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The New Video Arcade in Spain Might Be the Movie Theater

By **DOREEN CARVAJAL**

Correction Appended

MADRID — For the last three years, Enrique Martínez has been toiling like a 3-D warrior to let the games begin.

The result is a hybrid movie theater with all the digital fire and fury of a video game: fog, black light, flashing green lasers, high-definition digital projectors, vibrating seats, game pads and dozens of 17-inch screens attached to individual chairs. And naturally, there's buttered popcorn.

Called Cinegames, this small theater in a huge suburban multiplex stands at the front lines where video games are invading movie territory, transforming isolated computer play into community entertainment.

"Forget the pathetic speakers of a PC or television!" screams an ad for the theater, which opened in December and is offering cut-rate tickets at 3 euros, or about \$3.95. "Come feel the sound that puts you at the center of the action."

"We're trying this concept because there are many theaters in Spain, and admissions are down," Mr. Martínez said. "So we have to offer new products."

Mr. Martínez developed the idea as part of an executive M.B.A. program at the Instituto de Empresa in Madrid.

"We see the future with multiplexes with five screens, one for the traditional Hollywood spectacles and the others for screens for video halls and 3-D. That's the next step."

Cinegames is a testing ground for the Yelmo Cineplex, a movie theater company in Spain, which spent more than \$390,000 to modify one of its small individual theaters into a high-tech video gaming hall seating about 50 people.

Yelmo aims to expand the concept throughout Spain and into the rest of Europe and North America by allowing other theater companies to buy the system.

Other companies are also experimenting with different approaches to mix movie magic with video games.

CinemaxX, a chain in Germany, carried out a four-month trial last year with video games on one of its screens in Essen. And TimePlay Entertainment, based in Toronto, is developing theater technology that will allow moviegoers to play 15 minutes to 20 minutes of ad-sponsored interactive games before the movie starts.

Ultimately, the company wants to develop a system that opens up screens for a wide variety of uses, from popular games as basic as bingo to online computer role-playing games in a virtual world.

Not every experiment has been an instant success. The CinemaxX video theater in Germany failed to draw enough games, and the chain eventually decided to drop it.

Game manufacturers are monitoring the reaction to video theaters where games like Battlefield 1942 by Electronic Arts are being showcased.

“What the theater is offering is a new form to play with your friends and a new way to enjoy the games,” said Gonzalo San Juan, commercial director for Electronic Arts in Spain. “Now you can play with all your friends or your ‘clan,’ and there are many in Spain.”

But he added that he viewed the video theaters as complementary to online play.

Since Cinegames opened in Spain in December, weekends have proved to be the most popular with game players, according to Mr. Martínez. In the short time that it has been open, the video game theater has been drawing about 30 customers on weekday afternoons and more than 120 on weekend nights.

Yelmo is trying to develop an educational division that would rent out the hall to schools that could use the system for learning and testing. And it also has plans to market the theater to corporations and senior citizen groups in an attempt to attract a broader audience.

The theater is also busy organizing game tournaments with competitions this month for Manga video games and Pro Evolution Soccer, a popular soccer game produced by Electronic Arts.

On one Saturday morning, the soccer competitors streamed quietly into the darkened theater,

while rock music blared around them and the giant screen filled with the computer-generated face of a deranged woman aiming a gun toward the audience.

Most people taking the seats were young men in their late teens and 20s — the typical demographic for the new game theater — although a few brought female supporters who paid 1 euro each to watch the action.

The most intense activity took place on the little silver screens where players battled against one another. The giant screen formed an edgy backdrop with game highlights and changing scores posted by a person tracking the play.

During a break, Javier Fernández Riballo paused to take stock of the surroundings.

“We’re still learning because this is so new, but it’s better to play this way in a tournament because there are plenty of screens,” said Mr. Fernández, 21, a Madrid university student who plays video soccer under the name of Vaquizza with a clan of other players. “Next Saturday, I’ll be back with a friend.”

Correction: February 27, 2007

An article in Business Day yesterday about movie theaters in Spain that also serve as video game arcades misidentified the maker of Pro Evolution Soccer, a video game for which a theater is organizing tournaments. It is Konami, not Electronic Arts.

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