

Golden oldies: retro videogame fans flock to Tokyo

September 30 2015, by Caroline Henshaw



A customer picks up a used videogame software for Nintendo's Game Boy, at shop 'Super Potato' in Tokyo

Tossed aside as outdated junk by some, old videogames such as Donkey Kong and Pac-Man are now getting a new lease of life in Tokyo's vibrant Akihabara district, as growing numbers of die-hard fans seek out vintage classics to relive their youth.

Inside Super Potato, a famed retro videogame store, devotees browse isles packed with everything from Legend of Zelda figurines to immaculately packaged old Sega Mega Drives, while Super Mario toys dangle from the ceiling overhead.

"It was our generation, it was our thing," said Matt, 35, over the constant ping and buzz of videogame theme tunes emanating from the screens lining the walls.

"At that age, when computer games were first coming out, there was nothing else like it," the Briton told AFP, adding that buying retro games was one of the main reasons he came to Japan on holiday.

Vintage games have been hitting headlines this year: huge parties were held to celebrate the birthdays of Pac-Man and Super Mario, while videogame-themed film "Pixels" has grossed more than \$200 million worldwide.

Big business has been swift to cash in on the trend, with Microsoft and Sony among those releasing products to appeal to older players.

As the home of Nintendo and Sega, Japan has long been a paradise for gamers and now Tokyo is becoming a global hub for collectors of specialist old titles.

Mandarake, a retro games shop nestled among the crowded, neon-lit streets of Akihabara district, has seen foreign customer numbers soar in the past five years according to staff member Kota Atarashi.

"A large number of our customers are aged between 30 and 50, and they come to buy games either for the sake of nostalgia or to build up a collection they started when they were younger," he said.

"Old games are more addictive and offer a real sense of achievement when a player finishes. I think that's one of the reasons for their success."

'Under-appreciated art form'

Vintage editions still make up only a tiny part of the world videogames market—estimated to be worth more than \$90 billion and growing fast—but avid collectors will pay huge sums for specialist items.



Customers check used videogame consoles and software, at a shop 'Super Potato' in Tokyo

Prices for rare classics have soared, with one example of the Nintendo

World Championships cartridge selling for around \$100,000 last year, according to its eBay listing.

Their value depends on rarity, condition and popularity. Experts say fans particularly like games that are part of a series, such as The Legend of Zelda and Japanese role-playing games like Final Fantasy and DragonQuest.

For some, they are an artform—even New York's Museum of Modern Art started collecting older video games in 2012 and plans to acquire dozens of titles in the coming years.

Patrick, a 27-year-old graphic designer from Australia, said he has built up a collection of around 1,000 games.

"To me games are an under-appreciated art form," he told AFP inside the Super Potato shop. "With a lot of the old games you have to use your imagination, which I think is really cool."

For others, they bring back memories of the excitement of playing for the first time.

"I remember playing my brother's ZX Spectrum and not even really knowing what it was," said Matt, who was around 10 when videogames started becoming popular.

"You'd go to your friend's house and play—now people just sit at home on the Internet. It's not the same."

Childhood nostalgia

Clay Routledge, an associate professor at the North Dakota State University and an expert on the psychology of nostalgia, said old

videogames can be a particularly potent trigger because they are interactive.



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"Often, nostalgia is not about the specific game but about the social experiences involving that game," he said. "The games we played in our youth would likely elicit the greatest amount of nostalgia."

This has not been lost on videogame makers, who have started offering revamped versions of vintage games in their online stores, such as Nintendo's Super Mario 3: Mario Forever.

Others are also including access to older games in new products. At the Tokyo Game Show in September Sony said its new streaming service, PlayStation Now, will allow customers to play games released years ago, such as God of War.

In June, Microsoft also announced it would be offering "backward compatibility" for hit older titles including Borderlands on its new-generation Xbox One consoles.

This cuts the cost of producing new games and reduces the danger no one will buy them, said Lisa Hanson, managing partner of gaming market research firm Niko Partners.



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"It short-cuts the marketing process and there is a ready group of gamers waiting to play," she said.

For die-hard fans, spending hours investigating obscure old games is part of the fun, but experts warn off anyone who thinks collecting vintage games could be a get-rich-quick strategy.

"You need a lot of knowledge... to make it viable," said Jason Moore, whose online store claims to have the largest catalogue in the world with some 40,000 games.

"For every rare [game](#), there are thousands which are virtually impossible to sell and knowing small differences like label variations and box types is vital if you're going to do well."

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