

Gotta Catch 'Em All

In the heat and excitement of the consumer craze, too much of what is past is forgotten. Amongst million dollar productions, celebrities and fame, where lie the myriad stories of how our much beloved industry came to be? Packaged in pristine condition in the collections of many of gaming's greatest fans, that's where.

It was bound to happen. Given the popularity of games today, the interest in the industry's history and the scores of stories about its rise to prominence – let alone of individual titles themselves – sooner or later, games were bound to become collector's items. Yet in reality we have all been games collectors for years. A great many of us will sympathise with Chris Kohler's [Founder and Editor of Wired.com's Game Life and an avid collector] account of the birth of his collecting career. 'I just saved everything when I was a kid and I was very particular about the manuals.' Clearly, this is nothing new. What is new, however, is the appreciation for games beyond mere entertainment, an appreciation that is being expressed in a great many ways.

There are a million reasons why gamers are so passionate about gaming and likewise a million reasons why collectors are passionate about collecting. Kohler has one view. For him, collecting is about 'Acquiring items with an interesting story behind them. It's like owning little bits of history.' Kurt Kalata [Head editor at Hardcoregaming101.net] has another, listing three main reasons for collecting: 'The thrill of the hunt, fulfilling childhood desires, and being able to play games on their original hardware. When I was a kid I spent a lot of time looking over gaming magazines and catalogues. Now I'm old enough to have a proper job, I can squander money going back and visiting all the stuff I wanted when I was younger.' Where many fans of old games would be perfectly content playing on an emulator, to Kalata that experience simply doesn't compare to the real thing. 'There's something special about playing games on original hardware on a CRT TV with the proper controller. Plus, if you've actually spent money on something, it makes playing it more gratifying. When there's cash on the line you're more inclined to explore the game.' Still contrasting to this is Nick Reichert [Owner and Editor-In-Chief of Racketboy.com], who was already an experienced collector before entering the games collecting scene, having collected baseball cards for many years. For Reichert, it was the unique nature of games collecting itself that was so alluring. 'Gaming is a new form of media and it's interesting to see how prices and other factors change over time. As opposed to books that have different prints and movies that have different formats, games have their own little platforms, so it's interesting to see how people collect and preserve everything.'

Clearly, as gaming has evolved it has become appreciated for more than its original intent, entertainment. It is beginning to be recognised as an integral part of modern day culture, a role which brings with it many responsibilities, one of them being the preservation of the history of our medium, which lies at the heart of collecting.

Collecting, of course, is not simply a case of dashing out and buying every antiquated game one can find. Not only would that result in a lot of wasted money on the part of the gamer – 'It's easy to get carried away,' warns Reichert – but it would leave the preservation of the industry in complete chaos. True collecting is about focus, about selecting a specific area of the industry and its history to build a collection around. Kohler's collection gives a great example of this. 'I'm working on Virtual Boy games. There's not many. I am two games and \$1000 away from a complete collection. I'd never have every game for NES or PSOne, and I've no desire to, but collecting 30 games for Virtual Boy? I can do that.' What is particularly important is that the collector build their collection around an area of gaming that they can become personally and emotionally involved with. As Kalata states, 'People should collect something they have an emotional attachment to or that they can get a functional use out of. That way, if you're greatly into a specific franchise, like Dragon Quest, for example, you can spend some time becoming involved in the games themselves and the

fan community, hence getting more out of it than just collecting.'

By having focus, a collector not only allows themselves to concentrate their resources effectively and build an emotional attachment to their collection, but also improves their chances of becoming specialists in their fields, a factor Kohler deems most important. 'Hardcore collectors have to educate themselves. You can waste a lot of money if you don't do research. Even I have not known what something is worth and bought it.' Thankfully, retro games collecting has evolved to include numerous dedicated websites through which a collector can remain informed of the scene and keep up with the changing prices of specific items. 'There are numerous websites that focus on collecting,' says Kalata. 'Hardcoregaming101.net is focused more towards gaming history than collecting, but sites like Digital Press or Racketboy (which is more consistently updated) offer great starting points. Racketboy in particular does a great job of compiling the more in-demand games and highlighting excellent games that can be had on the cheap.'

Being very much a community-based pastime, the majority of these websites are run by committed collectors who wish to contribute to the developing scene. As Reichert recalls of his own website, 'Racketboy.com started out as a small blog that featured classic games or newer games that had a retro style. Over time we started to create guides for collecting and covered the rarest games for various systems in great detail. We try to update the values every now and then to have a good gauge of where things are.' Another most useful product of these websites is that they help collectors to get in contact with one another, thus forming the backbone of the community. 'Our users are split between regulars in the forums discussing games and a big trade community for people who don't have a lot of local resources.'

By making use of available online resources, including both dedicated sites and larger ones like Amazon and eBay, the collector can quite readily keep up to date on the latest news and prices as well as remaining involved with the community at large. The one thing these sites cannot provide, however, is the underlying key to any successful investment, be it in games or elsewhere: the collector's ability to predict changing market trends. As Kohler states, 'The key is to look for items where the demand curve is on an escalation point, where you know the item is rare and more people will want it later. You need to look for where demand is going to start increasing.' This is an absolutely essential skill for anyone wanting to play the market. 'You have to know what makes an item valuable in order to spend your money in a smart way.' This, of course, leaves the obvious question of just what exactly determines a game's value.

The principles governing the value of a game are, of course, the same as in all markets: supply and demand. Either of these elements – a limited supply or a high demand – can cause high value, and a number of factors determine each. Supply is generally governed by a game's print run. The American version of Stadium Events for the NES, for example, was pulled from the shelves, resulting in a very limited supply for which collectors compete, paying through their teeth for a copy.

'A couple of years ago you'd pay a couple hundreds dollars for a Stadium Events cartridge and up to a thousand dollars for it in perfect condition with the manual,' says Kohler. 'Now, Stadium Events can be worth several thousand dollars because it's acquired the allure of being the rarest NES game.' Hand in hand with these are games – or version of games (often distinguished by the colour of the cartridge) – that were only ever given to a select few people, such as the grey and gold cartridges given to contestants of the Nintendo World Championships that toured the USA in 1990. 'Only a few people in the world have them so when the cartridge goes up for sale the price just keeps climbing,' says Reichert. Just how much, exactly, are these former freebies worth today? 'The Gold Edition cartridge sells anywhere from \$15,000 to \$21,000,' says Reichert. This is the amount of money hardcore collectors are willing to pay for what Kalata calls 'Kitsch factor or

bragging rights.' They want to be one of the very few people in the world to own the game, and they're willing to pay for it. Very few titles indeed enter this territory, however.

What drives the majority of sales is the same for retro games as it is for contemporary games: popularity. As Kalata states, 'Most of the big ticket items, such as Radiant Silvergun for the Saturn and Earthbound for the SNES, are valuable due to their fanbase and good word-of-mouth.' In many cases these titles aren't even particularly rare. Chrono Trigger for the SNES, for example, certainly does not have a very limited supply, but because it is considered to be one of the greatest games of all time, passionate fans will pay big money for it; a boxed copy has been known to sell for over \$1000. This is just the beginning.

So passionate are hardcore gamers about their pastime that not only are they willing to pay big bucks for the games themselves, but for memorabilia too. As Kohler explains, 'People love games; they love the mystique of the culture, so certain pieces of memorabilia are worth more money.' Reichert adds, 'The best selling are the Nintendo items that are really random, like a jacket or a marquee, usually things that used to be on display. Nintendo hold a sweet spot; they have a lot of popular franchises.' Some of these now valuable merchandise items are so bizarre they'd probably make the average gamer laugh, at least until they saw the price tag. 'Nintendo made a ruler to promote Earthbound,' says Kohler. 'I saw one on eBay for hundreds of dollars and someone bought it.' To put it simply, gamers will pay for virtually anything that holds a special place in their heart. 'Art books, soundtrack CDs, various tie-in merchandise; all of them can be quite valuable if there's a big fanbase for it,' says Kalata. 'There are other items too: board games, really old hardware, etc. If it's old, video game related or not, there's probably a market for it somewhere.' Indeed, this very magazine may well become a highly valuable item in years to come. 'One thing I collect is videogame magazines from the late eighties / early nineties,' says Reichert. 'Certain publications sell for well over the cover price.'

Knowing the amount of different items collectors are willing to pay for, one could be excused for diving head first into the attic with pound signs in the eyes, but before getting too excited there's a painful piece of realisation to swallow. 'A lot of people threw away the cardboard boxes of their games, or they got beat-up,' Reichert states, shattering everyone's optimism. Sadly, if a game is damaged or the box or manual, or anything else for that matter, is missing, the price of the item plummets. 'You can find Mario cartridges for under \$10, for instance, but if you have a boxed copy it can go into several hundred,' says Reichert. As Kalata points out, even the slightest damage can slash an item's value. 'Japanese game stores tend to have a "damaged" section with items that are severely marked down because they might have a tiny scratch on them – though even these look better than 95% of anything in Gamestop's used stock.' Such particularity might seem ridiculous until you realise the end result of a collector's endeavours. 'Every collector envisions their games room as a museum, where random people can tour it and marvel,' says Kalata. Just as curators at Le Louvre would be less than impressed with a graffitied Picasso, a games collector isn't going to be impressed with a dog-eared manual.

Some might think that damage is so frowned upon simply because games collectors take too much pride in their possessions, but in reality it is about much more. The ultimate role of games collecting is to preserve and present the history of games. It's about capturing an item from a moment in time. Much like damage to the canvas of an old oil painting might compromise the work's purity and essence, damage to gaming items taints the original vision. If a box is damaged it is no longer a pure and true reflection of a moment in time. Doubtlessly this level of delicacy has been the bane of many a seller, but for those working in the industry themselves and those greatly passionate about it, it should come as a triumph to know that the utmost care is taken to ensure the preservation of our pastime, and this is but the beginning.

'In time, you'll start to see games accepted as a legitimate form of media, and collecting will come along with that,' says Reichert. Indeed, not so many years ago most people would chortle at the idea of gaming ever receiving the amount of cultural recognition it sees today. 'The Smithsonian is recognising the art of games, showcasing it and putting it into a context to show its evolution,' Kohler points out. These shifts in the understanding of gaming as a form of media lay the ground floor for what we surely most hope will become a cultural powerhouse. As Kohler states, 'As long as the art of games remains to be considered important, as long as the history of technology is something people want to preserve, then games will be considered a valid item for museums to build collection of and for libraries to store.' Yet exhibitions at museums are but the glorious tip of an iceberg the base of which is and always has been a love and passion for gaming.

It isn't with grand visions that collectors collect, it is because they wish to honour and pass on what to them are precious moments in time. Collecting is about recording where we've been for future generations to see. It is about the development and evolution of gaming as we chart our collective progression. It is as much a sign of where we are heading as it is a reflection of where we have been.