



Third-grader Sabbir and his friend Kakon trying to beat the final boss in "Cadillacs and Dinosaurs". The photo was taken in Rayer Bazar recently.

Cricket has become popular in arcade gaming.

PHOTO: MD ZAHIDUR RABBI

In Dhaka's secret alleys, lone arcades hint at a bygone era



A boy playing a game at an arcade machine at Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur.

bowling end with another set of controls. This is an everyday scene at Usman's gaming arcade, who has been operating the business out of the same spot for the last 25 years. For just five bucks, gamers like Ayan and Nandu can immerse themselves in the virtual world of gaming for 15 minutes. There was a time when almost every alley or "para" in Dhaka had at least four to five gaming arcades. However, as smartphones and computers

matter. "Cadillacs and Dinosaurs", or "Mostofa" as everyone in Bangladesh loved to call it, and other classic hits like Street Fighter II, now gave way to the more popular sports genre games like Cricket '07, FIFA, and occasionally, Grand Theft Auto. Some old-school, machine run arcades, however, still remain in Dhaka at various spots. At the capital's Rayer Bazar, one arcade still harbours the old machines operated by coins. Here, third grader Sabbir and his friend Kakon were found trying to beat the final boss in "Cadillacs and Dinosaurs". Every day, Sabbir sells kitchen mittens after school, earning,

business was very popular back in the day. Sometimes I used to earn about Tk 2,000-3,000 in a single day. Now I am only able to earn about Tk 300-400 a day, operating from 9:00am to 11:00pm. I am unable to even keep up with the rent," he shared. "I am thinking about selling the machines and retiring as the business has now become a burden and I have also become an old man," Ashraf added. Unable to keep up with the inflation and the downed popularity of the arcades, Khokon, owner of the arcade at Rayer Bazar, now doubles as a shoe-seller on the footpath just outside

From outside, you can hear hushed laughter, a street slang hurled, an almost loud shriek that quickly fades into giggles, and an unlikely combination to the rest of the orchestra -- the clacking of keyboards and chiptunes. The red curtain, as it turns out, hides a gaming arcade.

MD ZAHIDUR RABBI

The unassuming, narrow, winding alley in Dhaka's Geneva Camp reeks of a pungent mix of mosquito coils and incense. A maze of tangled overhead electric wires blocks the sun here any time of the year. A bare-bones eatery sells piping hot "singaras" with questionable hygiene from dawn to dusk. There's a cacophony of conversations in mixed Urdu and Bangla that gets doused in old hindi songs from a speaker somewhere.

To a stranger, this alley -- like the rest of the camp -- is an all-out attack on the senses.

At the dead end of this alley, nestled between the worn-out brick buildings that house "variety stores", a bright red curtain hides a dusty little establishment. From outside, you can hear hushed laughter, a street slang hurled, an almost loud shriek that quickly fades into giggles, and an unlikely combination to the rest of the orchestra -- the clacking of keyboards and chiptunes.

The red curtain, as it turns out, hides a gaming arcade.

THE DENS THAT HIDE 'MOSTOFA'
Inside one of the four remaining gaming arcades in Dhaka's Geneva Camp, the race is on to beat the high score in EA Sports Cricket 07. Second grader Ayan, an avid arcade gamer, smashes the keyboard controls to hit back-to-back sixes. He must beat his friend Nandu, who is on the

There was a time when almost every alley or "para" in Dhaka had at least four to five gaming arcades. However, as smartphones and computers became more accessible with time, the crowds started waning at the arcades.



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became more accessible with time, the crowds started waning at the arcades. These days, arcades are rare, and most of the ones that are surviving, like Usman's, have ditched the old arcade machines for computers.

However, an arcade is no arcade without the familiar retro machines. The solution? Fitting in a monitor, a keyboard, and the entire setup inside a makeshift arcade machine body made in the local markets.

The facades hold up just fine with no bother; it's the games inside that really

on average, Tk 35 in profits. He saves some for daily expenses and the rest goes into the arcade machine. For Sabbir and his friend, the arcade is a place to forget all of the hardships of the day and enjoy simple laughter and good times together.

THE LOOMING END OF OLD ARCADES

Ashraf, owner of one of the arcade gaming centres at Geneva Camp, shared troubling insights about the business. "The arcade gaming

his shop. He shared how his profits have gone down from a Tk 1,000 to just Tk 300-400. He blames the rise of smartphones for his dwindling profits. He also mentions that often he falls victim to extortion from local gangs. "I try my best to keep them out of my business but it is getting more and more difficult every day," Khokon said.

These days, there are rising gaming arcades or hubs that have

ditched the old models altogether to make ways for PlayStations, usually targeted towards higher end customers.

GamationBD is one such modern arcade that has PlayStation 4 that can be rented on an hourly basis. Yousof, who works at GamationBD, said, "The hourly rent costs Tk 60 per hour and if you play multiplayer, every player must pay Tk 50. We have games like Mortal Kombat, Street fighter, Need for Speed, GTA V, FIFA, and more."

"Most of our customers are between the ages of 16 and 25," he shared.

HOW ARCADES CHANGED AND HOW THEY CHANGED US
These arcades that once riddled the alleys of Dhaka, and now hide in secret corners of the city, shaped an entire generation in the country. The impact, no matter how one perceives it, was undeniable.

Md Golam Rafsan Jani, a tech enthusiast who is currently working as a learning designer at Optimizely, said, "I used to regularly play arcade games about 17 or 18 years ago. Each coin was about Tk 1 and the most hyped game was 'Mostofa'."

"I also used to play Mario on TV cards at my home back in the day. All of these experiences had motivated me to buy a personal computer for gaming back in 2006," he shared.

While arcade gaming has lost its golden era, it continues to impact the lives of youngsters, particularly in the underbellies of Dhaka. For the children in Geneva Camp, an hour of gaming in the arcade is an escape from the harsh realities of life. To others, they remain the reminders of a nostalgic bygone era.



Ashraf's gaming shop at the Geneva Camp.

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