, and affordability in contemporary Tokyo. After clarifying the concept of liminality and urban borderlands, the article examines various case studies in central Tokyo, argues that arcades serve diverse purposes and highlights the importance of reintegration of such liminal spaces to bring people from different backgrounds together, providing entertainment, competition, and ritualized encounters. Employing ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, interviews, and secondary data analysis, this study recognizes the gaming arcade not only as a physical but also as a mental and social space. The arcades embody the hopes, fears, and aspirations of their users, blur boundaries, offer immersive experiences, and foster a sense of community, comfort, and nostalgia. Such insights allow us to understand how identities are constructed and negotiated in these spaces. In conclusion, the article advocates for a nuanced approach to urban planning that recognizes the value of subcultural spaces like gaming arcades and emphasizes the need to preserve and integrate these spaces into the broader urban fabric. By doing so it can be understood how these liminal spaces can contribute to a diversity of social interactions, community-building, and a better understanding and revitalization of urban borderlands if integrated and managed in the right way.

## Keywords

collective memory; community; gaming arcades; liminality; social integration; social isolation; third spaces; Tokyo; urban borderlands

## 1. Introduction

Liminal spaces can be defined as transitional or in-between spaces where the everyday boundaries and structures of society are temporarily suspended or dissolved. In these spaces, individuals may experience a blurring of familiar spatial references, such as distinct boundaries or clear paths, leading to a sense of disorientation. Spatially, they are physical locations literally situated in-between; temporally, liminal spaces exist as a transitional state between past and future, where normal routines and temporal markers may be disrupted or fluid (Turner, 1969, 1982). Victor Turner, one of the leading scholars in this area, connects liminal states to a suspension of social order and norms for groups or individuals. Such transformative experiences can then provide opportunities for personal growth, self-reflection, and the potential for profound cultural changes (Turner, 1979).

Airports as transitional areas between different locations or stages of a traveler's journey are an example of a physical liminal space that creates a sense of in-betweenness and suspension of normal routines (Augé, 2020). Temples, sacred groves, or initiation grounds that are used for religious or cultural rituals can also be considered liminal as individuals undergo transformative experiences and engage in symbolic practices that challenge conventional social categories (Derks, 1998). Similarly, festivals and carnivals create transient spaces that disrupt social norms and hierarchies as traditional roles and identities might be temporarily disconnected and boundaries between performers and spectators blurred (Bestor, 1985). In a wider sense, occupy movements, which established temporary camps in public spaces to challenge social and economic inequalities, creating alternative communities and disrupting the conventional uses and power structures of urban borderlands, can be seen as liminal spaces as well (Massey & Snyder, 2012). It is important to note that liminal spaces can manifest in various forms and contexts, and their characteristics may differ depending on cultural, social, and historical factors (Turner, 1969).

Urban borderlands refer to large zones between urban areas of cultural diversity, social tension, and economic disparity, and frequently serve as meeting points for different communities or are areas that have undergone significant urban development changes (Iossifova, 2013). Often, a blurring of boundaries and a mixing of identities occurs, creating a sense of in-betweenness. van Houtum and Eker (2015) define them as zones of social and economic transformation, where new ideas, practices, and forms of expression emerge. As such, they can foster creativity, innovation, and the formation of hybrid cultural identities (van Houtum & Eker, 2015). However, liminal spaces and urban borderlands may also be marked by challenges and conflicts when different bodies navigate interactions and negotiate positions within them (Bene & Benkő 2022).

Moreover, liminal spaces and urban borderlands can influence each other in several ways: liminal spaces can provide a space for people from different backgrounds to come together and interact, which might also help to bridge divides within urban borderlands (Robertson, 2018). Conversely, a neighborhood that is located on the border between two cultures (e.g., different subcultures or sub/main culture) could be considered an urban borderland, as it could be seen as a source of inspiration for the creation of new liminal spaces, such as art galleries or performance spaces, that explore the intersection of these cultures (Sulaiman, 2014). Thus, the relationship between liminal space and urban borderlands can be complex and dynamic, as it can change over time (Fourny, 2014). Furthermore, both types of spaces represent challenges and opportunities for urban planners as both a potential source of blight and decay as well as a chance for creative reuse, adaptation, and social innovation (van Houtum & Eker, 2015).

## 2. Tokyo Arcades as Liminal Spaces Located Inside Urban Borderlands

In this article, we will highlight the unique characteristics and societal values that make gaming arcades worthwhile to be considered for preservation and argue that urban policymakers should consider the urban typology of subcultural gaming arcades as spaces that bring people from all walks of life together (Migliore et al., 2021). Arcade games like Pong, Space Invaders, and PAC-MAN catapulted gaming arcades to their status as one of the most popular pastimes in the late 20th century until they reached their “golden age” in the West during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Until this day they share many characteristics with their predecessor, the penny arcades of the past, such as usually being inside and open to the public without entrance fees and, like this, providing light amusement protected from the elements. Their defining feature, however, remains the offering of coin-operated and thus automated entertainment. One coin will rent the game, usually until the player loses. Since the 1990s, gaming arcades have experienced a continuous decline in popularity, caused by many factors, prominently the introduction of home consoles and the more complex gameplay they offer. In the US and Europe, arcades are considered almost extinct and remain only as nostalgic remembrances (Horowitz, 2018; Kent, 2010; Kocurek, 2015).

In Japan, gaming arcades had a different trajectory as arcade games only increased in popularity throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, Japan’s arcades—or game centers, as they are commonly called in Japan—have been experiencing a decline, too. While they remain a common sight in Japanese cities today, of the around 22,000 game centers in 1989, only 4,000 remained in 2019 (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2019). Covid-19 and the imposed restrictions on public gatherings and operating hours for businesses accelerated this development when already struggling businesses had to face extended periods of closure and deal with guidelines that directly opposed the common activities in game centers (Agency of Cultural Affairs, 2020). However, in recent years, many centers have undergone a transformation and now focus on creating safer and more family-friendly environments with lighter and cleaner spaces. Some have incorporated additional attractions like indoor adventure playgrounds, photo booths, mechanical crane games, and rhythm-based games to attract a wider audience. This has caused a shift in perception and acceptance which helped to reframe the centers as a dynamic, liminal space on multiple axes, in-between places (work/school and home), in-between times (“after work, before the last train”), and for people in-between ages (high-school students who have to go home “by the time when people under 18 have to leave,” young unmarried men, and retired, elderly men; Hussain, 2020). Gaming arcades are places that exist somewhere between the private and public sphere, between reality and fantasy, between decay and disappearance, between subculture (*otaku*) and mainstream; a space designed for entertainment and escapism, yet also associated with negative behaviors and social stigmas (Lin & Sun, 2011).

### 2.1. Contextualizing Gaming Arcades

To contextualize game centers, we need to understand that there is a variety of liminal spaces in Japanese cities that differ in terms of their primary activities, social dynamics, and the liminal experiences they offer. With their emphasis on play and entertainment, game centers as well as maid cafes can be considered ludic spaces. Hostess clubs and love hotels lean towards hedonic experiences, focusing on pleasure and enjoyment. Coffee shops (*kissaten*) and neighborhood bars can encompass elements of both. While each of these examples represents a social in-between space involving strangers with varying degrees of intimacy, game centers are typically interactive spaces dedicated to arcade games that cannot easily be experienced elsewhere. They

offer entertainment, competition, and ritualized encounters through different gameplays and tournaments that allow for skill-building and socializing among gamers (Nicholls & Ryan, 2008). By providing a transitional and transformative environment for their customers, game centers can be considered liminal spaces where individuals and groups can temporarily escape their everyday lives (Turner, 1969, 1982).

By representing a distinct subculture and attracting a specific demographic, gaming arcades and their unique atmosphere can contribute to the landscape of urban borderlands. Their presence might have an economic impact by attracting visitors, potentially increasing foot traffic, and benefiting local businesses such as food vendors, shops, and other entertainment venues. Since game centers often occupy large structures, they can cause the transformation or repurposing of buildings and thus contribute to the revitalization and economic growth of the surrounding urban borderlands, especially major transit station areas (Simpkins, 2020). It however can also lead to noise, disruption, dependency (Wardle et al., 2014), or the displacement of residents in surrounding areas (Kidokoro et al., 2022). This article aims to contribute to the discussion of the urban borderland concept by showing how Tokyo's arcades interact with and influence the broader urban borderlands in which they are located. These arcades serve as hubs where individuals from various backgrounds come together, blurring the lines between different communities within urban borderlands and offering a unique perspective on how liminal spaces can be integrated within the broader urban context and contribute to social interaction and community-building. The main purpose of this article is to evaluate the recent transformation of gaming arcades as liminal spaces, from a prominent social setting to facing challenges and shifts due to factors such as the rise of home consoles and changing societal perceptions (during the Covid-19 pandemic these spaces were heavily influenced by stigmatization and concerns regarding public health and safety (de Rosa & Menarini, 2021).

### 3. Aims, Questions, and Methodology

To understand the nature, potential, and influence of the gaming arcade, the different spatial dimensions of these areas and the perspectives of those who gather, interact, and socialize in them will be explored (Sennett & Sendra, 2022). To fully embrace the potential of arcades to serve as liminal spaces that bridge different worlds, promote inclusivity by accommodating diverse individuals, and help revitalize urban areas by providing engaging spaces for recreation and community-building, a more nuanced approach to urban design and planning is needed. The article aims to provide deeper insights by asking:

RQ1: What are the spatial dimensions and user perspectives within gaming arcades that define them as liminal spaces?

RQ2: What are the social dynamics between different users and how does it influence the sense of community and social integration?

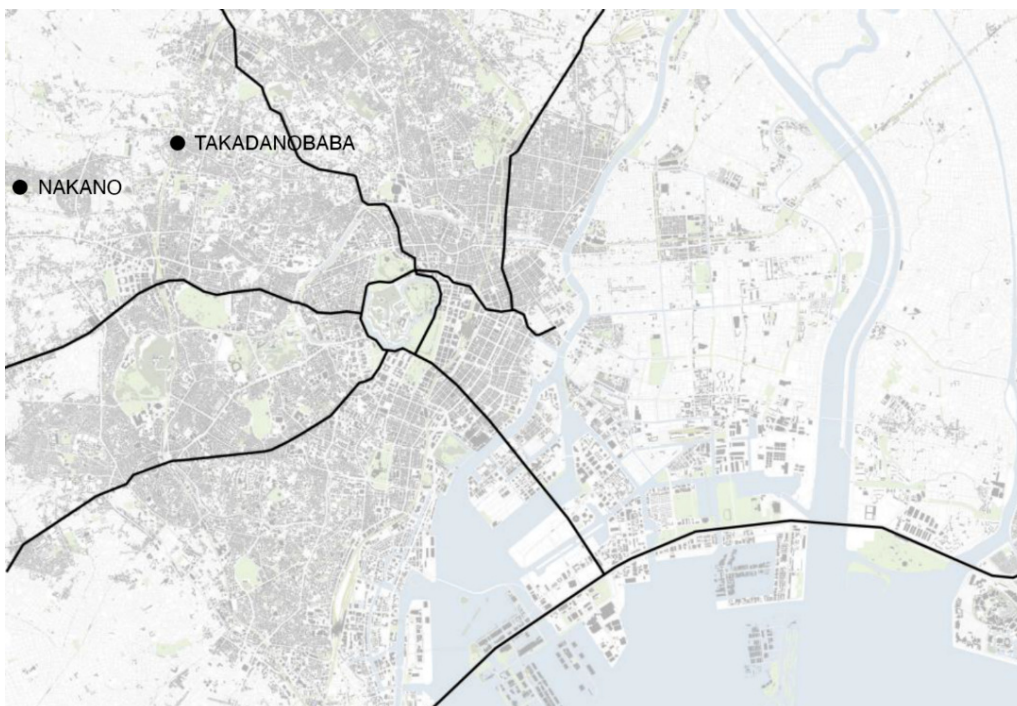
RQ3: How do gaming arcades blur different boundaries and influence the urban context they are situated in?

RQ4: How could gaming arcades be more effectively preserved and integrated into urban development strategies?

To address these research questions, a case study approach was adopted, allowing the researchers to conduct an in-depth investigation of specific cases to gain a comprehensive understanding of specific phenomena at play. The study focused on three gaming arcades: MIKADO Takadanobaba, TRF Nakano, and GIGO Takadanobaba. These arcades were selected for their prominence, unique characteristics, and representation of different types of liminal spaces to showcase the diversity of arcades and thus provide a comprehensive understanding of the spatial, social, and cultural aspects of arcades and their significance within the urban landscape (De Kort & Ijsselsteijn, 2008). Takadanobaba and Nakano (Figure 1) are both well-known and popular districts in Tokyo and represent different types of urban borderlands: Takadanobaba is located in Shinjuku, known for its youth culture and nightlife; Nakano is located in the Nakano Ward, which is well known for its anime and manga culture.

In addition to visual analysis and participant observation, thirty interviews were conducted with various individuals associated with the arcades, including regular patrons, experienced players, beginners, staff, and other relevant stakeholders. The researchers applied a snowball sampling method, allowing the identification of additional participants through referrals from initial interviewees, to reach people who are not easily accessible but important for the study. Additionally, purpose sampling was utilized to ensure that people of different ages, genders, or gaming interests were interviewed (Parker et al., 2019, p. 863).

To gain a comprehensive understanding of arcades, the researchers maintained a dual perspective as both observers and participants, which allowed them to experience the arcade culture firsthand while also objectively observing and analyzing the various cases and their urban environments. This dual position enhanced the depth and validity of the research findings. Potential risks such as bias and subjectivity were



**Figure 1.** Location of Takadanobaba and Nakano.



considered and mitigated through careful data collection and analysis (Berger, 2015). The autonomy of the interviewees in determining the focus and depth of their responses was ensured (Bavinton, 2007). To enhance the rigor and validity of the study, data triangulation was applied (Marshall & Rossman, 2014) and the findings were cross-referenced and validated by revisiting the gaming arcades, observing activities, and confirming their observations with the collected interview data (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016). This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the liminality of gaming arcades, capturing the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of individuals within these spaces and their urban context.

## 4. Case Studies

### 4.1. MIKADO Takadanobaba

The gaming arcade MIKADO Takadanobaba is located only a two-minute walk away from Takadanobaba Station, one of the busiest commuter hubs in Tokyo. With a historical legacy of equestrian activities, the neighborhood is now mainly known for its vibrant nightlife scene of karaoke bars, jazz clubs, and cheap izakaya that mainly cater to the student population of both nearby Waseda University as well as various Japanese language schools. Also, home to a large community of Southeast Asian immigrants, Takadanobaba exemplifies an urban borderland where multiple cultures, identities, and lifestyles coexist and interact. New forms of expression and belonging are often generated in these spaces where tradition and modernity, local and global, as well as high and low cultures converge. This is illustrated by MIKADO's name being written above the automatic entrance door in Japanese calligraphy, a style choice that blends well with the surrounding traditional Japanese and modern international stores. At the same time, it distinguishes MIKADO from modern game centers: While contemporary arcades announce themselves usually in a louder fashion (both literally with the noise of machines and happy music spilling out of the building and figuratively with branded design and bold colors), MIKADO features a more unassuming look (Figure 2a).

Inside, customers are greeted by even more traditional Japanese elements, such as a *noren* (traditional fabric dividers hung between rooms) and a frog plush labeled as the "god of MIKADO" (Figures 2b and 2c). Since the

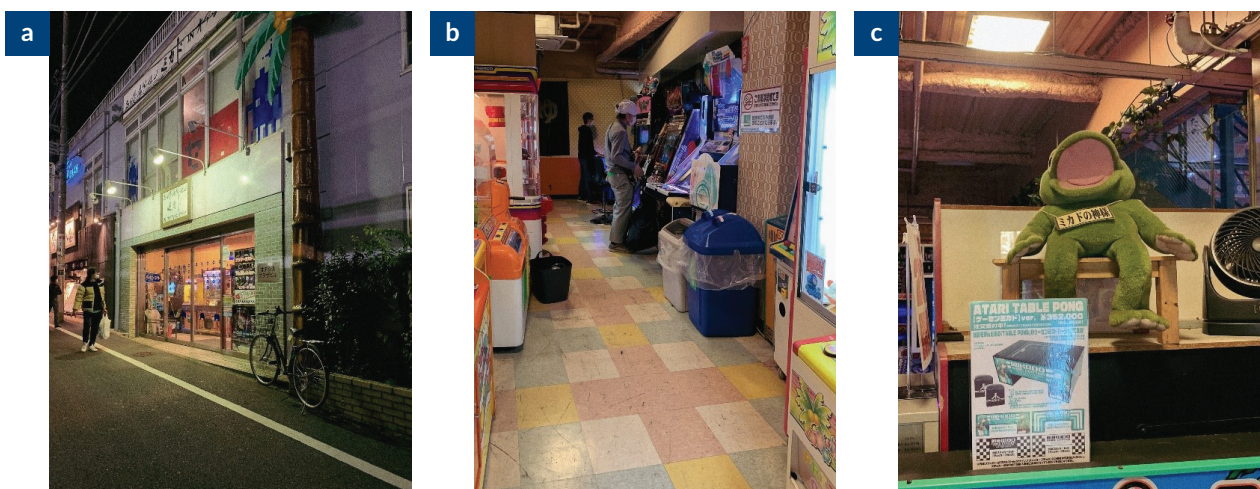


Figure 2. Approaching MIKADO Takadanobaba and first impressions upon entering.

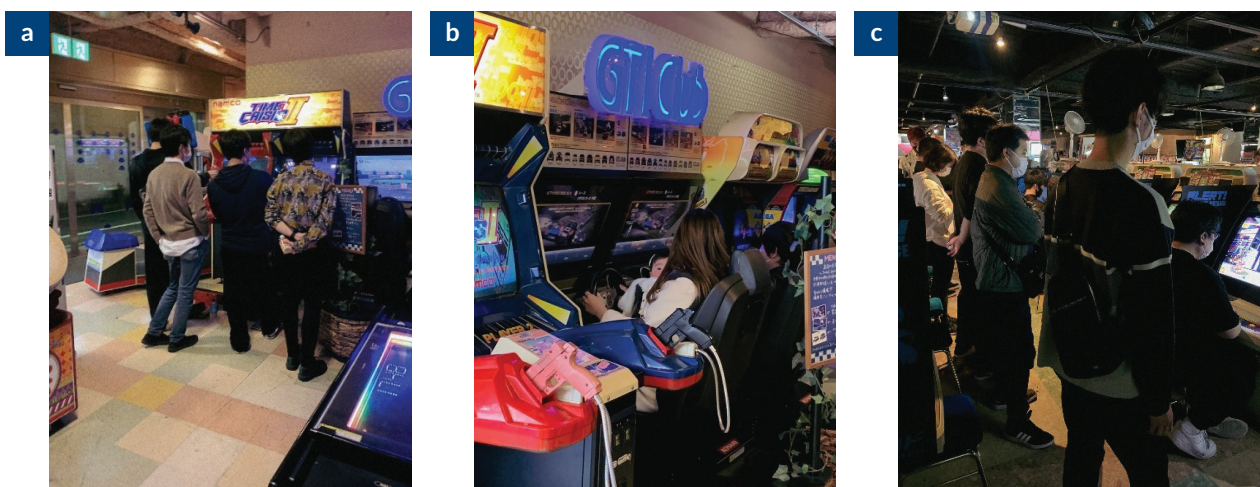
Japanese word for frog—*kaeru*—also means “to return,” this plays with the notion of homecoming in multiple ways. It can be understood as a greeting for the returning regulars but also as a more metaphorical return to a place of nostalgic remembrance.

The first floor, with its walls painted in wild patterns and covered with an eclectic selection of posters, gives an impression of varied, light amusement. Customers first must find their way through a labyrinth of simulator games, which include shooting, driving, and flying. Since most of these can be played together, they especially attract customers that enter as a group and, in the daytime, we could even observe parents playing the games with their children (Figures 3a and 3b). The second floor is devoted to classic cabinet games arranged in long rows and seems aimed at more committed gamers. In the afternoon, two or three single players might be dispersed among one row, yet in the evenings, at weekends, and especially during tournaments, the rows are so jam-packed with players and onlookers that it is difficult to pass through (Figure 3c).

#### 4.1.1. Interactions and Behavior in Space

The space is exceptionally well set up to blend into, loiter, and do things on your own accord. Simultaneously, with the cabinets arranged in long, parallel rows, it is not immediately clear what the onlooker’s gaze is aimed at. With the players being too absorbed anyway, one can approach people (at least physically) without awkwardly placed barriers. MIKADO holds daily tournaments for its patrons and live streams them on their YouTube channel (ca. 100,000 subscribers as of March 2023).

During competitions, a spatial peculiarity might be observed: The competitors, while playing, have no way of acknowledging each other’s presence. Once the game begins, their encounter is mediated by the screens, and they interact solely through the game’s interface as the cabinets, being arranged back-to-back, completely block any view of their opponents. Additionally, the loud noise makes it impossible to hear each other’s voices. For one example, around the competitors, however, crowds of spectators can gather, and they do not seem to know each other—they usually consist of acquainted regulars and people not related to them—comments are made (amazing, *sugoi*) and from here small conversations start. Like that, the players, while being isolated in their virtual world, generate an active, social environment (Figure 3c).



**Figure 3.** Observing different activities inside the arcade and during competitions.

When tournaments take place, the atmosphere seems more welcoming, as people acknowledge others ever so slightly (for example apologizing before passing by). Outside competition times, even on the weekend and in the evening, the atmosphere on the second floor is more reserved. Overall, however, the space seems to allow for a variety of activities and behaviors to happen: People play by themselves or participate in the competitions with all the planning/arrangements that go along with that. Some people instruct their friends or even their children on how to play a game and on one occasion a teenage couple was seen strolling through the aisles while eating ice cream that they bought at one of the vending machines on the second floor. Thus, the space is not hyper-controlled or hyper-focused (unlike for example TRF) and simultaneously supports both passive and active behaviors.

Trying to talk to a player, we first get ignored, but after some minutes, he is ready to chat: “The space itself is one of the best things about arcade gaming! Going to the game center, especially together with friends and you see and hear all these amazing things...I feel like a kid in a candy store.” His friend later adds that “of course, arcade games are created for a more short-term experience but there is that thrill...getting hooked on a particular cabinet and meeting strangers to team up with or play against.”

He further emphasizes his longing for the social interaction he misses when playing games at home. At MIKADO, engaging with others becomes a highlight, and he recalls making numerous new friends and even rivals. “They taught me the art of losing with grace!” he exclaims. Despite some viewing game centers as childish or uncool, he believes many people find genuine enjoyment in them. A foreign visitor, lamenting the disappearance of arcades in their own country, highlights casualness as a key aspect of their charm, appreciating the ability to casually visit after work or on a whim. The convenience of location in a walkable city remains essential for an arcade’s success. Reflecting on Tokyo’s contemporary arcade culture, he shares: “Having witnessed the decline of arcades back home, I expected nostalgia to overwhelm me at MIKADO. However, Tokyo’s plentiful game centers and the ease of access to these spaces prevent that sense of loss, maintaining a wonderfully casual atmosphere.”

When approaching a man in a suit, he tells us a similar story: “I often come here during lunch break....Sometimes after work too, before I go home, to wind down and wait for the evening rush hour to pass.” Especially at noon and in the early evening the space is frequented by salarymen in suits and the words of the interviewee mark MIKADO as an extension of this way home and associate it with in-between times, signifying a feeling of liminality in both temporal and spatial terms. This casualness seems to contribute to MIKADO’s broad appeal and can also be observed in one of the arcade’s main visitor groups: older, retired men who can be found here at any time and often stay for extended periods. The reason MIKADO is so attractive to them might be that they have more time to kill and often lack purpose or other places to go. While they do not seem to interact much with each other or the younger patrons, they are as much accepted as any other visitor. In this sense, MIKADO displays a certain duality: On the one hand, it is known for its competitions, for very high-level players chasing high scores, while on the other hand, it invites others to casually drop in and aimlessly roam around. MIKADO’s appeal as a space of comfort for a wide variety of people was most prominently reflected in an incredibly successful crowdfunding campaign during the height of Covid-19 in 2020, when 3,872 supporters from Japan and abroad pledged over 37 million yen to protect this space from impending bankruptcy due to Covid-19-related restrictions (Campfire, 2020).



#### 4.2. TRF Nakano

Nakano is a densely populated neighborhood that, despite being conveniently connected by multiple train lines to the large cities of Shinjuku, Shibuya, and Ikebukuro, did not develop as a large-scale commercial district and instead remains a mainly residential area. Home to many manga artists since the 1950s, it has become a hub for *otaku* culture that coexists with a vibrant local culture and traditional events around the various shrines and temples. Nakano simultaneously holds space for the modern and quirky as well as the traditional and serene and as such can be considered an urban borderland. The game center TRF Nakano, unlike MIKADO, is not located in a separate building but instead is found inside of Nakano Broadway, whose main entrance is reached by walking through the covered Sun Mall *shotengai* (shopping street) which starts right at the north exit of JR Nakano Station. At most times of the day, Sun Mall is a bustling place, the commercial center of the area, with locals lining up to buy fresh meat or bento boxes while visitors browse through the small novelty stores or famous sweet shops. At its end, Sunmall connects to Nakano Broadway (Figure 4a), one of the main attractions of Nakano. Dubbed *otaku* mall, it is a windowless multi-story labyrinth-like structure containing dozens of small stores that are devoted to highly specific niche interests relating to manga, anime, and games (Figure 4b).

When ascending the stairs to the fourth floor, TRF is not yet visible but already audible by the electronic sounds of the gaming machines and the frantic clicking of buttons and joysticks. Crammed into the space are 18 retro cabinets and the view is almost bland in its utilitarian appearance. TRF does not make much effort to brand the store. Additionally, there is a lack of more “playful” machines to lure or ease you in, like electromechanical games, simulator games, or merchandisers found in modern game centers like GIGO but also in MIKADO (Figure 4).

Especially when compared to MIKADO, the relationship between location and atmosphere seems slightly paradoxical. Despite being much easier to stumble upon and much more “publicly” located in the hallways of Nakano Broadway, even lacking a door, TRF seems to have a much higher inhibition threshold that potential customers must cross. For all its open and accessible appearance, we immediately feel as if we are intruding or

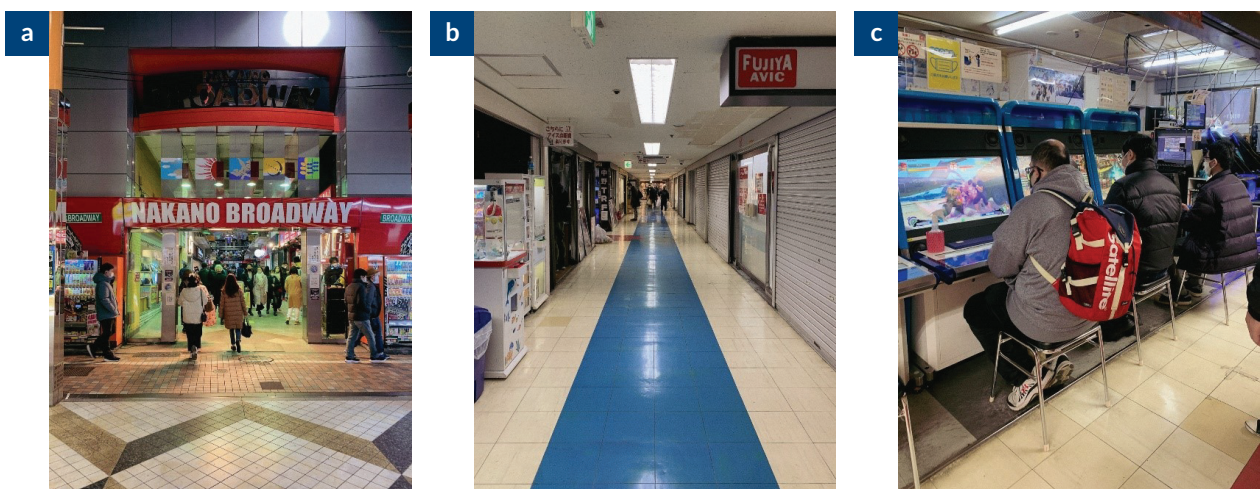


Figure 4. Entering Nakano Broadway, approaching TRF, and players sitting at cabinets.

“disturbing a private party.” When positioning ourselves among the four or five other people who are watching the three active players, we cannot just slip in and merge into the background like we were able to do at MIKADO. Instead, we receive stares from the other patrons and the shopkeeper that make us feel out of place. Though this might be caused by the much lower number of visitors, which naturally makes individual people stick out more, our discomfort might be best explained by the spatial setup and circumstances.

While MIKADO fills up a whole building, TRF has a stage-like feeling, due to the garage-like set-up of the store, which opens to only one side and is closed by a shutter when the store is not operating. However, this stage also puts the spectator into the literal spotlight, as the ceiling lights of Broadway illuminate everything and everyone brightly instead of veiling them in darkness as is the case in MIKADO (Figure 4c). Like that, the attention is not as naturally drawn towards the screen as the main attraction and light source, but also to everything else that is happening in the vicinity. Thus, at TRF, the observer also becomes an observed object (Berger, 2015).

Furthermore, with the space being so small and most of the machines clearly visible, there is no need for moving around after choosing a spot and thus, doing so anyway would be strange and draw even more attention. It goes against the unspoken behavioral rules of the place (Lin & Sun, 2011). This inhibition towards roaming also implicitly prevents casual observers from entering the back row of the space that is completely hidden from sight. As it is very cramped, there is no way of casually observing the players in this area of the store; it would require a very conscious decision to cross this threshold where one would then have to stand very close to the players to observe them. TRF is clearly separated into an inside and outside, both regarding the physical space and the initiation status of players. Even though this arcade is so publicly situated and part of a larger complex with many passers-by, it gives a strong impression of an insider space.

#### 4.2.1. Anxiety of Being on Display

Trying to talk to a man in his 30s standing next to us, we get to know that he is here for the first time. He states:

I am quite conscious about being bad at these games, especially because there obviously are so many veteran players here....I thought it would be way too embarrassing to struggle with the controls so publicly, so I was thinking of checking out the space before playing but actually, the cabinets don't have very detailed instructions on how exactly to operate the games. I tried to push myself...but I didn't really get it and I felt too much on display.

Another bystander and beginner joined our conversation, saying that he thought he would be better at gaming but soon realized that everyone around him was so much more skilled which made him feel embarrassed and “super out of place”: “I was worried that I might annoy the regulars with my fumbling around.”

A few minutes later, there is a chance to talk to an experienced player in his 40s who has a more lighthearted view on newcomers: “True, there are no manuals and few tutorials compared to other game environments....But I'm also more the type to just insert a coin and learn by trial and error. I don't really care what others think or if I look like a fool.” Another seasoned player states:

It is nice to have new players around here, we need them to keep the arcade alive. Also, no one is advanced from the get-go and there are people who can help you....I actually became friends with some staff members who helped me to get better.

With its spatial restrictions, TRF thus does not encourage as wide a range of behaviors as the other game centers, which is also reflected in the homogeneity of both its visitors and onlookers—mostly streetwear-clad men in their 30s and salarymen in suits. We did not encounter families or groups of teenagers at this game center. As indicated by the interviewees, the space is dominated by experienced players, operating with speed and ease. Beginners seem rarer, which seems influenced by the fact that the players are so much on display. TRF feels more competitive, professional, and very intentional. While MIKADO has a more open quality that encourages customers to stroll around, TRF is less about a spatial experience of exploring and drifting between different games, roles, and activities and, instead, appears to be created for a distinct purpose: to offer a very specific set up of retro games for *otaku*-like gamers.

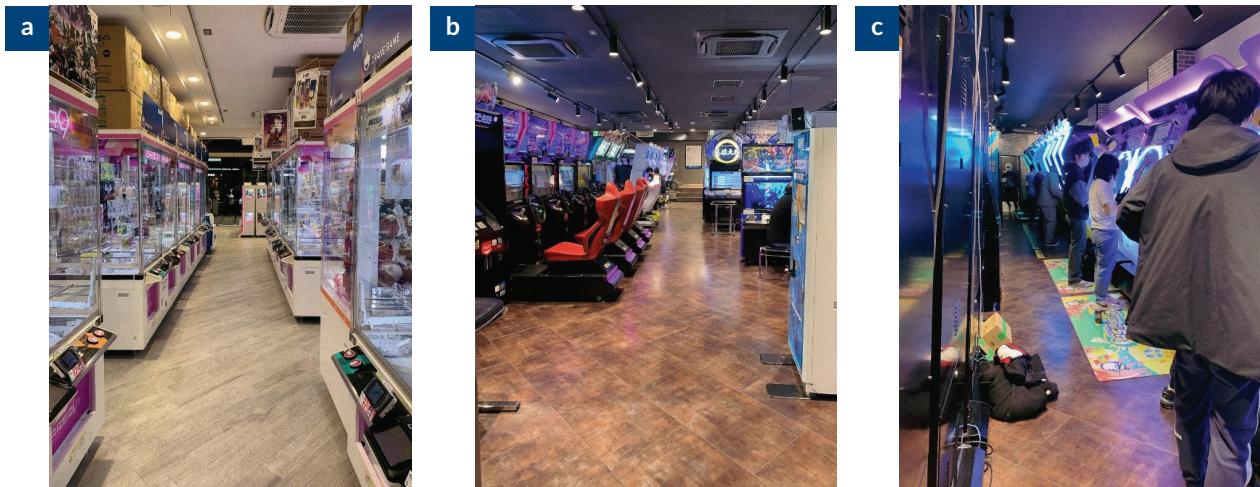
### 4.3. GIGO Takadanobaba

Taking up three floors in a seven-story building named Grand Tokyo, which also contains Big Echo Karaoke and a chain restaurant, the Takadanobaba branch of GIGO game center is situated right next to Takadanobaba Station, across the well-known Sakae Dori and only 100 m away from MIKADO. Despite being in close proximity to one another, the initial impression of the two arcades is very different. MIKADO has a more utilitarian appearance with posters announcing upcoming tournaments and might not even be noticed as a game center by passers-by. In contrast to that, GIGO has a much more franchised, commercial appearance. Plastered around the wide-open entrance, colorful posters inform the customer about a new collaboration with the popular anime series *Spy x Family*, LED lights are flashing and changing colors, and the electronic noise from the machines layered over cheerful background music is spilling out onto the street.

As is the case with most modern game centers, the first floor is dedicated to merchandiser games, starting with small machines offering goods as small prizes (mostly plush keychains of popular anime characters) to lure visitors in. Behind them, bigger, uniform-looking machines (exclusively UFO Catchers by Sega) are arranged in a perfectly aligned fashion, allowing us to clearly view the entire aisle and offering a rather open impression, especially when compared to the winding paths of MIKADO or the cramped garage space of TRF (Figure 5a).

Another contrast to MIKADO is immediately obvious: The space is brightly lit. Spotlights are placed evenly along the ceiling and the crane game machines themselves also have internal lights. The machines are pink and white and are filled with cute and round plush animals and dolls, colorful figurines in boxes, or oversized versions of popular snacks and candy.

The ground floor does not seem remarkably busy during the evenings, but in the afternoons (when school is over), the space fills up quickly. Compared to the darker *showa*-style (MIKADO) and *otaku*-style (TRF) arcades, this bright game center seems to attract a very different audience: young girls, couples and even parents with children. We can spot a variety of school uniforms, especially girls coming here to try to win cute trinkets representing their love for certain characters or anime. In general, the space seems much brighter and more youthful with the light-colored machines, the cheerful music, and the cute prizes, giving a more agreeable impression than the dark, utilitarian appearance of MIKADO and TRF.



**Figure 5.** GIGO with brightly lit games on the first floor and musical games in the basement.

In the basement, video (cabinet) games, driving simulation games, and musical games can be found, and the space seems to appeal to a more mature audience than the cheerful merchandise area on the first floor. The walls and ceiling are painted in dark gray tones and the floor is covered in tiles with a glossy wooden effect, that reflects the ceiling lights and screens, giving the basement more of a “grown-up” appearance (Figure 5b). Still, this area, too, seems rather sleek and more clearly organized than MIKADO’s maze-like setup.

#### 4.3.1. Absorbed in the Game

The players in the basement seem to be mostly coming alone and immersing themselves in the games (Figure 5c). We approach one player who thinks that while people at MIKADO might stroll the aisles in search of an old favorite or of an obscure game they have never played before, people coming to GIGO seem more “determined” and gravitate towards specific games, especially when it comes to rhythm games.

After asking him whether he usually comes with a specific plan in mind, he lets us know that he tries to make time two or three days a week to play after his shift is finished, often just to relax but not to meet other players. He comes to this store because it happens to have a specific game he likes to play and says he would go to any game center that has it and that is convenient, indicating that he does not feel a strong attachment to the space itself, that it is interchangeable to him.

Around the corner, a group of two boys and one girl in their early 20s are huddled around a driving simulator game, one of them playing and the other two laughing and encouraging the driver. Next to them, we see a man in his 40s playing one of the more classic cabinet games while explaining the game to a woman sitting to his right. The staff members, who are much younger (university student age) than the staff of the other arcades, are very friendly and polite, constantly shouting welcome (*irasshaimase*). They are often busy rearranging toys in the machines and are also playing by themselves. Once they have won a prize, they put it back in. They also wear easily identifiable uniforms, leading to a more obvious distinction between customers and staff and giving the impression of a friendly but supervised space.



Approaching some more customers we meet a young man who says that he often comes with friends, and they usually play driving games because it is an experience that they cannot have at home. He confirms that other simulator games are fun as well, but because almost everybody has played Mario Kart before, they often are drawn to that game.

Another young woman in her 20s explains that she often tries the UFO Catchers, spending around 500 yen when she drops in at this or another game center. If she does not win, she gives up after that. Sometimes, if she really wants something, she will go up to about 1,500 yen. Her friend replies that that shows great self-restraint, something she herself does not have as she is always in danger of spending way too much money. At the end of our talk, she states: “For most of the better prizes you have to spend a bit to move it into a good position, and especially if I already spent a lot of money on trying to get one prize, I cannot stop.”

Other customers are more curious about the players themselves as one bystander explains:

I really enjoy watching people play games, especially when they play sound games at super high speed because they will use their whole body. But I was wondering if it makes players uncomfortable if I stand somewhere behind them and watch them play.

Talking to some gamers about how they feel when they are being observed, we learn that people standing behind players and watching is considered a tradition in arcades: “If you’re really good, sometimes an audience will gather behind you, as proof of your skills. If you end up losing, it might hurt your pride but on the contrary, an audience will make the win feel even better.” One gamer adds that “it feels nice if even one person is interested in me playing. But yes, for people who are not very good or confident, observers might make them feel very uncomfortable.” In recent times, however, crowds are dwindling, so having an audience has become more of a rare experience: “The only places where you can still see that kind of scene regularly is in ‘sacred’ game centers like MIKADO or TRF.”

## 5. Discussion: Spatial and Social Characteristics of Urban Borderlands

In the following, we will highlight the spatial and social characteristics of MIKADO, TRF, and GIGO, while examining their relationship with the concept of urban borderlands. Each arcade reflects and influences its surrounding urban borderland in unique ways, contributing to the diversity and cultural fabric of their respective neighborhoods. MIKADO epitomizes the concept of a liminal space by blending elements of traditional Japanese culture with modern arcade gaming, which creates a unique space that straddles the boundaries between nostalgia and contemporary entertainment. By incorporating calligraphy, *noren* curtains, and the iconic *kaeru* frog, MIKADO becomes a living testament to the coexistence of various cultural identities within the urban borderland of Takadanobaba. It provides a symbolic “homecoming” for some customers who connect with these traditional elements, while simultaneously attracting a diverse audience intrigued by the contrast and diversity it offers. The arcade’s ability to cater to different levels of engagement and interest further solidifies its status within this urban borderland.

MIKADO welcomes both casual gamers seeking light amusement and dedicated players looking for more immersive experiences. This inclusivity and role as a community hub contribute to the dynamic nature of this urban borderland, where diverse communities and interests intersect. Despite the seemingly isolated nature

of gaming, the arcade fosters an active social environment. Tournaments especially create opportunities to learn and share. Thus, MIKADO represents a place of communal gathering where people observe, comment on, and converse with each other, resulting in a sense of belonging and comfort, akin to finding a “home away from home.” The arcade’s impact extends beyond its immediate surroundings. MIKADO not only reflects the local culture of Takadanobaba but also actively contributes to the neighborhood’s vibrancy by providing a unique and lively attraction that draws in customers from different backgrounds and locations. In essence, MIKADO strengthens Takadanobaba’s reputation as an urban borderland known for its embrace of *otaku* culture and entertainment.

TRF offers a different perspective on the urban borderland concept, emphasizing the preservation of arcade gaming culture. Like MIKADO, TRF is dedicated to keeping the spirit of the golden age of arcade games alive. However, it does so with a distinctly “underground” and subcultural atmosphere which distinguishes it as a unique liminal space within the urban borderland of Nakano Broadway. Furthermore, TRF’s spatial layout and the feeling of being on display create a distinct experience that aligns with the concept of urban borderlands. While casual customers tend to feel self-conscious amidst the intense gaming environment, revealing the blurring of various boundaries and barriers, TRF’s regular customer base, predominantly consisting of men aged from their late 20s to 40s alongside some older salarymen, creates a tightly knit community, all unfolding within this urban borderland. Unlike MIKADO, which appeals to a broad spectrum of gamers, TRF caters to a more specialized demographic. The absence of simulator games and UFO Catchers further reinforces this exclusivity. TRF’s positioning on the fourth floor of Nakano Broadway serves as an inherent filter, drawing individuals with a particular interest in *otaku* culture, and consequently, its small size underscores its function as a unique liminal space within the Nakano Broadway urban borderland, exerting also its limited influence on the wider neighbourhood. While Nakano Broadway is home to various businesses targeting infrequent visitors and tourists, TRF consistently draws a loyal base with its regular tournaments and limited opening hours, which mirrors the sense of community, nonetheless also associated with urban borderlands.

GIGO Takadanobaba presents a different perspective on urban borderlands compared to MIKADO and TRF. GIGO intentionally targets a younger audience, predominantly composed of teenagers, families, and individuals in their 20s. Its strategic location right next to the train station and low entry threshold make it accessible to walk-in customers. In doing so, GIGO serves as a space for teenagers and young adults seeking affordable and light entertainment, mirroring the concept of an urban borderland as a place for diverse groups to gather. Unlike MIKADO and TRF, where dedicated communities form around gaming, GIGO prioritizes commercial success over community-building. Visitors often view it as a convenient stopover rather than a space to forge deep connections. This commercial approach aligns with the notion of urban borderlands as places of commerce and transit. While GIGO may lack the sense of community found in MIKADO and TRF, it still contributes to the broader urban borderland of Takadanobaba. Its low entry threshold makes it an attractive destination for those passing through, reinforcing the neighborhood’s reputation as a vibrant urban borderland. GIGO’s presence in the area adds to the diverse array of entertainment options, enriching the cultural fabric of Takadanobaba.

In summary, these three gaming arcades—MIKADO, TRF, and GIGO—exemplify various facets of the urban borderland concept within the context of Takadanobaba and Nakano Broadway. MIKADO bridges traditional and modern elements, fosters a sense of community, and actively contributes to the neighborhood’s vitality. Contrastingly, TRF, with its underground ambiance and exclusive allure, operates as a unique liminal space of

*otaku* culture within the broader urban borderland of Nakano Broadway. GIGO, on the other hand, targets a younger and more mainstream audience, prioritizing commercial success while still contributing to the vibrant urban borderland of Takadanobaba. Thus, each arcade, in its own unique way, embodies the urban borderland concept, enriching the cultural diversity of its surroundings.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has explored the concept of liminal spaces in Tokyo, with a particular focus on gaming arcades as transitional spaces within urban borderlands. Throughout our discussion, we have highlighted the intricate relationship between these liminal spaces and the broader urban context. By examining case studies such as MIKADO, TRF, and GIGO, we have uncovered the diverse ways in which gaming arcades embody the essence of urban borderlands. Liminal spaces, as we have mentioned, represent transitional or in-between areas where societal norms and boundaries are temporarily suspended or blurred. These spaces challenge our conventional notions of time, space, and social order.

Within Tokyo's urban landscape, gaming arcades serve as quintessential liminal spaces, existing at the crossroads of various cultural, temporal, and social dimensions. Our investigation has revealed that gaming arcades, such as MIKADO, can simultaneously bridge traditional and modern elements, fostering a sense of nostalgia while embracing contemporary gaming trends. They become places where diverse communities converge, transcending the boundaries of mainstream and sub-culture. In the case of TRF, we have seen how such space can cater to specialized demographics, forming a close-knit community of enthusiasts in liminal space. GIGO Takadanobaba demonstrates that gaming arcades can be accessible to a younger and more mainstream audience, contributing to the vibrancy of urban borderlands by attracting a wider range of visitors. In this sense, GIGO adds to the diverse array of entertainment options available in Takadanobaba and enriches the neighborhood's cultural fabric.

Our findings show that gaming arcades in Tokyo serve as important liminal spaces for people from different backgrounds, as they provide a space where people can come together to play games, socialize, and learn about different cultures. This helps to create a sense of community and understanding among people who might not otherwise have gathered and interacted within such spaces and contexts. Old-school game centers like MIKADO have especially been re-appropriated to respond to people's longing for the past, with the subconscious repressed by modernity turning ordinary, everyday, and familiar places into "secret" places of desire (Ivy, 1995). The arcade forms an imaginative boundary between past and present, allowing people to remember certain moments and re-encounter places of their childhood. Yet, newcomers and younger customers see the arcade in a different way, experiencing the nostalgic spirit, but enjoy the arcade either for competitive gaming (TRF Nakano) or pure entertainment reasons (GIGO). As such, each arcade fulfills a role as a liminal space that expresses different voices, thoughts, and personal opinions about political, economic, or social changes going on.

Moreover, the article emphasized the fact that the relationship between liminal spaces and urban borderlands is dynamic and multifaceted. Liminal spaces like gaming arcades provide a platform for people from different backgrounds to come together, fostering inclusivity and diversity within urban borderlands. They contribute to the economic vitality of their surroundings by attracting visitors and increasing foot traffic, which can lead to the revitalization of urban areas. However, it is important to acknowledge that this

relationship is not without its challenges, as the presence of gaming arcades can also lead to negative issues. In essence, gaming arcades in Tokyo serve as crucial components of urban borderlands, enriching the cultural tapestry of their neighborhoods and offering unique spaces where individuals can momentarily escape the confines of their everyday lives. These spaces challenge, reshape, and blur the boundaries between different communities within urban borderlands, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and equitable urban environments.

As we move forward, it is imperative that urban planners and policymakers should recognize the value of these subcultural spaces like gaming arcades. They should consider preservation efforts that acknowledge their cultural and historical significance, their accessibility to a wide range of individuals, and their potential to contribute to the local economy and the revitalization of urban borderlands. By actively integrating and managing these liminal spaces, they can ensure their continued existence and relevance in a rapidly changing gaming and urban landscape. In doing so, they not only preserve a unique aspect of urban culture but also foster a deeper sense of community and understanding among the diverse inhabitants of our cities.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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### About the Authors



**Heide Imai** (PhD) is an architect and associate professor at Senshu University Tokyo. She specializes in the dynamics of urban development, focusing on the intricate balance between city rejuvenation, creative innovation, and sustainable practices. Her scholarly contributions include *Tokyo Roji: The Diversity and Versatility of Alleys in a City in Transition*, *Asian Alleyways: An Urban Vernacular in Times of Globalization*, and *Creativity in Tokyo: Revitalizing a Mature City*, reflecting her profound research on vernacular landscapes and cultural identities within different settings.



**Lisa Woite** is a German artist based in Tokyo, where she is researching liminal spaces in the city and the city as a liminal space. She utilizes video, photography, and text to interweave various influences from literature, myth, popular culture, and private memory into an essayistic fabric. She holds degrees from the Berlin University of the Arts and Musashino Art University Tokyo. Among other places, her work has been shown at Museum für Fotografie Berlin and Lichtsicht Projektions Triennale.