



Can retro gaming beat its sell-by date?

Will the internet's convenience turn even your dusty PlayStation 1 into a relic of the past, or do old classics have what it takes to thrive on our shelves far into the future?

Just before the Park Square Bridge in Sheffield City Centre you might be surprised to find a little gaming café along the road. Screens line the tables and someone in the corner might just be the source of all the faint noises of gunfire. While you're looking over the selection of fresh cakes your fellow customer is fighting for his life in LED-lit fields of war. Extra Life Gaming Lounge is a cross between a café and entertainment: for every customer, the games are free to play.

They have a diverse selection from arcade machines, old consoles and even a PlayStation 5. The older classics offer customers relief from the long-stretching loading times of modern games.

"You boot up the game and it's going to work straight away, no waiting for anything, no online support with most of them." says Michael Penman, co-owner of Extra Life Gaming Lounge.

He explains parents bring their kids to bask upon the displays of older machines, happily showing highlights from their youth. The café lets them share the experience of old-time favourites in a cosy environment, Sonic the Hedgehog and a side of coffee offering a glimpse into the past.



Image credit: Extra Life Gaming Lounge.

“The older games are a lot harder for younger people,” says Michael, explaining children typically prefer the newer consoles on display. “The big thing with a lot of the retro stuff, particularly the Sega, Mega Drive and Nintendo era, was they adopted a very unforgiving process to try and combat the rental market.

“At the time rental video games were popular and they didn't want people finishing their games in the two days they rented it and then just not buying them.”

The Video Game History Foundation just last year revealed that nine out of ten games ever produced are now mostly inaccessible, antiquated games requiring equally as antiquated consoles to play them, with some games' content being entirely unplayable or incomplete as the online servers of once-beloved systems shut off for good. Hundreds of games are disappearing from shelves – including classics like The Sims 2, meaning pre-owned retailers like CeX, collectors, museums and businesses are some of the last places preserving them.



“We need to preserve retro games because they're part of our history. Anyone from my generation onwards will have grown up with video games.” says Ann Wain, the Collections Officer at the National Videogame Museum.

She believes video games are an art form which reflect the issues at the forefront of society, and that it is important to conserve them as one would ancient artifacts or old paintings – each has a tale to tell.

"We need to preserve the thoughts and ideas of who's making them, who's playing them, how players respond to games and how these games reflect people's fears and aspirations." Ann says.

While thinking about the continual disappearances of arcade staples like Dance Dance Revolution, Ann explained the nearby PacMan machine had broken and she needed capacitors but could only find ones in packs of one hundred — she only needed a few. Luckily what she needed was on the market, sold by a US company, but the hurdles refused to end there: they didn't ship to the UK.

"The problem with a lot of retro stuff is, as stuff becomes more obsolete, it gets harder to source," Joe Tonks, games collector and Event Organiser for Press Start Sheffield explained. "There was a period where everyone wanted to get rid of their old TVs, but it must be the point now where actually they're in quite short supply. There's only so many times you can fix or replace the boards in those cabinets unless someone's out there creating new ones.

"If you've ever been to the arcades where you have guns with games like Time Crisis and Point Blank, a lot of those only work with older CRT TVs. They don't work with modern LED and LCD displays."

Press Start is a quarterly non-profit event for the community which offers all sorts of games for those who attend. Some include old time classics like the GameCube and even Binatone Ping Pong. Dan Eaton started the project 10 years ago as a small gathering at a Wesley Hall in Sheffield, its success inspiring gradual expansion, the group opening doors to the wider public with numbers soaring from around 50 people to over 100.

Joe's believes it is very easy to have rose-tinted glasses: a lot of people come to Press Start and play 10 minutes of Golden Eye on the Nintendo 64.

"Retro games are a lot more unforgiving. The style is still around because it's striking and easy to look at, but it's very different from what you'd play on a phone these days." says Joe. Nostalgia wears off and all they are left with is the reminder it's jerky, plain and unfair. As he put it, 'you realise there's probably a reason we don't make games like this anymore'.

"So much modern gaming is online now," Joe says. "Everyone can sit at home and play Fortnite or Call of Duty over the internet with their friends." Couch multiplayer, sitting side by side and playing a good game split screen, is something old classics offer which Joe thinks is 'brilliant' if you want people to connect. "Rockstar made a game based on a 1970s or 80s film called The Warriors and it was a beat-em-up brawler," says Joe. "Me and my cousin would sit down and

play this multiplayer map and we'd play out these long drawn-out stories and scenarios for hours."

He thinks modern games impose mounting restrictions on their players, with some newer titles not allowing you to play local multiplayer unless you're connected to the internet. Held back by the 'dodgy' church wi-fi, older games and consoles offer the opportunity for multiplayer experiences without the added stress of a struggling connection.

The National Videogame Museum in Sheffield has been collecting and displaying old titles for six years. Their beginnings stem back to the National Videogame Arcade in Nottingham which, like many arcades before and after it, closed due to financial struggles. The museum reminds everyone while video games matter, and that even the oldest games have a story beyond money. Every time a donation is made to the museum the donator is asked about their own experiences, the oldest consoles and dustiest discs earning a place on their shelves alongside the human story behind them.



One of the machines Ann showed me was donated by Dan Hett, and while it now hosts games made by children in partnership with BBC's Children in Need it was initially created for his games 'The Loss Levels' made to help him cope with the grief of losing his brother in the

Manchester Arena bombing – it serves as a compelling reminder games can both entertain and be a form of expression.

“Knowing about the games that do succeed and the games that don't succeed is important; we need to know both,” Ann added. “Things like the Pax Power Glove were tried and not commercially successful for example, but they paved the way for motion control that consoles like the Wii and PlayStation Move use.”

“Things that get overlooked would be things like instant gratification,” Michael believes. “When you buy a game, that's the full game. There's no microtransactions, there's no DLC, you get the full experience. I think that's one of the things that has changed as time's gone on, which tends to be missing more.” He thinks old classics, contrary to popular belief, are still on the rise. Their evident mounting interest has stoked the flames of rising costs.

“Recently there was a video on Twitter of an old game for the PlayStation 2 or GameCube called Piglet's Big Adventure,” Joe happily explained. He had looked on Ebay for the game and it had only been around four to five pounds, before soaring to a whopping twenty to thirty when popularity picked up. “There's a horror level that's like Silent Hill, a very small bit of one level, but everyone was like, wow! This game's got a lot of attitude for a kid's game!”

“I think retro gaming is absolutely not past its time,” says Michael. “If anything, it's probably more popular than ever. With a lot of the problems with the game industry at the moment, I do think we're seeing a lot more people gravitate towards the retro stuff. Weirdly enough, the pandemic gave retro gaming a huge boost.”

Ann believes even as consoles disappear, controllers wear out and arcades break down, retro will remain sought-after. “You're not going to be able to replace the parts without spending thousands on bespoke components,” she says. “But because you have something that you can maintain in a certain condition, not reliant on a cloud server or an external force, I believe it will remain popular.

“Retro gaming is growing and people are going to still grow up playing video games 40 years from now.”