

ENDANGERED GAMERS: THE SUBCULTURE OF RETRO VIDEO GAME COLLECTORS
AND THE THREAT OF DIGITAL MEDIA

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2024

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ABSTRACT

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Retro video game collecting has seen an increase in popularity in the recent decade, however, with the increase in popularity of digital gaming and digital media the retro video game collectors are an endangered subculture of the video gaming industry due to the increase in digital gaming and the disappearance of the physical commodity. This research takes an autoethnographic approach and uses theories such as, Pierre Bourdieu's theories regarding capital and the field, Karl Marx's theory of commodity, and Ray Oldenburg's theory of the Third Place to explain the importance of this subculture and why retro video game collecting is worth researching.

I dedicate this page to my family, friends, and fellow collectors. Thank you for your constant support and encouragement. To my son, Trontous, let this be an example of your future interests and passions being worthy of respect and pursuing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Words cannot express my gratitude to Dr. Kristen Rudisill and Dr. Jeremy Wallach for their invaluable feedback, patience, and encouragement throughout this process. This was probably the hardest thing I have ever done, and their guidance through it all allowed me to persevere and challenge myself. Their knowledge and expertise will never go unnoticed. Additionally, I am thankful for Bowling Green State University's School of Cultural and Critical Studies for allowing me to teach, learn, and give me funding and opportunities for my research.

I am also grateful for my classmates, cohort members, colleagues, and professors, for their editing help, feedback, and moral support. Thanks, should also be extended to my students who allowed me to teach and inspire me to continue in academia and gave me an extra reason to persevere during challenging times in my own coursework.

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INTRODUCTION: THE COLLECTOR TURNS ACADEMIC

I was always a collector. Growing up I would always take good care of my toys, often putting my dolls and action figures back into their boxes and storing them neatly in my closet. I used to drive my mother insane—one day while I was at elementary school, I came home to discover that she had thrown all of the boxes to my toys away, because she wanted me to ‘enjoy’ playing with them, when in all honesty I enjoyed looking at them just as much. I was like that with everything. My CD collection was always in mint condition, original stickers left on the top of the discs. I would open the discs from the bottom up and put paper in between cases on the shelf to stop the cases from touching and scratching each other, then they would be organized and displayed nicely on my shelf. I did the same with my books, refusing to write in them, cautious not to bend the covers and always trying to keep them in a condition where I could try and preserve that “new book” smell. I remember traveling to Japan for the first time and being in awe at the amazing condition the citizens of Japan seemed to keep their commodities in; the fact that the culture in general adhered to my idea of respecting the objects made me fall in love with Japan even more.

Growing up, I enjoyed playing my father’s Nintendo Entertainment System. My younger brother and I spent hours bonding while playing *Kirby’s Adventure*. I developed a deep love and sense of nostalgia for the Nintendo Entertainment System, which has played a huge part in my journey to establish a livelihood in the retro video game market. I have been a collector of retro video games since 2010. It started as collecting cartridges for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and then quickly became collecting anything retro video game – including marketing materials, magazines, figures, kiosks and displays, apparel, everything in between, and of course games themselves. My husband and I bonded over collecting; any vacation

required designated “hunting” times – new territory meant new stores, garage sales, flea markets, and other physical locations that would allow us to find retro video games that may have not been common in our Northwest Ohio region. Networking with other collectors and getting to know the store owners introduced us to a community of “gamers” that became a secondary family to us. Our collection grew, so our designated game room grew so that the items could be properly showcased. Because our collection grew, our “trade bait” grew and soon we had a separate storage space for duplicate items and designated trading items. This led to us setting up to sell and trade as a vendor at conventions and flea markets, which led to a small store we created, out of a literal shed, on my parents’ un-zoned property. As the business grew, I eventually quit my full-time job in radio to open a brick-and-mortar storefront in 2016 dedicated to retro video games and “nerd” culture. “For Collectors by Collectors” is a slogan we often use, because we keep collectors as the focus when it comes to the quality of our products. We are meticulous in ensuring that condition matches the price point, and that the items we sell are authentic goods.

The culture and climate of collecting retro video games has changed rapidly over the last decade. The collector subculture within the retro video game industry has become hard to distinguish for outsiders. Collectors are now often lumped in with resellers or other subculture of gamers – this is due to new media press and social media platforms spreading misinformation concerning the values of games, or a rare find making its way to the general public’s news causing a growing interest in the resale of these video games for personal gain instead of preservation reasons. The change in the climate caused by growing interest of outsiders has caused price inflation, making it more challenging for collectors to obtain the physical commodities. This difficulty causes rapid changes in the cultural practices surrounding collection

as well as gaining the attention of video game companies producing the new generation of games. The new generation of gaming is becoming more digital, the physical commodity is disappearing, and with the increase of interest from outsiders combined with the convenience of digital gaming is creating endangerment for the subculture of retro video game collectors. While observing the changes over the last decade, questions arise such as “What would happen if the physical commodity disappeared from the gaming industry and it was solely digital, what culture would be lost?”, “What separates a collector from the other subcultures of gamers?” and “How are collectors acting as advocates for the physical commodity and why is that physical commodity important?”

Popular culture is culture, and video games provide a wide range of culture. Video games also create culture, including both digital and physical forms. However, the digital form should not replace the physical form, they should supplement one another. Digital gaming can allow preservation of the physical commodity, by allowing the physical commodity to rest and not be worn down as much, but there is culture tied to the physical commodity. It is undeniable that the current popular culture climate is turning digital, gaming is the current change. It is noticeable when a person walks into a big box store, the gaming section has shrunk, digital cards are now being marketed, and consoles such as the Playstation 5 are now offering solely digital alternatives to allow for consumer price breaks. The capitalist market is not only taking away potential ownership and resale ability, but it is also endangering the subculture of collectors in the video game industry. This needs to be addressed.

The Subculture of Retro Video Game Collectors

Subculture can be summarized as a group whose members share beliefs and common experiences that set them apart from others in society at large, commonly using established

behaviors, language, consumption patterns, and lifestyle choices (Gelder, 1955). My research will discuss these shared beliefs and common experiences of the retro video game collectors and the importance of the physical commodity to this subculture, because without the physical commodity this subculture would not exist. The research will also show how this subculture acts as a counterculture, resisting the dominant community's acceptance of digital gaming as the only form of game releases. To clarify, this subculture is not anti-digital gaming, but rather believes that the physical commodity should not be replaced by digital gaming – both formats should be available for the consumer. The resistance is presented by the culture's emphasis on preservation and restoration of the physical commodity, commodity valuation standardization, dedicated physical spaces revolved around the commodity, and the creation of physical commodities through third party publishers such as Limited Run Games. Limited Run Games' slogan "Forever Physical" puts an emphasis on the importance of the physical commodity in this new post-modern era of media consumption, as digital gaming is on the rise.

Every era of gaming eventually becomes "Retro" when the physical commodity is present, and every era of gaming has history and culture that can be studied through those games. So, what is retrogaming and why does it matter? "Retrogaming describes the growing interest in 'vintage' or 'classic' videogaming hardware or software. The fascination with 1970s, 1980s and, even, early 1990s' 'vintage' videogaming is often expressed in terms of its purity" (Newman, 2004) I argue that this is true to an extent but that "retrogaming" should encompass any games that are no longer being physically produced. Without a physical production it would be impossible to have a baseline of when a game has reached its "end" thus creating the term "retro". If we take the Dictionary.com's term of "retro," which is derived from the word "Retroactive," then retroactive being defined as operative with respect to past occurrences, as a

statute. The question this raises is whether something such as digital software that always can be reuploaded can be considered “retroactive”, or whether digital software does not have this capacity in the same way as a physical produced commodity. If we think of retro video games in the same form of “Retro active” then the only way, I believe, a video game can be labeled as “Retro” is when the physicality of the video game is no longer being produced. So why is it that so much emphasis in game studies is focused on the software when it comes to retro gaming and not on the physical good? Sure, planned obsolescence plays a role here, as developers do prioritize the revenue over other elements of the video games. However, not only is the hardware being removed from the games in today’s digital gaming culture, but important learned worldly cultural elements are also being removed. The physical commodity is attached to many displaced meanings that are tied to many subcultural discourses. The richness of the cultural exchange that the physical commodity of the “retro” game brings to the gaming industry needs to be respected and preserved. The new digital era of gaming is a threat to the historical roots of the entire gaming industry. Although the digital form of these physical commodities may come as a more convenient option to the industry, it should not replace the physical commodity completely. This thesis will focus on the importance of those physical commodities and the importance of preserving and collecting them to the gaming subculture and industry more broadly. My hope for this research is to prove how essential the physical commodity is to preserving the history of video games and learning from collectors on how the physical commodity creates an equitable culture that society can learn from. The physical commodity needs to be protected, digital gaming has become a threat to not only to a subculture of gaming but also the history of gaming.

In 2014, the documentary *Atari: Game Over* discussed a historical event in the gaming industry rumored to be a myth: the fate of the Atari game *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*. The

documentary explains how the game was rushed to market to capitalize on the movie's popularity. However, the game, although finished by the deadline, was poorly received and caused the entire video game industry of the early 1980s to crash and bankrupt Atari. Rumors began to spread that Atari took all the unsold copies of an overproduced game and buried them in a New Mexico landfill, until the burial site was discovered and the decades of video game history were uncovered. This E.T. example shows the importance of the physical commodity for historical accuracy. The discovery of the burial myth allows for questions, but it also explains shifts in the retro video game market. For example, E.T. was once seen as a somewhat rare title to collect. Since it wasn't well received, people did not purchase it or returned the title, so less of the physical commodity existed outside of unsold store copies or outside of the landfill. Once the landfill myth turned out to be true, the rarity of the game decreased. However, there are collectors who value those recovered from the landfill more than those not.

Collecting as a Gamer

"Gamer" is a term usually described to explain the stereotypical person which spends a large portion of their free time playing video games. It is defined by Dictionary.com as "a person who plays games, especially computer or video games." However, the word "Gamer" is not all-encompassing and is broader than the people the term is generally used to describe. I argue that the definition of "Gamer" should be expanded. Throughout this thesis, I use gamer to refer to "a person who has interest in games, especially computer or video games." There are many different subcultures within the culture of gaming and the purpose of this research is to discuss a subculture of "gamers" that is usually excluded from discussion – the retro video game collectors. Retro video game collectors may play games, but this is not central to their identity.

They are more interested in games as a whole and especially as a physical commodity (including game cartridges, marketing materials, and other related paraphernalia).

Building on this, I also narrow the definition of “Digital gaming,” which originally was a term in scholarship used to encompass all video games (Kerr, 2006). I argue that the concept of digital gaming has now shifted and refers only to the more efficient and cheaper route for capitalist initiatives in the videogaming industry. As videogames are now being released only in a digital format, production of the physical commodity is now disappearing. Arguably, it is possible to “collect” digital games, by archiving and storing them in a folder on a hard drive, but does that serve the same cultural practices that are learned through the exchanges of the physical commodity? Stephan Reese, Retro video game collector and Founder of the Video Game Art Museum Exhibit, has said that he thinks “Collecting physical media is important because when you are buying a digital product you are not actually buying the product, you are buying a license to operate the product” (quoted in Payson, 2021). The verb “collect” is defined as “to accumulate; make a collection of,” so yes in a sense a person may accumulate digital files and organize them into a collection, however the verb “collect” is also defined as “to regain control of.” Both of these definitions can describe collecting a physical commodity, but arguably digital gaming commodities do not give the gamer the same ability to “to regain control” as the physical gaming commodities. For example, a person has the ability to sell a physical commodity but just because they sell it, does not mean they cannot repurchase or repossess it in the future. Digital gaming does not give someone the ability to sell. To explain this more thoroughly – since my store purchases items from individuals we do occasionally purchase game consoles that have digital games on them. The customer, when selling the console, may argue that they deserve more value because they have a certain amount of games digitally downloaded to the console.

However, those games are directly tied to an individual account – they cannot be transferred or resold. So, we cannot sell a console with someone’s account attached to it – thus the console gets wiped and reset to original factory settings, and the games are no longer on the console. Now, the person who sold that console can redownload the game, using their account, to a new system in the future or even repurchase it, but the game itself holds no value. Control in the ownership is somewhat lost when purchasing digital commodities because of its inability to be traded or sold. The digital gaming commodity can also be looked as solely a software that can be deleted, erased, hacked, edited, and modified; but the physical commodity once produced and distributed cannot be changed and remain authentic. Physical games may be removed from distribution or buried in a landfill like Atari’s ET, however if the physical commodity exists, then the person who OWNS the physical commodity assumes control. Currently, there is an argument in digital gaming on whether consumers of physical games have the title of ownership or if they are purchasing licensing agreements to play the game in the same way that digital game owners do. In recent news, an Ubisoft spokesperson shared that gamers need to “get comfortable” with not owning the games they’re playing and that it's a consumer shift that needs to happen. (Dring, 2024). This can be seen as a way the game development companies are trying to maintain control over their software, which would allow them to make updates that could change the coding within games for the better or for worse. The collecting subculture of the retro video game industry is combatting this by preserving the physical commodity, thus preserving its history and multiple versions. Along with preserving historical milestones of the industry – the physical commodity allows for more recognition of the work that goes into creating the game.

“When you only have digital content, at some point that work is going to disappear. It’s inevitable. I believe it is up to the manufacturers and the developers to at least give the modern

day consumer the right to have physical form of those games so that we can protect that work. There are a lot of people that put their heart and soul in those things, the musicians, developers, electrical engineers. I mean the list goes on and lives that have gone into that game. So, if we don't keep a physical copy of that, you know, it's all gone." Jason Baamonde (JayBaam) (Payson, 2021).

Baamonde, in this quote, draws attention to the labor that goes into the creation and production of the retro video game. Retro video game collectors like him in the subculture strive to draw attention to Karl Marx's idea of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1906) that often alienates the work force from the commodity. He is directly connecting the laborers to the product by acknowledging that these video games aren't just fetishized commodities but that these are creative products and labors of love for those who imagine and develop them. It can be argued that collectors appreciate the labor that goes into the physical commodity, and without the physical commodity the chance of further labor alienation from commodity fetishism will worsen.

Software edits and updates are one of the many reasons for variants in video games that impact both playability aspects as well as marketing aspects (such as cover art). Video games are localized, but not to an extent where the nonlocalized commodities do not exist, and these differences between localized variants, or titles being released after edits due to cultural pushback are all important to not only video game history, but cultural history as well.

"I mean 70s, 80s, 90s, think of how many toys came out. How many actual physical products and us now trying to actually get that stuff back is a representation of preserving culture. Preserving culture that matters to us, preserving the culture that we grew up with." Deniz Kahn, Founder/President Wata (Payson, 2021)

As Deniz Kahn, Founder and President of WATA, mentions above – collecting the physical products preserves not only the physical commodity but also preserves culture.

Storytelling is another major importance to this subculture; it is what leads the conversations and creates a bond between one collector to another. Collectors will ask each other “What is your best find in the wild?”, “What is your best hunting story?”, or “What is your best pick up?” during their initial meetings but also continue with the “pick up” and “hunt” storytelling for later conversations. “In the wild” relates to a find the individual was not expecting to find while being out in public spaces – for instance one would not go into a retro video game store and find a specific game and refer to it as being found “in the wild.” However, going into a retro video game store and finding a specific game does give the storytelling aspect if it is what the individual considers to be their best “pick up.” Sharing these stories, giving suggestions and recommendations about physical spaces to shop, and giving trade secrets are what creates a bond between collectors; collectors do not view each other as competition, but view each other as a family and community that celebrates successes and holds grudges against the people that have wronged community members. Chapter 1 will describe some of these instances where people who have acted unethically are effectively disowned from the collecting community.

“I think a lot of collectors prefer finding a game in the wild as opposed to buying it online because those particular collectors are in it for the thrill of the hunt.” - MY RETRO LIFE, Tyler Esposito (Payson, 2021).

There is a thrill of the hunt to collectors, each hunt creates a memory and the memory is then attached to the commodity purchased. Those commodities then become the center of the conversation. Buying online does not provide the same personal experience as purchasing an

item in person. This could be one of the reasons those who are now part of this subculture regularly purchase online using websites such as Ebay or Heritage Auctions. The subculture this research is focused on are individuals who use those online resources as a last resort.

“But I never heard someone say ‘Man, I have this really great story. I bid at the last minute. I bid hundred dollars more than the... just in case.. And I got it.’” - Chris Woodside, NESComplex (Payson, 2021).

This could be why there are many social media influencers in the industry that center their videos around their “pick-ups” and finds over game play, and those in the community that do make videos center around other aspects of gaming usually still contain a part of their video dedicated to their weekly “pick-ups”. Collecting retro video games creates a sense of credibility in these videos to the subculture, and the credibility is created based on the social, economic, and cultural capitals built by the individual. The fact that everyone can obtain all three capitals in this subculture creates the potential for equality- as the subculture focuses on the physicality and the capital gained by the commodity and not the individual themselves. This subculture was created by the physical commodity and it is maintained by the physical commodity, without the physical commodity the subculture goes extinct and the members of this subculture understand that and are finding ways to keep the physical commodity alive during an era where digital media is taking over.

I use Bourdieu’s theories of social, economic, and cultural capital as well as his idea of the habitus throughout this research as all three capitals are important to the subculture. Social, economic, and cultural capital create and shape the norms, values, and beliefs of a social group. Social capital refers to the network of people and social interactions of the individual. Economic

capital refers to the wealth and assets of the individual. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge of the individual.

Chapter 1 will explain the language, rules, shared beliefs, traits, and ethics of the retro video game collecting community to argue that the community meets the criteria for an established subculture. Using the iconic Triforce from *The Legend of Zelda* as an analogy for Bourdieu's Capital and Habitus theory, I will explain how the three Capitals – Social, Economic, and Cultural need to be established and present in each individual collector within this subculture to be considered an authentic collector in the community.

Chapter 2 will discuss the reasons one collects and engages in the subculture. The Triforce will again be used as an analogy – as all three capitals are needed to be considered part of the subculture. However, Chapter 2 will discuss how each collector, individually, has one capital theory that holds more importance than the others. The reasons people collect are broken down into the categories of Nostalgia, Preservation, Investment, and Social Connections.

Chapter 3 will discuss the physical spaces within the subculture that create a Third Place for retro video game collectors. Using Ray Oldenburg's theory of the Third Place as well as Bourdieu's Capital and Field theories, the chapter will explain how the physical spaces such as the retro video game store, thrift store, flea market, game room, museum, and retro video game convention create the Third Place for this subculture, and how without the physical commodity these physical spaces would not exist, and the subculture would lose their Third Place. Ray Oldenburg (1989) explains the third place as being a place separate from one's home – first place, and one's workplace – second place. The third place combines the leisure of home with the social aspect one obtains in the workplace. Characteristics of the third place include no obligation to be there or to stay there, acts as a home away from home, conversation being the

primary focus, regulars, and acts as a leveler – no socioeconomic importance. These characteristics hold true for the creation of the third place.

My methodology for this research is a combination of autoethnography and literary analysis. As a member of the collecting subculture for over a decade and being an independent retro video game store owner I am immersed in the culture. My research will also include quotes from well-known retro video game collectors who participated in the 2021 documentary titled *Rarity: Retro Video Game Collecting in the Modern Era*.

Through these next three chapters, I will explain this subculture and how the physical commodity created this subculture, and why this subculture is worthy of protection. I will also explain how the subculture notices the threat of the digital gaming era and why and how the subculture of collectors is countering digital culture. This subculture is endangered with the disappearance of the physical commodity, and it needs to be protected.

CHAPTER 1: THE BOURDIEUAN TRIFORCE

This chapter will discuss the subculture of “Gamers” that is often excluded from scholarship and discussion – the collectors. To discuss collectors and their behaviors I will be using Bourdieu’s Capital and Field theories. The retro video game collectors value the physical commodity and the capital that is attached to the physical commodity. The physical commodity lies at the center of a “field” that inheres in determinate physical spaces (discussed in Chapter 3) which then leads to the creation of behaviors, rules, ethics, and etiquette established by the community and those physical spaces. To understand the importance of the physical commodity that is a retro video game, it is important to understand the behaviors of the collectors.

Conventions, retro video game stores, garage sales, flea markets, thrift stores, and digital spaces are all important to the success of a retro video game collector. However, even though they all offer the same opportunity to purchase the commodity, all these spaces have different rules, etiquette and ethics that contribute to one’s success in the community through cultural, economic, and social capital. “Capital” is a concept employed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to understand people’s behaviors and how they can be used to understand inequalities. Cultural capital relates to knowledge, skillsets, and cultural tastes (for retro video game collectors this could be graded video games). Economic Capital refers to money or the material that is obtained, and Social Capital refers to relationships, networking, and social connections. These three capitals create a “field” of competition (Bourdieu, 2005) The field (physical spaces) of this subculture all have rules established and etiquette which ties directly to the Cultural Capital that is obtained through being in the field. For instance, conventions are a space for the community of collectors, each of whom brings a different perspective, to come together for the love of the

hobby. Vendors (often collectors, although this depends on if they have achieved collector identity through obtaining capital) and collectors travel from near and far to sell and trade commodities, attendees (often collectors) travel from near and far to purchase and trade commodities, and both have ethical expectations and understanding of proper etiquette for promoting mutual respect within the community. Additionally, convention organizers focus on the experience and creating an environment that is welcoming to all. Failing to understand etiquette hurts the individual's ability to gain economic and social capital in the community. Video game stores have different expectations for the collector than spaces such as garage sales, flea markets, or thrift stores. The digital space has a wide range of rules and etiquette and is where some of the social capital is commonly built. If a person is negatively presented in the digital space, they will not accumulate Social Capital. Before the physical spaces can be properly analyzed, it is important to understand the forms of capital tied to the retro video game commodity and how it creates equity in the field. This chapter will present the ethics, rules, and etiquette of the retro video game collecting subculture by discussing the language, transparency, and mentorship importance in the community, and how these establish the label of "collector" in the subculture. To identify as a collector and be accepted in the community as a collector, the individual must make a conscious effort to accumulate capital. I will break down common terminology and how that terminology is used to build credibility within the community. Transparency will be used to explain the importance of establishing trust and authenticity in the community, thus building credibility. Credibility is important because it allows the collector to build networks to help find artifacts for their collection, ask for advice, and trade/buy/sell among other community members. The field is competitive because of non-collectors participating for financial gain, and collectors trying to obtain physical commodities for their personal collections

or preservation projects. Credibility from collector to collector allows for networking that creates an advantage and makes the field less competitive. Mentorship will be discussed as the forefront of what builds the retro video game collecting subculture. These will be discussed through the lens of a collector/buyer and the lens of a seller. “Seller” will be used as the term for a vendor, store owner, or reseller throughout this research. Both parties play essential roles in the subculture and both parties are expected to use proper language, transparency, and mentorship to benefit the community. This research will be focusing primarily on the North American region (US and Canada). However, the digital space connects collectors from all geographical locations and allows Cultural Capital to be established due to the foundational aspects, such as language and credibility because of the ability to connect through these digital spaces. Digital spaces refer to, in this research, online forums, social media groups, and online websites such as Ebay, where collectors interact with sellers, as they would in physical spaces.

Bourdieu’s Capital Triforce

The primary theoretical lens for this research will be Pierre Bourdieu’s Cultural Capital and Field Theories. To explain this theory and apply it to the subculture I will be using the analogy of the Triforce. The Triforce is a universally recognized symbol of the retro video game community, for both gamers and collectors. The Triforce comes from Shigeru Miyamoto’s video game series *The Legend of Zelda*. The Triforce are three forces – presented as three triangles to create one triangle, that together create the Ultimate Power. In *The Legend of Zelda* those triangles stand for Power/Strength, Wisdom, and Courage and together those create the Ultimate Power. This analogy is a great representation for Bourdieu’s Cultural Capital. The retro video game subculture has its own “field” revolving around the commodity, which creates its own

attitudes and dispositions that creates certain values, language, and expectations that go into its field.

When applying the three capitals in the lens of the Triforce they create the ultimate power needed for the success of a retro video game collector. Bourdieu discusses the three capitals as Social, Economic, and Cultural. To simply apply this Triforce Analogy to the Bourdieu concept, this research will look at the retro video game collector Triforce as Language and Community – Social Capital as a source of “Courage,” Authenticity and Transparency – Economic Capital and as “Power/Strength,” and Mentorship – Cultural Capital as “Wisdom.” All directly impact each source, and all intersect with one another to give shape to the Ultimate definition of a retro video game collector.



Figure 1: Concept of the Bourdieuan Triforce

Social Capital- Courage: Language & Credibility

Language

Within the retro video game subculture there is subjective terminology that works hand-in-hand with one's hierarchical status in the community. The subjective words used for certain

commodities establish the speaker's status. Grading companies (companies that assess condition, authenticate, and inform the consumer on any industry historical significance tied to the commodity) are starting to take on a form of mentorship that helps decode some of these subjective terms for any collectors they choose to mentor. Words like "mint" or "minty" are relative and subjective to the collector. What is "mint" to one collector might be "worn" to another. However, the collecting elite utilizes a numbered grading system when discussing physical commodities, so the currently established elite may ask questions such as "would it grade at a 9.0 or higher?" This is more specific and aligned with an accepted grading system than vaguely saying that something is in "mint" condition. In the retro video game business culture, most physical stores will only trade or purchase from a customer if they can see the commodity in person, so that the condition can be inspected—this is a way to guarantee full transparency. Customers often call retro video game stores and say things like "I have a copy of (insert title here) it looks brand new!" only for the product to indeed not look brand new and be, at best, fair condition. In the business culture of this subculture, because of the subjectiveness of the collector, often retro video game store owners will not make offers, give offer price ranges, or discuss trade-ins without dealing with the customer in person. The item's condition needs to be inspected, because the item's condition matters to its exchange value, and the importance of the condition of that item is subjective to the collector. Transparency and Authenticity is necessary and dealing with the commodity, in person, is the only way to ensure authenticity and transparency.

A collector's hierarchical status is determined by the subjectiveness of "what is rare" to the collector. A beginner collector may consider a commodity to be rare, whereas a veteran collector may consider that same item to not be rare at all. Terms such as "Mid-Rare," "High-

End,” “Common” also come into play. Mid-Rare is usually used to describe games that are harder to find in the wild. High-End is used to describe games priced on the high side of collectability, and Common is used to describe games easily found or that were mass-produced and easily accessible when released. Grading company CGC tries to help close the gap by providing a resource guide for all, that notates “Traditional rarity” and defines it as a *game that has been long considered rare or is desired by video game collectors* (2023). Other common phrases found in CGC’s retro video game resource guide include the popular term “CIB” or “Complete in Box” and defines it *as a game state that includes the original box/case, disc/cartridge, and manual* (2023). However, veteran collectors or elite collectors may argue and suggest that Complete in Box should also include all posters and inserts that were also included in the release of the game, suggesting that CIB should be considered more as a “Cartridge, Insert(s), Box.” The true meaning of CIB is another subjective term that builds a cultural hierarchy between collectors. Those who include the inserts in the CIB definition generally have higher status than those who don’t.

Along with the discussion of a commodity’s relative rareness, other terms that come into play when placing collectors into the cultural hierarchy include “licensed,” “unlicensed,” “homebrews,” and “reproduction.” Understanding these differences allows the collector to obtain cultural capital essential to establishing the credibility necessary to participate in the subculture. The subculture is not necessarily about consumption, but understanding the knowledge, history, and capital tied to the commodity. Collectors are seen as a collective society that focus on preserving the physical commodity and the historical and cultural importance of the physical commodity in an era where digital gaming has become more prominent. This will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 2. Homebrew, defined by CGC as *a game produced by a*

hobbyist for a proprietary console after the console's lifespan (2023), can oftentimes still be collectible depending on the entity that produces them. TimeWalk games, which was based out of Sandusky, Ohio, for example, was a small but well-known and respected company that sold homebrew cartridges prior to receiving a cease-and-desist order, and a few years later, Capcom contracted TimeWalk to do a limited anniversary release of Duck Tales, in a collectible Gold form with an exclusive lunch pail and certificate of authenticity, this is referred to collectors as Gold Duck Tales. It is considered a homebrew because it was not manufactured by Capcom itself, but was created by a company owned by hobbyists as a partnership. Homebrews are original games created by hobbyists, in contrast to reproductions, which in simple terms are also called “knock offs” or “bootlegs.” While homebrews can have value to collectors, reproductions pretty much never do. Licensed and Unlicensed, especially to Nintendo collectors, determines the completion of a Nintendo set. A collector will say things like “I am going for the complete licensed NES set” or “I am going for the complete NES set” usually referring to both licensed and unlicensed games. Licensed refers to games produced by the company or a partner of the company. Unlicensed typically refers to a third-party developer that commercially sells games for a specific hardware. Unlicensed games were extremely commercialized in the 1980s through the early 2000s and are typically considered to be as authentic as licensed games in specific video game eras.

Along with the language above, terms referring to pedigrees in the collecting subculture are just as important when establishing credibility because it proves you have an understanding of aspects that create rarity and add value to the commodity. A new collector may hear games referred to by specific collections or pedigrees. Grading company Wata discusses this on their website so that collectors are able to enhance their cultural capital—and I will discuss it more

thoroughly below in the Cultural Capital section. But collectors will refer to games such as “Indiana Collection,” “Carolina Collection,” and other pedigrees when discussing their collections (2019).

“Holy Grail” is also a subjective term heard in collecting that is often the start of a conversation when people meet that determines their first impressions of one another. Responses to questions like “What is the current Holy Grail in your collection?” can reveal a lot about a collector. It also establishes the *strength* of someone’s collection. Holy Grail, in someone’s collection can refer to a high exchange value commodity, a rare commodity, a unique commodity, or something with significant displaced meaning, usually deep in nostalgic roots, to the collector. The collector respects the other collector’s Holy Grail, but even with respect there are clear hierarchies built through the question-and-answer session as the collector-to-collector relationship is established. Holy Grail is used regularly among collectors regarding what they already own, because there is a collector out there who wishes to obtain that specific “Holy Grail” that is already owned by another collector. But, Holy Grail is also used in the general form: when someone is actively seeking to obtain an item, a quest, that they do not own yet, either. The Holy Grail, in this subculture, is entirely personal.

Credibility

Collectors trading in private spaces, when between two individuals, is often unsettling during the initial trade transaction. This is because the trust between the two individuals has not been established and the individuals are questioning the legitimacy and authenticity of the other prior, during, and even after the transaction. Collectors, especially during expensive trades, will often go to online community groups and ask for reference checks about an individual prior to trading, have a trusted and mutual third-party present, or do extensive research about the

individual and how to authenticate the commodity itself. This is why Social Capital is important in the retro video game collecting scene. The more people a collector has “authenticate” them, the easier it is for them to buy, sell, or trade commodities. Although, typically collectors prefer to deal in person, there are circumstances where that is not an option, which is when credibility is essential as the risk increases in online spaces.

During the initial trading transaction, the parties may question the trade after it is over. Questioning why someone valued the item a certain way, why they traded certain items for other items, or the number of items traded for a specific item often leaves the collector feeling as if they did not get as good of a trade as they had thought. To summarize, most veteran collectors live by mottos like “the deal was good if both parties feel like neither of them got a deal.” Meaning neither of them feel as if they were on the winning side.

Since trust is a major part of this collecting culture, most collectors will be return customers to businesses, deal with the same people, or look to others to connect them with trusted parties. Until that happens, when a collector is new to the hobby they will often carry around tools with bits to open cartridges to establish authenticity.

Ethics is one aspect that separates a collector from a non-collecting reseller. A Collector appreciates the hobby, enjoys the hunt, and appreciates a fair value on the commodity. A reseller, although they may be a collector in a sense of understanding some aspects of the subculture, primarily is only concerned about paying the lowest price possible. The collector community loves to share “pickups” to share excitement with others in the hobby, often being transparent and sharing the monetary price tag of the item, even when not asked. The reseller shares “pickups” solely to brag, and to market that the product is available for resell, which often can cause others in the community to be wary of the authenticity of the person, thus hurting their

Social Capital and in turn hurting their Economic Capital and proving that they lack the cultural knowledge of the subculture.

Another example of being considered an unethical collector in a way that hurts credibility is being considered a “sore loser” because of missing a deal. An example of this is when someone posts their private collection, or a game extremely underpriced, because of not having the cultural knowledge of the commodity, on a public forum, such as Facebook Marketplace, or craigslist, and instead of being happy for the collector scheduled to do the transaction, the “sore loser” will either message the seller telling them that the item or items they are selling are actually worth x amount of money, or offering more money- creating a bidding war for the person that already was scheduled to make the transaction, or merely telling the seller you can meet them sooner than the person that originally scheduled. When this is discovered by others, it automatically ruins some credibility as it is seen not to be respectful of other collectors or the collecting hobby.

In the documentary *Nintendo Quest* (2015) the collector has 30 days to obtain all 678, licensed North American released Nintendo NES games. The 30 days was a challenge set by the producer to signify how obtainable the physical commodity can be through networking even with time constraints. Collectors usually set a challenge: collecting every variant of a specific title, completing a certain set within a time frame, or collecting any title under a certain price range. Essentially, these individual challenges are what create a competitive field, even when the subculture doesn't view the field as competitive. It's an individual competition similar to that of a personal record, rather than a competition with other collectors. The documentary goes through the haggling struggles when obtaining these games in such a brief time for a mission of completeness. Along with the challenges, comes a “back-door” collector that was aware of the

collector's mission and knew of items coming into the storefront, and made the conscious effort to arrive at the store prior to the collector, purchasing the games before them. The "back-door" collector refers to one who intentionally beats someone to the door knowing that that will take the opportunity from another collector who already made plans to obtain the items. The "back-door" collector in this circumstance justifies their wrongdoing by claiming they also have been wanting these games and knows the other collector will have the opportunity to purchase these games in the future whereas he might not have the same opportunity (McCallum, 2015). While this may be true, the unethical part comes into play that the "back-door" collector knew of the other collector's mission and made a conscious effort to obtain the games from a certain store prior to the mission collector's arrival.

The digital spaces on social networks and public forums also create a sense of Foucault's Panopticon theory. Panopticon meaning in the sense that a collector may not be aware of who is watching them and that they must act in an ethical manner even in digital spaces to maintain credibility and conserve social capital, and those who do not behave in an ethical manner are punished (Foucault, 1979). Collectors are observed in public spaces, but they also are observed in these public and private digital spaces. For instance, if a collector is seen as unethical in the public digital space, they may be banned from certain pages and discussed on forums, podcasts, and other places that hurt unestablished or established credibility. But this also happens in Digital Spaces. For instance, a collector made a joke on a private social networking page, among peers, about jokingly trading in a fake Mega-Man cartridge to a major capitalist company because of known issues with this company taking in fakes from their employees having lack of cultural knowledge, but because someone in the private digital space reported it, this collector was banned from public trading groups and listed as a "scammer" on multiple lists, along with

others who were joking in the same manner on comments. Credibility was automatically threatened in this circumstance and just proves that even in digital spaces the collector is being watched for collecting standards.

Economic Capital- Strength: Authenticity & Transparency

Economic Capital also plays a huge role in establishing credibility and Social Capital, because Economic Capital focuses on the ethics of Authenticity and Transparency. Economic Capital in the retro video game collecting subculture is more than just the actual market value of the collection- although that plays a huge role in the strength of a collector's ability to buy, sell, and trade to be successful; the transparency and authenticity directly impacts the collector's credibility which directly impacts the economic growth of the collector. If a collector is not deemed credible, as discussed earlier, then the collector will have a tough time building social connections, thus impacting the ability to trade, sell or buy commodities in the subculture.

One of the factors that separates the traditional retro video game "gamer" from the retro video game "collector" can be explained using Karl Marx's concept of Use Value vs Exchange Value. (Marx, 1990). The usefulness of the commodity is the priority of the "gamer" whereas the exchange value is the priority of the "collector." The exchange value is impacted by the authenticity of the commodity. When discussing "Retro" video games, it is important to realize that the word "Retro" is referring to games that are no longer authentically produced. This means that these games are no longer created [have been discontinued] by the original manufacturing company. As discussed above, reproductions as defined by CGC, *are a bootleg or fake copy of a video game or its components* (2023). These games often play without issues but hold no resale value as they are not authentic. The intention of a reproduction, in certain circumstances, is to allow people to play expensive games in an easily attainable way. Thus, they are purchased

purely for their – *Usefulness/Use Value* and are often deemed unethical to the hobby because of unethical resellers misleading buyers into thinking they are authentic, damaging the – *Exchange Value* of authentic games by flooding the market with inauthentic commodities. To gain economic capital in the subculture of retro video game collecting, the collector must understand that the importance of Exchange value outweighs the importance of Use Value. This comes into play in circumstances when a collector is trying to complete a specific collection of video games and comes across an authentic but unplayable video game. The collector may purchase a non-working game just to have the authentic physical commodity until they are able to replace it with a working authentic copy if given the opportunity later. However, the exchange value might be significantly lower than that of one that is in working condition.

Pricecharting.com, also known as VGPC, is the current database used by most collectors and resellers to assign monetary value to individual items. The website is integrated with different Point of Sale software for businesses, and the website itself offers its own point of sale. The website also offers private databases for collectors to track their collection with updated price lists. VGPC is continuously updating the pricing ranges, mostly based on Ebay sold listings, so that collectors, resellers, and store owners can keep up to date with the current market prices and market values of video games. The website also is used as a tool to compare prices on variants and see the history of the price changes, which is deemed helpful for market research when trying to draw conclusions of future trends, treating the retro video game industry as a unique stock market. Price charting is used as a standard when negotiating prices. The common range for haggling is within 60-100% of the commodity's current value. If the commodity is priced below 60% of its value, the collector finds it unethical to haggle for a lower price and finds that the respectable thing to do is to pay the asking price.

An example of an unethical transaction is a garage sale, one specifically that is not publicized but is found merely by driving past, the “collector” approaches the sale, and sees video games on the table. The collector sees a game worth \$120 USD priced at \$1, they then bring the game to the person to purchase the game and proceeds to talk them down more on the price. The person selling the item is under a false impression that they marked the game too high and agrees to sell the game for under the original \$1 price tag. This is considered unethical to the collecting hobbyist. Collectors suggest paying the asking price of the game, when clearly marked under value because of the seller's lack of knowledge, is the most ethical way to proceed in the transaction. Some collectors also state they would also either offer more money to the seller before completing the transaction or pay the asking price and then give them more after the transaction is completed (out of fear that offering more money may cause the seller to not want to sell until they can conduct research.)

One of the most hostile situations for new collectors is the situation where the seller tells the buyer to “make an offer.” Public forums and public online trading groups often have rules in place where a price must be listed on a selling post to try and contain the potential hostility that comes of this situation. The situation goes two ways when the buyer makes the first move: the potential buyer knows the value of the game and makes a reasonable offer (around 60% VGPC or higher) and the seller agrees or counters it accordingly, or the potential buyer makes what is considered a “lowball” offer (under 60% VGPC) and potentially offends the seller, instantly losing the opportunity to purchase the item entirely, or losing any chance of a discounted price. Lowball offers come off as offensive and unethical in the sense that they question the seller’s knowledge on pricing. However, there are the situations, like garage sales, where the buyer may say something like “I do not want to offend you with a lowball offer, do you have any idea of

what you are looking to get for this item?” which could change the “best offer” into an “asking price” and create the opportunity for a deal.

Authenticity and Transparency are important when gaining economic capital – as obtaining commodities that increase the collection’s value through unethical means is deemed “shady,” and often hurts social capital as other collectors may then not trust the individual. Proper selling etiquette is that the games being sold are authentic and original games, and that there is not anything misleading in the initial posting. A seasoned collector can spot a fake (reproduction) just by looking or feeling the item without needing to take it apart with tools. In an online space, where a non-collector is selling an item and has it marked as authentic providing photos, with the photos showing an inauthentic item, a seasoned collector can tell from a photo if the commodity is authentic or not but a younger collectors in the hobby may not be able to tell from photos, so misleading a collector into thinking they are buying an authentic game not only is unethical, but also potentially floods the normal trade market with inauthentic games because of the beginner collector’s lack of knowledge in regard to that purchase. An everyday example seen in my shop, is someone purchasing a game online from a source such as eBay or Amazon, a young collector may think they are purchasing an authentic game unaware that the photo is of a reproduction, and then bring it into my shop to trade in and immediately be told it is an inauthentic game. This usually is a teaching moment as we can explain to the individual why it is inauthentic, how to protect their purchases in the future, and how to inspect products even in spaces where the transaction cannot be done in person. The lack of initial knowledge, without mentorship to correct it and provide guidance, potentially hurts the beginner collector’s social capital later when building trust with other collectors. Being in the hobby, as a mentor, is

considered proper seller etiquette as buyers, traders, and beginners all look to the seller for knowledge, expertise, and mentorship.

For instance, when someone purchases a large collection, the right thing for the seller to do is to notify the buyer of the games that are reproductions. That way, the buyer is made aware of it for their collection and in case they want to sell or trade certain items from that collection. Reproductions in collections also cause the collection to potentially be misvalued and could also hurt the credibility of the collector if the collector unknowingly traded off a reproduction.

Seller to seller ethics also exist and dictate whether future trades happen based on previous interactions. For instance, in a convention setting the vendors realistically have “first dibs” on the commodities. Conventions try to discourage preshow selling, so that vendors do not purchase all the deals prior to the paid attendees, but realistically there is no way of stopping preshow sales and trades from vendor-to-vendor transactions. However, this does ethically impact the vendor, aka the reseller, if they are not purchasing games from the perspective of a collector. For instance, if a vendor approaches another vendor and asks for a discount or a “bundle” deal for purchasing multiple items and misleads the vendor thinking they are purchasing the commodity as a collector instead of a reseller, and then turns around and instantly prices the items at a markup at their booth, this hurts future trades between the two vendors because it was an issue of transparency. The proper way is to be honest about why you are purchasing the items.

An example of an unethical purchase technique is if a person is purchasing a commodity, claiming to be a collector, and uses a fabricated story of nostalgia or displaced meaning to convince the seller to sell at a discount. Stories such as “This was the last game my grandmother ever gifted me.” play on heart strings through displaced meaning. If the seller of the item then

finds out the buyer was not a collector and fabricated a story to purchase an item at a discount just to resell for profit, then that person is acting in an unethical matter and will lose a lot of authenticity and credibility in the industry, thus hurting their social capital, and hurting their future economic capital. As the person will not just be marked as unauthenticated for future purchasing as a collector, but they could conceivably be marked as unethical, which may cause problems when they are selling their items to the next person.

Transparency is also expected of the buyer. If the buyer asks for a discount on the commodity because of a certain mission or goal, the seller expects that to be the truth. If the buyer is buying to complete a collection, then the seller trusts that the buyer is asking for a discount for the mission of completing a collection and not to resell. There are circumstances when the reseller should present themselves as a reseller. Arguably, ethically speaking, a reseller should always make it known that they plan to resell, however a general rule is if the reseller is paying the original asking price, without discount, then identifying themselves as a reseller is not needed, because they are paying the sticker price.

Transparency is also important when discussing the condition of the commodities: has the label been swapped? Have repairs been made? Backs been swapped? Although these may not be important to the gamer, they are incredibly important to the collector who may want all the original parts. This comes into play with the terms mentioned earlier such as Complete in Box when describing consoles, do the serial numbers (on the console box and the console itself) match? Was it pieced together or was it all original? Is it the original seal (or H-seam – a special seal Nintendo used when packaging cartridge games for the Nintendo Entertainment System, Super Nintendo, and Nintendo 64)?

Cultural Capital- Wisdom: Mentorship

A common theme among collectors and in the retro video game subculture in general is that a collector should be a mentor, a friend, a hobbyist. The hobbyist refers to the fact that the person should be a collector first, and a reseller second. This is because the community values the mentorship of other collectors and the hobby of collecting is considered a community effort to preserve these commodities. There is always something new to be found, and each individual has an expertise, and it is through the mentorship that allows other collectors to grow in their cultural capital.

The retro video game collector subculture provides an equitable place for all. This is because the subculture focuses on the importance of Cultural Capital, and this is attainable by all collectors. Children can achieve the same level of Cultural Capital as adults and women the same level as men. Any sexuality, gender, and race can hypothetically build credibility and obtain Cultural Capital in this subculture because it runs on etiquette, ethics, and mentorship. Cultural Capital is achieved in this subculture by understanding the terminology, the value, the rarity, the scarcity, and welcoming others in the community with respect and excitement. Without a clear understanding of the Cultural Capital, the Social Capital and the Economic Capital are hard to obtain; without a clear understanding of the importance of the Social Capital and the Economic Capital, then the Cultural Capital cannot be obtained. The three work in unison, in a way they build their own Triforce but instead of a meaning of “Power, Wisdom, and Courage” this Triforce is focused on the importance of capital. In so many aspects of this subculture of hobbyists, or collectors, the Cultural Capital is at the center. But the collector cannot be authentically successful in this community without the Capital Triforce. However, this

subculture would not exist without the physical commodity, and mentorship is a key to building the community in a subculture that is focused on an authentic commodity.

The retro video game collector is not only a collector, but a mentor and a colleague. The retro video game collector respects the mission to the individual's subjective completeness. The retro video game collector protects the culture of the hobby by understanding proper etiquette and ethics, by looking out for the best interest of peers, and by educating fellow collectors. This is done in many ways such as giving resources to peers to help them grow in their knowledge, helping to track down titles off want lists, connecting peers with people that may have the commodity being hunted, being respectful to others, and acting in ethical ways when out on the "hunt" by understanding that everyone in the hobby has a mission or goal for their collection.

Many retro video game store owners are collectors. The store itself, in a way, is their collection, but they usually also have a smaller or even bigger collection at home. Since the store is displayed as part of their collection, owners usually take a sense of pride in their inventory, making sure items are authentic, tested, and cleaned to a collector's standard. Store owners will usually take time to teach their customers how to properly authenticate the commodities, and how to thoroughly clean them. Because most stores are owned by collectors, they usually will be empathetic to them when haggling. However, store owners also consider the approach of the buyer when negotiations first begin. A general rule of thumb for a buyer is any offer below 60% market value is considered "low-ball" and usually creates hostility between the two parties. If an offer is too low then the seller, or in this situation the store owner, usually would not be willing to counter or even entertain other offers from the individual. Proper etiquette of the collector when in the buying perspective also is to only consider haggling when making a large purchase of bundling multiple items, otherwise standard practice is to pay the price tag, or move on.

Bundling on two or more “Heavy Hitter” titles usually justifies haggling. Haggling is also justified when purchasing a larger selection of “Commons.” Although terms such as “Heavy Hitter” and “Common” are seen as agreed-upon terms in the culture, those new to the culture may use them subjectively -- this is usually when elder collectors notice young collectors based on what the collector considers “common” or “heavy hitter.”

Collectors, after walking around a storefront examining the inventory, tend to approach the owner or staff member prior to handling merchandise, and ask questions like “If I purchase a stack of games can you make me a deal?” This gives both the seller and the buyer the initial expectations of the transaction, other transactions may be the potential buyer handling a stack of games and bringing them to the counter and asking, “What’s the best you can do?” Although, it may not always come across as a hostile and aggressive tactic for negotiation sometimes it comes off as improper etiquette, as it can create a power dynamic where the store owner or employee may feel as though the buyer is insinuating that the items would not be sold without a discount.

The retro video game market is competitive, and transparency is necessary. Collectors expect to pay the prices listed; if an employee or the store owner makes a mistake when pricing, and the item is placed on the shelf with that price, then the ethical stance of the store is to honor the marked price. This seems to happen regularly and often causes a sense of embarrassment on behalf of the store owner because they may feel as though their knowledge is being challenged, and that the power dynamic has shifted to the power being in the hands of the buyer. Store owners are perceived as mentors, so when the buyer who should be mentored has caught a mistake then it is the buyer who is now the mentor. However, store owners and store employees learn a lot from the customers and collectors, as there are a wide range of variants and other

commodities that are in the subculture that makes it hard for one person to have knowledge on everything involved in the subculture. Signage, accessories, magazines, toys, and other retro video game commodities are also collected in this subculture.

For fear of the pricing situation above happening, some stores have taken a stance where nothing is priced until items are brought to the counter and then the employee or owner looks up the price in current time. Collectors will often describe the retro video game collecting market as its own “stock market.” Prices can fluctuate at any given time due to new discoveries, such as the ET burial (see Introduction), or prices may become stable. Stability in prices is more common for mass-produced and popular titles such as Super Mario World, but even games like Pokémon Emerald that were always extremely popular will experience price increases – the market is constantly changing so being able to keep up with trends and price points is essential. Due to lack of price transparency, potential buyers- collectors are often uncomfortable with purchasing items from stores that do not price items until a customer asks the cost and will often seek other options. However, in certain circumstances they may find a title they have been searching for and may willingly but unhappily purchase the item from stores that use this pricing method. Although transparency in this situation is not actually unethical, most collectors feel as though it should be unethical. Often this leads to collectors telling peers to avoid these stores unless the opportunity of purchasing that item may not arise again.

In the subculture, store owners are friends and supporters of each other. Often when store owners travel, since they are usually collectors themselves, they will find other retro video game stores and use them as a form of connection, social capital, and sometimes they come in as customers for their personal collection, or as a third party purchasing for a specific customer, and sometimes they are purchasing stock for their own store. Certain video games have certain

values based on geography. A common game may only be worth \$4 at one store, and worth \$10-\$15 at another store because value is based around scarcity, and some video games were more predominately released in certain geographical regions through exclusive distribution channels. It is common for a store owner to purchase bulk stock at sticker price from another store owner, although a common ethic is to ask something like “Is it okay if I clear you out?” before making the purchase. This also often leads to the opportunity for colleagues to ask questions about the market in their areas and conduct some market research that increases the cultural knowledge of the subculture. Store owners will also work as mentors to other store owners to authenticate items for each other and help value items that may be challenging to value. They will also help each other come up with offers on trade-ins or even offer each other discount rates to help move stock.

Pricecharting.com, aka VGPC, works as a mentor by making current market prices as well as past trends available for anyone to analyze, they also now work hand-in-hand with the Grading companies. Grading companies are becoming major mentors in the retro video game collecting scene by bridging gaps between collectors and establishing baselines. Grading companies are used to authenticate items, preserve items, and provide cultural knowledge on the items. Currently, there are three major grading companies in retro video game collecting: VGA, WATA, and CGC. WATA and CGC are the most popular, and CGC is currently seen as the most credible. The assumption can be made that WATA and CGC are seen as most credible because of the importance they put on the three capitals. When looking at their slogans they can be simply broken down:

WATA uses the slogan *Collectors. Experts. Gamers.* regularly in their advertisements and on their website. This is a clear representation of Bourdieu's social theory. Collectors= Economic & Social Capital, Experts= Cultural Capital, and Gamers = Social Capital.

CGC uses “*Real Expertise. Real Protection. Real Community*” to market itself, which also clearly represents the Bourdieuan social theory as well, Real Expertise = Cultural Capital, Real Protection= Economic Capital, as it preserves the condition and its value, and Real Community= Social Capital.

VGA, owned by the Collectible Gaming Authority, according to their marketing tools and website, focuses on the slogan *The Authority for Your Collection*, which would only focus on the Cultural & Economic Capital, but misses the Social Capital, which in return may reflect why WATA and CGC are currently the leading companies of the grading industry.

CGC has recently tried to close the hierarchical gaps in the collecting community by providing a resource guide for all, that notates “Traditional rarity” and defines it *as a game that has been long considered rare or is desired by video game collectors* (2023). The fact that CGC has taken the time to create these resource guides, created by collectors also, is an example of how the subculture is focused on equity for all and keeping the hobby enjoyable for all by having resources easily accessible for new and veteran collectors to obtain the cultural knowledge to be successful.

WATA also contributes to mentorship by providing resources such as a guide to understanding “Named Collections.” WATA explains on their resource blog the concepts of collections and pedigrees. Pedigrees are collections, but not all collections are pedigrees. It also explains the concept of perceived value and that the value of commodities from pedigrees and certain collections is subjective and based entirely on how the buyer valued the item. (2019)

WATA like CGC, makes note of these pedigrees and collections when encapsulating these commodities, to authenticate the commodity's history, but not necessarily authenticate a perceived value. The history of these items plays into the role of expertise and cultural capital as the collector can show these purchased commodities and prove their origins- collection and historical significance- pedigree. It is a similar concept to the pedigrees and collections purchased by comic and art collectors. It also opens a way for a beginner collector to learn more about the collecting culture by gaining this knowledge, as these grading companies not only authenticate and preserve titles, but they provide mentorship and resources. WATA and CGC both use terminology such as "Transparency" and "Authenticity" throughout their websites and advertisements because these grading companies understand the importance of these concepts to a collector. Both grading companies focus on their credibility and take extra steps to provide mentorship.

Conclusion

The collector is much different than the gamer. The gamer typically does not understand the significance behind preserving games, as when the game is encapsulated then the use value of a thing-to-be-played is destroyed. However, grading companies exist because of the need for authentication and mentorship in this subculture. Collectors need trust, credibility, transparency, authenticity, and guidance in this hobby, and grading companies create a baseline to allow collectors to be on one level, and to learn from each other. The grading companies understand the need for all three capitals that make up the Bourdieuan Triforce, and they in a unique way create equity for all. This could be why some hobbyists in the subculture frown upon grading companies, if there is a baseline and standard and a way for the new collector to learn from resources that were not available at the time the veteran collector started, this could be

threatening to some. However, many collectors would agree that the best part of the subculture is how welcoming the community is and how easy it is to obtain cultural capital, anyone has the ability to gain the ultimate power of the Triforce and become the ultimate collector. Why do collectors want to obtain capital and be part of the subculture? What are the reasons behind learning the critical elements for accumulating capital in the subculture? Chapter 2 will discuss the reasons the subculture exists and why collectors are motivated to maintain its field.

CHAPTER 2: RATIONAL REASONS- WHY COLLECT RETRO VIDEO GAMES

As established in the first chapter, retro video game collecting encompasses all three of Bourdieu's capitals. The retro video game collector internalizes the ideas of social, economic, and cultural capital while participating in the subculture. However, the collector may participate or gain interest in the subculture for a variety of reasons. I have condensed these reasons and motives for collecting into four categories: Nostalgia, Preservation, Investment, and Social Connections. These four categories also contribute to the Triforce analogy as Nostalgia and Preservation works as Wisdom/Knowledge (Cultural Capital), Investment can be thought of as Power (Economic Capital), and Social Connections represent Courage (Social Capital). Although, as mentioned, a collector encompasses all capitals through their participation, an individual collector will tend to value one form of capital more than the others. For example, a collector may have limited funds available and be presented with two options- option one: a complete in-box cartridge game that is in prestige condition for \$50 that will continue to increase in price or option two: a rare commodity that does not hold any significant value but potentially could be worthy of research – the collector can only choose one item, so they will choose the one that holds the most value for them as an individual- do they value economic capital or cultural capital more? These are the situations that collectors face daily as they determine what commodities are most important to their collections and why; this situation is what starts trade negotiations and directs the future of the individual collection.

Reason 1: Nostalgia

Frederic Jameson characterizes nostalgia as “The approach to the present by way of the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present

reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage. But this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way: it cannot therefore be said to produce this strange occultation of the present by its own formal power, but merely to demonstrate, through these inner contradictions, the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience” (Jameson, 1991). To simplify, Jameson explains that nostalgia is an aesthetic in the present that has society losing touch with history and current experiences. Essentially, nostalgia obfuscates the current reality by hiding the failure to understand the modern world and the actual historical processes that shaped it. From this post-modern reading of nostalgia the conclusion can be drawn that society today cannot understand or represent current experiences, but focuses on an imagined past as an illusion that is distant and glamorous such as “the good ‘ol days,” which essentially causes individuals to lack engagement with history, as society tries to compare the present with the past through imitations instead of experiencing the present in its true form. When taking this thought and applying it to the retro video game collecting subculture, it seems as though “nostalgia” as far as memories of the past is relevant, however collectors do have an interest in engaging with history and acknowledge the separation of the historical past of retro video gaming with today’s current gaming.

Nostalgia **is** a term often used by collectors who collect artefacts of the past. Nostalgia allows physical items to hold superpowers which have the ability to transport someone back in time or to associate themselves with a period in time. Often, retro video game collectors will have nostalgia for game titles which they never played or never even had as a child, but the aura surrounding the items and the subculture enable nostalgic feelings, which does make sense

because if the commodity is no longer being produced – such as retro video games—then it is a thing of the past. While it could potentially live in the future in a digital format, the actual creation and marketing of it is as a thing of the past. It is something to be studied, something that represents part of the industry’s history, but it is no longer a new entity, even when it is rereleased it is rereleased and marketed for its nostalgia.

In the retro video game collecting culture, the current generation’s youth has taken an interest in being part of the collecting community from watching YouTube channels focused on the collecting hobby. These YouTube influencers have instilled nostalgia for these items into generations that have no actual memories of the commodities from the original release period—pseudo nostalgia. In a way, the retro video game collecting subculture has developed future ideals (i.e., investment) in something that is normally seen for its nostalgic ideals. Still, regardless of age, all participants in this subculture do still focus on obtaining all three of Bourdieu’s capitals. Being an independent retro video game store owner, I see a lot of different types of consumers that come into the shop; some are frugal with money and others have the liquidity to indulge in things that I would call “nostalgic ventures.” I define “nostalgic venture” as purchasing commodities no matter the price point just to relive a nostalgic experience. For example, my shop had a sealed Super Nintendo console that we had purchased after someone discovered it in their grandmother’s attic—a Christmas present never given. It was waiting on the shelf in the backroom of the shop for a few years as the decision was being made to grade it or sell it when a customer walked in specifically looking for a sealed Super Nintendo Console. The customer purchased my shop’s sealed Super Nintendo console (at this time, with the model variant of the console, the buy price was \$2,000) for the purpose of opening it to relive the nostalgic moment from childhood of opening a brand-new super Nintendo console. The

customer opened it in front of us immediately after purchase, and the value of it immediately depreciated once the box was officially opened.

“We tend to latch onto those comfort foods and by that I mean those comfort video games. It’s like a microwave you’re reheating leftovers, right? It’s like, you know, nostalgia is the leftovers that you remember it being so good it was such a great meal, but is never going to be as good as when you first had the meal. But it was so good that you do want to keep having it over and over again. The leftovers are very good.” Tyler Esposito, *My Retro Life* (Payson, 2021). This quote from well-known retro video game collector Tyler Esposito describes nostalgia as leftovers, distinguishing that he is living in the present, but also compares the present to the past. As described in the introduction, retro video game collectors are a subculture of gamers, but they are not necessarily playing the games, collectors are more focused on maintaining the “nostalgic” feelings that come with holding the physical commodity. One of the main conversations in the shop environment is around the nostalgic feelings from certain titles. Customers walk in and purchase consoles from the past so that they can relive the past in the present with their children. However, I think video games offer a nostalgia different from that which Frederic Jameson describes. The collectors or customers do not necessarily focus on video games of the past being a better time or simpler, but focus on the history that is tied to the physical commodity. The Virtual Boy, for example, was not a console that was executed well, but it was one of the founding consoles for Virtual Reality that we know of today. The original Super Mario Bros game created a franchise that produces video games using the same story and characters in new ways. If anything, video games build on the history of the games of the past, but do not let us lose focus on the past but think of how the past creates the games we enjoy in the present, and sets excitement for what the future holds. So, when a customer walks in to

purchase their childhood console, they are not necessarily doing it as “games were better in my time” but more to show the historical significance of what produced the games of today. The physical commodity is what creates that excitement, through nostalgia, which is something that a strictly digital era cannot replicate if the physical commodity does not exist. The consoles and games themselves do not just offer the nostalgic experience, the manuals, registration cards, and everything including the box play a role in nostalgia and the history of gaming.

“Anybody can scroll through their digital library. But I love walking by my shelves and looking at the physical media. And also, you know, we come from a time, where you get a game, and you open it and you flip through the manual. And I mean that’s what I do before I play the game. And now games don’t even come with manuals and it’s so sad.” Brett Ennis – Podcast *The Keep Up Podcast* (Payson, 2021)

“It's like one of the biggest catastrophes for modern day gaming, really, is no manuals.” Tim Martin Jr, *The Keep Up Podcast* (Payson, 2021)

The example mentioned by Brett Ennis and Tim Martin Jr of *The Keep Up Podcast* emphasizes the nostalgia that was produced because of the physical commodity. They both mention the disappearance of manuals due to the digital gaming culture, where instructions are given online and can be updated easily. However, physical manuals would not necessarily invoke a nostalgic aura or nostalgic feeling if the commodity were still being produced in the same physical form. This nostalgia is only connected to objects from the past, because companies are not producing the items in the same physical form. This is why there is so much advocacy for countering digital culture in this subculture- to protect the history to redefine nostalgia in a way that cherishes the past while living in reality of the present. Collectors see the changes, and history being removed. The lack of manuals in cases, or purchasing cases only to

have a code to download a game, which cannot be reused, and no disc or cartridge to insert shows the loss of history because the digital gaming climate is making things like manuals a thing of the past. However, even if games today were to suddenly start including manuals again, each era of gaming does have a clear end of production when it has a physical form, which still allows for separation between present and past, but allows collectors to engage with history by discovering new gaming artifacts while also living in a present gaming society.

“Back then I put tons of time, tons of energy, tons of love into getting a box, opening it, smelling it, feeling it, reading these guides, these books, the video games. Oh, look at the characters. Look at this manual. It’s telling me every character’s name. Everything in my mind is vivid, even looking back at console’s old boxes. When you see Super Nintendo boxes now, they’re bright, there’s so many games on the back. They’re showing you 20 games in the back of the box.” Aaron Stapish – Youtube TheNesPursuit (Payson, 2021)

Aaron Stapish’s comment is an interesting look at the nostalgic aura of the retro video game. Again, the physical and tangible commodity is the primary focal point over the actual gameplay. The rituals performed when purchasing the game all relate to the senses of touch, smell, and sight. However, there is also mention of the games on the back of the box; this is an interesting example of past, present, and future all being extrapolated from something as simple as a Super Nintendo box. The games on the back of the box were games that were already released (past), included with the console (present), or were being released soon (future), and this was a common trait through decades of gaming, until the rise of the internet playable games, when people started to value the convenience of digital gaming. This is essentially one of the reasons collectors are countering the digital era of gaming, they are countering the post-modern era of gaming and preserving a historically – centered nostalgia that is essential to preserving and

respecting this media form as art. My emphasis of digital gaming is not to eliminate digital gaming, but to draw attention that it should not be the only option for gaming, that it should be supplemental to the physical commodity. Digital gaming in a way participates in preservation by allowing less usage of the physical game, however going strictly digital removes ownership, history, and culture. Collectors DO participate in digital gaming, however collectors will opt to purchase both the physical release as well as the digital release, or solely purchase the physical release. If a game is only released in digital format, the collectors who play games for acts of leisure and escapism will purchase the digital format, but will purchase the physical alternative when and if available, if companies such as Limited Run games produce them. The counterculture aims not to remove digital gaming completely but to ensure that the physical alternative exists to preserve history.

Reason 2: Preservation

Preservation is another one of the primary reasons that retro video game collectors justify their expenditures and massive consumption of physical commodities. Preservation, in the retro video game collector sense, means to provide space for the physical commodity to exist so that its historical significance can be displayed and available for research. Digital media can be tweaked, deleted, and changed, but the original produced physical copy cannot be altered from its original form without the authenticity of the commodity being at risk. As discussed in Chapter 1, authenticity is an important concept to this subculture of gamers and it is important for collectors to be educated on authenticity of products.

Grading is a recent phenomenon to the retro video game collecting subculture. Although, grading has been around for decades in the comic, coin, and card collecting industries it has only been respected in the retro video game collecting industry for less than a decade. As briefly

discussed in Chapter 1, there are currently three respected grading companies within the retro video gaming subculture. VGA, Wata, and more recently CGC. Each has their own grading scale, but all work the same. The higher the number, the better the grade. Grading is currently accepted by the subculture because of the preservation the encapsulation of these games provides. Along with the preservation, it authenticates the commodity, and also includes a wide variety of information on historical aspects of the game – such as manufacture information, variant information, if it belonged to a certain collection or pedigree, and any other valuable information. Grading companies Wata and CGC have been authenticated by seasoned collectors who have vast knowledge of retro video games and are also skilled in research so that the item can be properly authenticated. The weight of collector influence in the authentication process is perhaps why WATA and CGC are more respected over grading company VGA as explained in Chapter 1.

Deniz Kahn is a well-known collector with one of the largest retro video game collections in the US, and is also the founder of WATA. In 2021, CGC launched their Video Game division of their grading company, they hired Matt McClellan, an Ohio native and owner of Forever Games in Pataskala, Ohio. This was big news for the subculture, as McClellan is a well-known collector and retro video game store owner who has traveled around the United States of America networking with other collectors and video game store owners. McClellan has been seen as a mentor to the community due to his extensive knowledge, expertise, and ability to predict trends in the industry. News of his association with the company furthered both his credibility and CGC's, which quickly become a credible source for authenticity and preservation in the collecting subculture of the retro video game industry. CGC and WATA popularity is

essentially because the two focus primarily on video games and employ knowledgeable video game collectors and retro video game experts.

The grading companies also work in tandem, with permission of the commodity's owner, with the Video Game History Foundation to scan, document, or archive the item prior to it being encapsulated so that there is archival record of the item as another way to preserve the history. This holds true for rare finds, such as the Minnesota lottery cart¹, so that the historical significance within the subculture is documented so that there is archival record of the physical commodity, if the physical commodity was at risk of being lost. Grading companies, in a way, have been seen as an essential tool for countering the digital gaming culture as the process of grading allows collectors to preserve the history and helps document the history of the physical commodity so that it is not lost.

Pricing for grading varies by company, and the price variations are sometimes considered when collectors weigh options for the service. VGA charges per item, based on size, and then offers a standard turnaround time (75+ days) or a faster turnaround time (30 days). Wata offers price per individual item but has turnaround times of 30 business days, 15 business days, or 5 business days. CGC offers per item prices, but has different membership options so those who submit for grading more regularly are able to get a discounted rate for loyalty. Each company offers upgrades such as "cleaning" - either light cleaning of dust, or a more thorough cleaning to remove stickers and debris. WATA and CGC offer a "reholder" upgrade which allows for a guarantee on the encapsulation in case of chips or breaks, and WATA even offers an upgrade for post-grading pictures. The cleaning and upgrades are an interesting concept, because this

¹ The Minnesota Lottery Cartridge is a licensed cartridge through Nintendo in partnership with the Minnesota State Lottery for the home console. Besides an article from the *New York Times* in 1991, there was no proof that the prototype existed until late 2023 when a single copy of the physical cartridge was found in a box with other games.

subculture of collectors usually have common rituals after purchase to clean and remove stickers themselves, so these services are assumed to be utilized by those outside of the subculture who want a professional to clean their items prior to grading for pure investment reasons.

“I’m glad there are people who are grading sealed games because they’re doing history a favor. I mean, I am not one of them, but they are preserving something, that posterity will be able to see.” Chris Woodside, NESComplex (Payson, 2021)

With grading, it is important to note that there has been some tension as far as transparency with ethics regarding grading within the gaming community, due to a lawsuit dealing with WATA related to alleged market manipulation with Heritage Auctions (a widely known online auction website for collectibles). WATA was said to be artificially raising prices of their graded games. The increased prices were marketed as more valuable because WATA graded them, adding value to their name. They did this, allegedly, by promoting and advertising their graded games on auction sites like Heritage Auction as high values, and their graded game appearance on the television show, Pawn Stars. The market manipulation was due to false advertising that grading through them would increase the value of graded games (Young, 2022). Collectors did purchase the items through auctions on eBay and Heritage auctions for these high prices because of them being graded by WATA. Due to this lawsuit, some collectors within the subculture have lost trust in grading companies or have lost trust specifically in WATA. However, those with established trust for the company regularly grade and advocate for grading companies as they do provide preservation which is important to the sustainability of the physical commodity that keeps the subculture in existence.

Even though grading companies exist to authenticate and encapsulate (sealed thick plastic casing/shell that protect it from the environment) the physical commodities, that is not the only

way collectors are countering the digital culture. Since collectors appreciate and value the physical commodity, they understand the importance of preserving the commodity. There is a wide range of rituals that collectors partake in when it comes to restoring or preserving retro video games, however the most common ritual, for cartridge-based games, is taking the cartridges apart to thoroughly clean them. Others have rituals with specific methods to remove Sharpie, paint, or other marks from the cartridges that usually were used to mark ownership (i.e., “Marvin” written on the cartridge) to restore them. Discoloration was also an issue for some of the consoles and cartridges, so some collectors will even restore them by sanding and painting them back to the non-discolored form. Collectors will go through methods of soldering to restore boards within cartridge gaming, back swap ²to better conditioned backs if there is a donor cartridge available from a cartridge that was not able to be repaired. It is important to note with back swaps, that collectors will go through the effort to make sure the back, as far as manufacturing, date, sticker, and code, matches the original cartridge so that it stays authentic. Collectors will remove stickers from cartridges that may have been used for retail or security purposes, occasionally this may tear the labels of the cartridge. If there is a tear in the cartridge’s label, a collector will typically purchase a third-party label, carefully remove the old label, put the third-party label on so it is aesthetically pleasing but also keep the original label so that the authenticity is still represented. However, this is usually a personal preference as some collectors prefer to keep the torn sticker because of the possible dilemma with authenticity. With the increase of fake cartridges, the retro video game collecting subculture primarily focuses on the authenticity of the cartridge – as discussed in chapter 1. Along with restoring cartridges,

² “Back Swap” is the process of removing the back from a donor cartridge and putting it on the back of the cartridge being restored. This is usually done by taking a back of a low valued cartridge to increase the value of a higher value cartridge since value increases/decreases based on condition.

collectors will also repair consoles so that they are in working order. The functionality of the console sets a gray area when it comes to authenticity, collectors will go through all the methods of restoring the original parts within the console, but sometimes third-party manufacturer products are needed for the repairs to allow the console to function properly. For example, to refurbish an original Nintendo Entertainment System typically one would replace the “pin connector” which are provided now by third-party manufactures- the authenticity is questionable because yes, the Nintendo Entertainment System does need the pin connector to work, but a third-party pin connector is not the originally produced part.

Third-party manufacturers work to counter and combat the new digital culture of gaming as well. Third-party companies create parts, tools, and even create “CLONE” consoles to play the physical commodities of the retro video game industry to keep the physical commodities in existence. The argument can be made that planned obsolescence and the deterioration of the physical commodity can make digital gaming seem more appealing, however third-party companies allow for the original hardware to be sustainable.

As mentioned in the introduction, companies such as Limited Run use slogans such as “Forever Physical” to emphasize the physical importance of the gaming commodity. Limited Run purchases licenses of digital games and does short production runs in physical forms so that the digital games have physical counterparts, thus creating a tangible collectability to the commodity while also allowing for it to be preserved in the future. Although, some argue that Homebrews, as mentioned in chapter 1, are a tool for countering the digital culture of gaming, Homebrews are not licensed products like that of Limited Run, making it unethical as far as authenticity of the physical commodity. Homebrews are seen as “fan made” or “homemade” replacements of what would otherwise be an authentic commodity.

The Video Game History Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit within the United States. Their website notes “Our archives provide rare material for study, and our advocacy and educational outreach bring everyone together to do their part in celebrating and discovering video game history.” (Video Game History Foundation, 2024). They also put an emphasis on the word “collaboration” - “We believe in pursuing a world where people are inspired to discover and celebrate the stories of video game history. We’re bridging the gaps between video game fans, historians, academics, institutions, collectors, and the industry. Historical video game preservation is a collaborative process — so let’s collaborate!” (Video Game History Foundation, 2024). As noted in the introduction and Chapter 1, the retro video game collecting subculture works as a large community focused around mentoring each other, growing in knowledge, and discovering the rich history and cultural influences of the physical commodity of gaming. The Video Game History Foundation’s team consists of a large range of video game advocates including video game historians, collectors, and museum curators focused on preserving the history of video games. Their current projects include a Research Library, Source Code Preservation, Public Education initiatives, Media Asset Archives, Archival Collections, Recovery and Restoration, Game Informer Project, and advocacy. The Research Library includes magazines and publications based around video games and the art of video games. Source Code Preservation project preserves the source code and assets of video game history, as well as raw art and documentation which even allows for the initiative to bring games back to life that would have otherwise been lost. Public Education initiatives allow for video game history museum exhibitions to be available, as well as a blog and podcast focused around the history of video games. Media Asset Archives relates to journalism and media articles about video games so that the articles can be archived. Archival collections include source codes, marketing materials,

concept art, and the games themselves. The Restoration and Recovery Project works with companies such as Limited Run to restore and recover lost material. The Game Informer Project is an initiative to document, preserve and archive decades worth of Game Informer magazines. Advocacy, of course, relates to advocating for the stories and the history tied to the development and the production of the physical commodity of these games, with the hope of having the history documented for research purposes and to grow in knowledge of this form of media.

At the 2019 Archive Game History Conference, Kelsey Lewin – who has since left the organization but at the time was Co-Director, spoke about their advocacy. She states, “We don’t collect video games, at all, our foundation – we think people are doing it already.” (Lewin, 2020). She discusses how video game collecting is a popular hobby and how libraries collect video games, and how their foundation is there to collaborate with collectors and developers as well as advocate for the companies to collaborate, so that all aspects of the video games can be documented and preserved.

The foundation putting an emphasis on collaboration with collectors proves the important role collectors play in documentation of video game history. As mentioned throughout this research, the retro video game collecting subculture collects not only the video games, but also the marketing materials such as signage, employee uniforms, employee resources, promotional items; video game magazines; synergetic items such as video game movies, video game action figures, and other types of toys. The collectors with their specific collections and dedicated spaces to house the collections, allow for discovery in video game history. Variations get discovered, new hardware gets discovered, and it’s through questions and discussions where the knowledge is formed. Without the physical commodity the collectors do not have anything to collect, the gaming industry will lack collaboration in the historical archiving if the subculture is

extinct due to the disappearance of the physical commodity with the new digital culture. The digital gaming culture is threatening this subculture that has proven its impact on the historical archiving of the video game industry.

Rachel Hutchinson writes, “By playing Japanese videogames we experience Japanese culture.” (Hutchinson, 2020). Hutchinson discusses how Japan has been packaged as a cultural product and a consumer object and site of nostalgia. The physical commodity of the retro video game also is seen as this, which could be why the physical commodity of the video game attracts collectors to take an interest in Japan. Hutchinson discusses *Katamari Damacy*, which is a game centered around collecting objects, so if collecting practices are represented in gameplay and observing Japanese culture as objects to be collected, then semiotically Japan represents a collecting nation. Hutchinson also discusses the absence of parents due to work ethics in Japan, and the independence placed on children who are represented in Japanese video game narratives as well as the role of “self” in society in both self-construction and position in relation to others. (Hutchinson, 2020). These cultural aspects of Japan that are seen through Japanese gameplay also align with the subcultural belief of retro video game collectors. Children can be independent collectors without parental participation. Children have the ability to obtain valuable information and learn preservation techniques that build an equitable experience for them in the subculture, without their parents being involved. The subculture also emphasizes the role of the individual collector and the position they have with others – acting as a mentor while also continuing to grow in cultural capital. Nintendo, which usually is thought to be one of the primary retro video games categories (as in some collectors specifically only collect Nintendo products) to retro video game collectors, is developed in Japan and then localized for the western markets – collectors find Japan to be a prominent geographical location for finding and purchasing retro

video games. “The game is already a Japanese cultural artifact, and each game from Japan is equally ‘Japanese,’ even if the view put forth in the text is not the same as in other games from Japan.” (Hutchinson, 2020). Hutchinson draws attention to the discourses within the gameplay’s text saying, “Playing Japanese videogames, we can not only learn about Japanese culture, but also realize our own assumptions, highlighted by differences we experience in the game text.” Although we do learn a lot about culture through gameplay, the use of the word “artefact” should also pertain to the physical commodity and what cultural emphasis is taught through the materiality of the tangible commodity. Video games are often localized not only textually in the gameplay but also through the physicality of the commodity. A game released in Japan may be localized to fit the western market in both the narrative and the physical aesthetic. An example of a difference in gameplay is the Japanese and North American releases of *Super Mario Bros 2* – entirely different games based on the audience. Not only is the gameplay different, but the cartridges themselves are entirely different. *Super Mario Bros 2* was released in Japan on the Family Computer Disc System, but it was deemed too difficult for the North American audience so they released an entirely different game as an alternate, under the same name on the Nintendo Entertainment System cartridge for the North American consumer. Japan then produced a cartridge titled *Super Mario Bros USA* for their Famicom system – which is Japan’s equivalent to the Nintendo Entertainment System. The consoles themselves look entirely different aesthetically, as do the cartridges- this was done intentionally by companies so that the consoles appealed to the different audiences- thus creating major differences between the two that have collectors interested in collecting them as cultural artifacts.



Figure 2. Localization Difference. *Left:* Super Mario USA (Japan- Famicom Cartridge) *Right:* Super Mario Bros 2 (USA- NES Cartridge)

By preserving retro video games, collectors are also preserving culture that has been discovered through globalization. From a seasoned collector perspective, Japan is the ultimate setting for retro video game collectors. The rituals we participate in as collectors when caring for our retro video games, such as the cleaning of the items and the restoration of items, plus our desire to travel to Japan for purposes of collecting the historical commodities of the retro video game industry, lends support to the notion that retro video game collectors are influenced by Japanese cultural practices. The majority of retro video game collectors have either gone to Japan or plan to go to Japan for reasons related to the retro video game collecting hobby. Retro video game collecting YouTube Influencers often travel to Japan to “hunt” for video games.

Maybe it's something specifically cultural about Japan. It's a very common comment on some of the videos I do with game hunting is people remark how it's so awesome, that, you know, all those games are still boxed, and how the boxes are still in good condition, and how the manuals and everything is still in good condition. Obviously, someone really cared about this, and you know they really took good care of it. It ties into a history of Shintoism in Japan, where you can have attachment to something. It's my understanding that in Shinto, even something like a doll can develop a soul, if you attach enough emotion and attachment to it, maybe like there's a certain soul that's connected to a piece of art because of the emotion that you attach to it. It compels people to take better care of things that you could put in an artistic context. You could argue that, okay, this box is a piece of art. This manual is a piece of art. The cartridge itself, all of this, the game inside it is all art. So I don't know maybe there is something cultural here that creates that kind of attachment, that people want to take better care of things. Jim Fontemont (aka Import Collector YouTube Personality KidShoryuken) (Payson, 2021)

The emotion mentioned above and the attachment that is developed to an object is similar to the attachment that is developed through displaced meanings and nostalgia. People develop special attachments to objects that give these objects a superficial power.

Taking the above quote from KidShoryuken, who has been collecting since the early 2000s, we can draw a conclusion that Japan's rich history in the video game industry and the interest collectors have of "hunting" for video games in Japan, has culturally impacted the retro video game collecting culture in the United States, through Shinto cultural practices observed by the collectors. If we look at the Buddhist religion also, with the practice of Kintsugi and Wabi-Sabi, the interest of preserving and restoring could also have come from that Japanese cultural

philosophy as well. In fact, treating video games as a worthy and respected art form is a rather new phenomenon to the United States, as this is also a common thought within the retro video game collecting community. Both Shinto and Buddhism focus on preserving culture. Shinto focuses on cultural preservation tied to preserving traditions and rituals. Although Shinto shrines are places of worship, they also act as repositories for cultural artifacts, and historical documents. Collectors of retro video games also focus on preserving the commodities as cultural artifacts and document the history of these objects. The subculture values the traditions and rituals (such as cleaning, restoring, displaying) tied to the physical commodities. Buddhism focuses on preserving cultural heritage by preserving monuments, documents, architecture, and art. Video games are a work of art, so preserving the cultural heritage tied to the commodity works hand in hand with the preservation ideologies of retro video game collectors.

“Looking at other cultures, video games are art and culture, and respected and revered. I think we are finally seeing that in the United States” John Hancock (Payson, 2021).

It’s possible that this respect is because of the cultural influence of countries like Japan, that teach these collectors a new philosophy when obtaining the physical commodities.

Mia Consalvo discusses the historical significance of Japan for the video game industry in the book *Atari to Zelda: Japan’s Videogames in Global Contexts* and further breaks down the regular localization that impacted the western market. “Japanese games are not simply released ‘as is’ in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Germany. They are localized after a host of technical, cultural, and social decisions and changes are made. Again, this process is not natural or inevitable” (Consalvo, 2016, p.10). The mention of the localization for the various regions again emphasizes the importance of the physical commodity, because when the physical

commodity exists, collectors are able to obtain the different variations of localized video games and compare them to research and study the technical, cultural, and social differences.

“Early American (and European) artists studied Japanese art and incorporated Japanese images and elements into their paintings, drawings, and artifacts, and they also studied the forms, techniques, and tools that were used by Japanese artists and incorporated those forms and techniques, to greater and lesser degrees, into their own work.” (Consalvo, 2016, p.10). These artists and techniques can be compared to the collectors that restore and display retro video games through what is culturally learned through Japan’s cultural appreciation of tangible objects. Collectors, for their private home game rooms or their public game stores, take on Japanese cultural techniques for restoring, caring for, and displaying the games. Chapter 3 will discuss the Japanese game store influence on the retro video game stores that are owned by collectors of this subculture.

Reason 3: Social Connections

Being an independent retro video game store owner and in the environment regularly, I have found it impossible to avoid social interactions, and with those social interactions come questions such as “What do you collect?” “How long have you been collecting?” and “What got you into collecting/How did you start?” Conversations are created based around the interest collectors have in the stories of other collectors.

It is not uncommon for couples to collect together and share a collection- my husband and I often made the joke when we were dating, “We can’t break up -- because who would get the collection?” I remember when I first started collecting with my husband, we were known as the couple going around with a binder of game lists. The lists provided us with what games we owned, what condition they were in, as well as rarity ranking. It wasn’t until I became an

independent store owner when I noticed how common this was in the hobby. Now, there are also apps for tablets and cell phones that help people track their collection, and some even track through digital spreadsheets.

However, it is not always romantic partnerships doing the hobby together; it is also common to see parent and child collecting teams as well as friends who collect and share physical spaces together to display their collections. Collectors who value social connections do not always collect with others, however they collect because of the social environments that come with collecting. Collectors will travel to stores and talk with owners, go to conventions to socialize, or create YouTube videos or run video game podcasts of their latest finds to connect with other collectors from different regions. The bond made through parents doing it with their children or families is not a new thing; this has been going on for all decades of the video game industry.

Tyler Esposito is now the star of the TV Program *My Retro Life*, which is a documentary series that discusses the collecting habits of him and his father in the 90s, and how his father recorded and documented their collection. Some collectors view this as the start of the collecting rituals and the start of the importance of documentation and preservation within the subculture.

“It was crazy in my house. We just had so many games and my dad especially was such a fanatic. He was the one on top of every little detail, every new system launch, everything and he recorded everything that involved games. When they came into our house, dad was there with the camera ready to record.” Tyler Esposito, *My Retro Life* (Payson, 2021)

Within the subculture, as discussed in Chapter 1, networking is one of the most important aspects of being a collector. Knowing other collectors builds credibility. Knowing who to reach out to in order to try and find a certain title is valuable social capital. Knowing who to contact to

authenticate something when time is of the essence and grading companies are not an option is important.

Reason 4: Investment

Investment is another reason people either get into the subculture of collecting retro video games or a reason they continue to expand their collections. When I began collecting in 2010, the collecting environment was different-- it was easy to find games for good prices at garage sales, thrift stores, and flea markets. Craigslist was loaded with huge lots with no competition when purchasing, retro video game stores had games marked at low prices, and it was easy to buy out vendors at retro video game conventions who were just trying to offload their collections. The climate was entirely different. Then around 2015 the market became competitive with the rise of collecting YouTube influencers, and countless news articles talking about valuable video games. The grading phenomenon in the community became popular in 2017, which introduced a new market of consumers that came from other media such as comics, cards, coins, and other established collecting cultures, which continued to draw news media attention and led to an influx in resellers and people using it primarily for investment.

I do think the graded game market has kind of had a negative residual effect on your average everyday casual gamer, because there are people out there that just want a few cartridges, or just want to revisit their old games that they played growing up. And if one of them happens to be rare, they don't even realize it, then they're like 'Oh, now I have to pay hundreds of dollars for this game that I just owned growing up,' And that's unfortunate because those people just want to collect that thing for themselves, and they have a passion for it. Yet these people that have nothing to do with video games are

coming from other markets like coins and collectibles and whatnot. They have artificially inflated the prices all around for their own greedy needs.” Robert Komen (Payson, 2021)

As mentioned in Chapter 1, those who purchase retro video games with the sole intention of reselling are not collectors; collectors in this subculture collect to encompass all three capitals. However, some collectors do enter the hobby initially with investment in mind.

For example, James Rolfe, famously known as YouTube influencer the Angry Video Game Nerd started his channel purely for humor and to talk about retro video games.

“That’s what was funny about it. That’s what I thought it was just you know, who the hell would want to talk about these old games? Who even remembered these games? I totally underestimated that. I just didn’t know it would catch on as much as it did.” James Rolfe, Angry Video Game Nerd (Payson, 2021)

However, in doing so, it led to fans donating games to contribute to his channel, and eventually led to him becoming fully submerged in the subculture.

“As soon as the nerd kicked off then collecting came back into my life because then I started seeking out these games so that I can make videos on them.” - James Rolfe, Angry Video Game Nerd (Payson, 2021)

This can be seen as an investment, because he is purchasing the physical commodity to create content surrounded by them, which later becomes monetized. James Rolfe now is respected and is seen as one of the original or “OG” collectors and regularly showcases his game room in his videos. James Rolfe’s emphasis on the discussion of games also relates to social capital’s strength in this subculture. Retro video game collectors want to talk about their collections, they want to talk about these video games.

Since investment is a reason for collecting, the community needed a guide or tool for any level of collector to be able to value their collections and also learn of the variants that have been documented and found by OG Collectors, such as James Rolfe. Chapter 1 discussed VGPC (pricecharting.com) and how it is a common and free website (with subscription options) for quick valuation of retro video games. VGPC was founded by JJ Hendricks who is not only a video game collector, but a collector of many types of media. This website has significantly impacted the retro video game collecting subculture because it is often used as an essential tool for quick analysis, trend projections, and pricing history. It also integrates with multiple Point of Sale software to make it easier for independent retro video game store owners to keep track of price changes. Along with that, VGPC has partnerships with grading companies CGC and WATA for quick access to information regarding grading valuations. It also offers a collection tracker so that individuals can track their collections and their collection's values, make want lists, and offers a buy/sell/trade marketplace to connect collectors with someone that has a desired piece. VGPC has helped to establish valuation in the subculture, which helps someone to easily obtain knowledge on variants and pricing to build essential cultural capital that allows the collector to also build economic capital with the possibility of networking with other collectors thus potentially establishing social capital. VGPC would not exist without the physical commodity, as there would be no way to track digital games the same way as VGPC tracks the physical commodity.

Conclusion

Collectors of retro video games understand the importance of preserving history and culture and maintaining the separation of nostalgia and reality. They understand that without the physical commodity the lines of nostalgia and present get blurred, and history begins to

disappear. The physical commodity preserves social connections, which creates memories and builds nostalgia but not in the sense of Frederic Jameson. By investing in purchasing the physical commodities the collector is investing in preservation, social connections, and nostalgia. All these reasons exist in forms of capitals, but one capital is subjectively more important per the individual, however the collector knows the physical commodity adds value where an all-digital reality cannot. The digital gaming culture should not cause the extinction of the physical commodity, because without the physical commodity history becomes more distant through nostalgia, social connections get lost, investment opportunities vanish, and preservation of culture and history become difficult. Collectors work together to build spaces that allow the physical commodity to be present and to create a Third Place for collectors, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: DO YOU WANT TO SEE MY GAME ROOM? THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL SPACES TO THE RETRO VIDEO GAME COLLECTING SUBCULTURE

The first and second chapter discuss the importance of the physical commodity to the retro video game collecting culture and the value of mentorship among community members. This chapter will explain the importance of physical space. The post-modern era has introduced digital spaces, which play a role in connecting collectors but do not take away from the importance of the physical spaces that are necessary for the collecting community. This chapter will discuss five physical spaces and the contribution these spaces make to the community, as well as the cultural and artistic significance that makes this subculture worth studying. Those physical spaces are: the retro video game store, retro video game conventions, thrifting locations (such as garage sales, flea markets, and thrift stores), museums, and game rooms (personal spaces dedicated to an individual's collection).

I entered the hobby in 2010, when I sought to purchase an original Nintendo Entertainment System for my (now) husband as a Christmas gift. At that time there was one local video game store that sold “retro” consoles and games. The store refurbished, cleaned, tested, and warrantied their pre-owned consoles. I was able to purchase the console as well as the *Super Mario Bros 3* and *The Legend of Zelda* cartridges to include with the game console as a gift. On Christmas, I gave the gift and that started our journey from a couple into a collecting couple. We went back to that local game store weeks later to purchase more pre-owned games for the console, and then we looked for other local video game stores that carried “Retro” titles. My grandmother also gave us my father’s previous collection so that we could enjoy it. Then one day, we purchased a small cabinet to house the games (the start of a game room) – we probably

had around only fifty different titles at that time—when Jon (my husband) opened it, looked at me and said “It’s not enough... I want them all.” Thus began years of traveling to different states, looking at thrift stores, scouting auctions, stopping at every garage sale, and browsing Craigslist, which finally led to the opening of our own physical retro video game store. Our video game store is now the home of our collection, but our collection is a little different than it used to be, as it is now a revolving door of items; we sell, we trade, we buy, continuously – and very few items do we actually say are “not for sale.” Items we never thought we would see in person walk through our small-town door. People use us to authenticate and appraise their items. The physical store is where trust is built, because the customer can see the physical item in front of them. In this subculture, the higher condition of the commodity adds to its exchange value. Our storefront is the place where we socialize, relax, work, and play – and we experience all those things daily.

The Triforce Creating the Third Place

If we apply the Triforce analogy from Chapter one and once again use the Bordieuan theory of capital to discuss the importance of physical spaces to the subculture, we can see the need for these physical spaces within the subculture. For example, museums act as a source of cultural capital through the **wisdom** and knowledge that is obtained. Retro video game stores can be seen as a source of economic capital and **power** in the subculture. Conventions can be seen as a source of social capital through the **courage** it may take to attend them, network with new people, and work as a team to put these large events on. However, it can also be argued that all these spaces provide all three forms of capital, adding to the ability to call these physical spaces the “third place.” Sociologist Ramon Oldenburg conceived the notion of third place. The third place is essentially a place that combines the leisure of home (first place) and the social exchanges of the workplace (second place). The third place is a generic designation for a great

variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work. (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 16)

Characteristics of the third place include acting as a leveler (meaning there is no socioeconomic hierarchy) so there is no importance to one's status, conversation as the main activity, regular attendance and no obligation to be there. Essentially, the third place acts as a home away from home, it mixes leisure and social life. This chapter will discuss the physical spaces created by the subculture of retro video game collectors and how they provide a third place for the collector.

A collector may walk into a retro video game store to acquire all three capitals; the same collector may accumulate all three of these at a convention, thrift store, flea market, video game museum, and even amass all of these in their own private game room. The third place is essential to collectors, and without the physical commodity, the third place does not exist in this subculture. One may argue that "digital" gaming could act as the third place, however its impact cannot compare with that of the physical space. Digital gaming does create a virtual space that allows for social exchanges, community, and leisure. In the characteristics of a third place the digital gaming space does not necessarily act as a leveler (there are requirements for certain gameplay and in-game purchases create advantages and disadvantages for players which cause unlevel fields of play), the digital gaming space also doesn't necessarily contribute to conversation as a main activity. Conversation may or may not be present, as "gaming" is the main activity over conversation. However, in the subculture of collecting conversation is the main activity which allows the collector to obtain the three capitals. The physical place has the possibility of providing all three capitals to the collector simultaneously, but the digital space may only provide one or two simultaneously. Travels to these physical spaces are considered

leisure activities for the collector. Collectors during their down time often are seen out in the community in these spaces looking for commodities to add to their collections. It is not uncommon to see collectors in the community cross paths at a local auction, random garage sale, local retro video game store, or a local thrift store. The “hunt” for the commodities is the leisure activity and the leisure activity that acts as third place provides all three capitals that are important to the sustainability of the subculture.

The Retro Video Game Store

It's important to note that the retro video game store would not exist without the physical commodity. It is also important to note that the retro video game store can be seen as being threatened with the rise in the digital gaming industry. Digital gaming at one point was referred to by game scholar Alphra Kerr in 2006 as an all-encompassing word for all of the videogame industry. I argue that this conception is outdated as digital gaming now separates the playable functionality of the game from the physical commodity of the game, and without the physical presence of these commodities there is no way for the retro video game store to exist. When there is nothing filling the empty spaces of the shelves, and no trade-ins or collections are being sold, then these spaces that are important to the collector's public and private aspects of life potentially will no longer exist. One of the spaces that the collector goes to for socializing and as a leisure activity will be nonexistent, as will many of the other important physical spaces.

James Newman spoke about planned obsolescence in his book *Best Before* and the impact of digital gaming and life span of the physical commodity. However, within his research he speaks on stores that carry new titles directly from the distributor, breaking down the trade-in policies and the value decrease among titles for people trading in for “newer” titles. Essentially, this is truth when talking about stores with that model, however it is not true for the retro video

game stores. Retro video game stores, which have no distribution for new titles that are currently being marketed and produced, value older games higher than new titles being traded in. This could essentially be one of the reasons why the retro video game market is currently on the rise and there has been a steady increase in the values of the games. The retro video game market almost works as its own stock exchange; it is important for someone involved in the subculture to project and make assumptions over the next price increase. It is common for retro video game shops to adjust prices to match current VGPC standards, as VGPC is the respected standard of pricing, as explained in Chapter 1.

The retro video game store is an experience, the displaced nostalgic emotions and future ideals creating a space of both socialization and leisure. **Pink Gorilla Games** out of Seattle has designed their store to resemble the retro video game stores in Japan, allowing their customer base to experience Japanese culture without leaving United States soil and get a feeling of what it would be like purchasing retro video games in Japan. Those who have visited Japan looking for retro video games get a sense of nostalgia by visiting Pink Gorilla Games. Other stores, such as **WarpZone** in Hilliard, Ohio also bring Japanese culture by providing a home for local collectors to purchase authentic imported Japanese retro video games. Stores like this play on collectors' future aspirations of travel to Japan and almost allow their customer base to experience the indescribable feeling of shopping for retro video game in stores in Japan. Japan is a central hub respected among collectors as a worthy place for collecting. Partly due to the fact of its rich video game history, and partly due to the Japanese cultural trait of taking good care of their commodities. This is observed in many retro video game shops (usually owned by collectors) and among individual collectors. A common ritual among collectors when purchasing a video game is to test, clean it, and if necessary, repair it. Using a cartridge as an example, the ritual of

cleaning it – to a collector- includes removing sharpie marks (there are multiple techniques for this), taking the game apart, removing the board from the cartridge, and deep cleaning the plastic casing, often intensely scrubbing with a toothbrush. If the board within the cartridge shows signs of rusting, the collector will often polish it to remove as much of rust as possible, and then put the cartridge back together, before putting it on the shelf as a loose cartridge or placing it back into the opened box. There are also rituals of cleaning for sealed video game collectors. Retro video game stores that are owned by collectors will do these same rituals for the commodities sold within the stores, but loose games are then often put into plastic sleeves or dust covers to protect them, regardless of the value of the video game. This can be seen as one of the ways the collector is separated from the hobbyist gamer. The Japanese cultural aspect plays into the rituals of the retro video game collector, due to the respect for the historical significance these commodities played in video game history. Japanese culture puts an emphasis on history using ideologies tied to Wabi-Sabi, and the importance of preservation plays into this concept as discussed in Chapter 2. In fact, Jason Lindsey, famously known as Metal Jesus Rocks, often travels to Japan to acquire new items for his collection and documents them on his YouTube channels. Metal Jesus Rocks can be often seen at Pink Gorilla Games, showing support for Kelsey Lewin, who is the owner of the famous retro video game store, and also fluently speaks Japanese to benefit her travels to Japan for business purposes within the collecting community. WarpZone owner Darrin Griffin has networked with people who reside in Japan to help acquire stock for his location. There is a concern here though: collectors living in the United States often travel to Japan to purchase the Japanese release of the commodities, transporting them from one part of the world to a different part of the world, thus displacing them and depleting the quantity available in the country of origin- Japan. This is a problem with the rise of digital gaming and

disappearance of the physical commodity in the gaming industry, because this is another instance where the subculture is being threatened because the important cultural artifacts of the hobby that are central to this subculture will not have the possibility of being replenished by new releases. When there is empty space on the shelves from no new releases, then there is nothing to collect. This is already being seen in huge chain stores across the United States that were once a main center for physical games such as Best Buy, GameStop, and Walmart. When there is nothing new for this subculture of gamers to collect, then there is no value added for their travel to Japan, and the rituals that have been attributed to the admiration of Japanese philosophy will disappear due to the fact there is nothing new to clean and restore as collectors enjoy the daily rituals that come with game restoration in their third place(s).

While owning a retro video game store, I have experienced evidence of it acting as a third place, collectors come to the shop for leisure by making conversation about their collection or retro video games in general. There are many regulars who come and spend hours at the store repairing their own consoles or helping repair consoles voluntarily for the experience or even participating in cleaning rituals to learn from other collectors (i.e., the store owners). This is one of the main differences between big box retailers such as GameStop and the retro video game store: the retro video game stores all have regulars who use the store space as their third place. Even introverted collectors will leave their private spaces of home for the social engagement of talking to other collectors. I think the reason for this may be connected to the nostalgic aspects of not only the retro video game commodities, but also the feeling of the “simpler times” that the retro video games resemble. Collectors enjoy the physical commodity because its physicality requires them to go find it, and focus on the memories of finding it, and the relationships created from having to search for it. Even though the internet is a helpful tool for collectors, especially

when building a network for people they would not normally cross paths with unless traveling to different regions, the collector enjoys the simplicity of going to a physical location for community and conversation and knowing there is someone there with whom to engage with similar interests, much like the nostalgic feeling of going to an arcade in the 80s.

Nostalgia is the primary focus of the retro video game store; most stores use nostalgia as a form of their marketing tactics, as evidenced by social media posts that focus on the “Good ol’ days” or use old advertisements or remind people of important historical events and releases within the gaming industry. As mentioned in Chapter 2, one of the primary reasons for collecting is for the nostalgic aspect of the game. Nostalgia is an interesting concept because the displaced meanings in the retro video game industry don’t just get displaced onto games that were owned by the individual, but games from certain time periods trigger nostalgic responses. Recently, a common trend of retro video game stores is to add playable and authentic arcade cabinets, allowing their customers to go further back in time when arcade cabinets were available to play for a quarter. This gives the illusion of being transported back in time and plays on nostalgic ideologies.

The Convention

The retro video game subculture, just like other subcultures, hosts a wide variety of conventions throughout the year. The retro video game convention’s primary focus is to have a large amount of both common and rare items available for customers to purchase. This draws a range of store owners and resellers to travel around the country buying, selling, and trading items to other members of the community. These conventions also focus on historical aspects such as having small exhibitions like that of a museum and having historians available to talk about items and the history behind certain retro video game items – not limited to just the video games

themselves but also original artwork attributed to the video games. The conventions usually house tournaments and free play areas for community members and convention attendees to enjoy together. Each convention has a list of special guests that range from cover artists (the artists who created the cover box art of the retro video games), YouTubers, podcasters, voice actors, and more.

I have traveled to many conventions over the years as a business vendor. Since, I am located in Ohio, I am seen mostly at Ohio and Michigan conventions; however, I have attended and vended at conventions in cities such as Milwaukee, Greenville, and Houston – all of which are similar in the sense the attendees are there for one thing – to purchase items for their collections. There are two types of conventions in the retro video game subculture: one is “Swap Meet” and the other is “Expo”. For the purpose of this research, Swap Meet is used to describe an environment similar to that of a flea market and focuses more on community buying, selling and trading of the commodity. Expo is used if it is a public exhibition which provides multiple different avenues and experiences, such as buy-sell-trade but also tournaments, meet and greets, free play for the activity of gaming and other experiences.

While attending, observing, and assisting a vendor at RetroPalooza Houston in 2023, the convention felt similar to those in Ohio. In a way, it did not feel like I even was outside of my home state. This is a common feeling to the collector and why so many travel to different territories to grow as a collector. The familiarity and rules that the subculture has developed over the years continue to create a sense of being “home” while not being “home.” This is what makes conventions essential to the third place, as the collector always feels a sense of leisure and relaxation even when they are far away from their home space. It is also important to note that travel is seen as a necessity for collectors within this subculture. The retro video game market is

so diverse that a video game title that is common to Ohio may not be common to Texas, and vice versa. This can be linked to supply chain issues during the game's production run, variations of game titles due to where it was manufactured, marketing from the game's production run, transportation infrastructure in the United States, and even historical events such as the E.T landfill burial being unburied. The scarcity has improved over the recent decade due to more people entering the subculture, and because of e-commerce websites, but as mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, the collector typically refrains from websites such as eBay to purchase their commodity because the physical presence is important for authentication and inspection of the titles for one's collection – that is not saying that collectors never purchase on eBay, most do at some capacity and even will sell occasionally on the platform, however it is not the primary focus of the subculture. The only main difference between RetroPalooza and the other conventions was that Sunday seemed to be busier than Saturday. Ohio is new to the Sunday convention dates, but Saturday still is primarily the high-foot-traffic day. RetroPalooza currently puts on two shows a year: a spring show in Arlington, Texas and a fall show in Fort Worth, Texas. Their websites note that they started in 2013 with 350 attendees and by year two their attendance reached 1200 attendees. This is not uncommon for retro video game conventions. Often the conventions are started by collectors or retro video game owners (also collectors) who understand the market and develop it around the cultural expectations of the collectors. RetroPalooza is organized by popular YouTubers Billy Hudson and Jay Hunter, known as The Game Chasers. They are one of the Top Influencers currently for the retro video game subculture. Austin, Texas is home to a well-known convention called Classic Game Fest which is organized by David Kaelin, who is the owner of Game Over Videogames, which is a

chain of retro video game stores found throughout the state of Texas but also all around the West Coast.

More recently, Josh Hamblin of Portland, Oregon, who only a few years ago was a private collector, now owns SideQuest Games and is the organizer of Portland Retro Gaming Expo. I cannot list every single retro video game convention, as there are basically enough to fill out the weekends of an entire calendar year, some of which conflict with each other, and new ones are being developed every day. However, it is important to note that all of them, even with added experiences, focus primarily on the vendor area so that people can build their collections and network with members of the community.

The two biggest conventions in Ohio, currently, are Cleveland Gaming Classic (CGC) based out of Cleveland, Ohio and TORG (The Ohio Retro Gamer) Gaming Expo which is based in Columbus, Ohio. Both focus on experiences and creating an environment that can be seen as a weekend destination for the family, over the one-day swap meet type of convention. I have been involved in the TORG Gaming Expo planning for seven years and have been vending there since prior to my store's opening. It has been amazing to see the growth of the TORG Gaming Expo, from a small hotel style swap meet for a Facebook Community to meet up and trade and buy some stock, to an exhibition that people travel from all around the world to attend.

Since TORG Gaming Expo is one that I have been part of for several years and have seen its success at exponential growth, I will be focusing on it as a primary example of the importance of the convention space in the retro videogame collecting subculture. TORG Gaming Expo is an Expo which was founded by community members Mike Colletti and Rachel Oscherwitz, both of whom are well-known members of the retro video game collecting subculture, and were the founding members of "The Ohio Retro Gamer" Facebook group which

brought Ohio collectors together, following specific collecting cultural rules that created an ethical space for collectors to build trust, learn, and be members. TORG Gaming Expo has a wide range of activities and experiences to build an inclusive and enjoyable weekend for all that attend. I have identified ten categories of space to discuss these experiences which will be familiar to collectors who attend other conventions as well.

1. Vendor Space

The vendor space is where vendors purchase booth or table space to display product for sale. Vendors are a mixture of private collectors selling their collection or duplicates, store owners, and resellers. All of these sell a wide range of products focused around retro video gaming and popular culture merchandise. This can include vintage videogame apparel, vintage store fixtures and signage, the videogames themselves, boxes and manuals for videogames, and everything in between. It is very rare to find a vendor not interested in trading, so convention attendees can be seen carrying around boxes and backpacks filled with “trade bait” and will walk around the vendor space to look for their personal “holy grails.”

2. Designated Trading Space

Designated Trading spaces are common at conventions, but they are seen more often at swap meets than expos. Designated trading spaces are often a space with a table or two where collectors may meet with the sole purpose of trading with one another (as opposed to selling). These spaces are meant to be between two collectors trading for their personal collections and not with the intention of trading for resale value. These spaces are often in hallways, in their own small rooms, or even just a table in the corner away from much of the event noise so that the two traders are able to connect and discuss. This is often an area where people meet for the first time, thus it works as a networking space for building social capital.

3. KidZone

KidZones are more commonly found at events with higher attendance such as the expo type conventions. These areas are intended for children and their families to burn off some energy in activities usually designed around video game themes. They will often include video game or popular culture themed crafts, activities such as bingo, inflatables such as bounce houses, board games and outdoor type games, and other types of play areas. For two years, I was the head of the KidZone for the TORG Gaming Expo. These are important for conventions that intend to have their attendees stay for the whole day or weekend because it allows the children a safe space for entertainment.

4. Free Play Area (Consoles and Arcades)

There are often two types of free play areas at conventions, one with television and game consoles hooked up to television units or monitors, the other with arcade cabinets and pinball machines. It is not uncommon to see auctions or raffles for the pinball and arcade cabinets that the winners can take home after the event. These are usually focused around family-friendly games or games for all ages, since these conventions are welcoming for all.

5. Museum-Quality Exhibitions

I refer to this space within conventions as “Museum-Quality Exhibitions” because each event curates different unique exhibitions and finds a way to present them as you would see in a museum setting. This is done by having information tags on each piece. These tags include release years, production information, and even include who owns the piece currently. These exhibitions often are staffed with video game historians who function like docents and can talk to attendees about unique artifacts and historical significance within the video game industry. These exhibitions often showcase unique collections. TORG 2023 featured a complete NTSC licensed-

cartridge-only NES collection and a console museum displaying common and rare consoles. Midwest Gaming Expo in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at one point partnered with grading company WATA to bring in a complete-in-box NES NTSC set. These exhibitions are displayed behind locked glass, similar to a museum setting, with security, staff, and volunteers supervising the area.

6. Special Guests' Area

Special guests usually refer to videogame-related voice actors, retro video game historians, and video game related social media influencers. The special guest quality is usually determined by the size of the convention, and some special guests such as Metal Jesus Rocks are usually found in particular geographic regions. Special guests often seem to ride the video game circuit, meaning that the special guest may be seen at several video game conventions throughout the year. However, for the most part, this is not seen as an issue because conventions typically support one another and do not look at each other as competitors; this is also seen as true for the majority of store owners across the United States, and this attitude and perception is what determines if someone is actually part of the subculture or not. Special guests are usually situated in areas with high foot traffic in the convention space. Influencers are usually tending to their own tables, eager to talk to fans or network with new people. Voice actors typically are treated more as celebrities, they will have set hours where they are at their tables to meet with convention-goers, but are also provided private areas away from people. Depending on the individual, they can be seen roaming and mingling as if they were a convention-goer themselves.

7. Game Developer Area

These are designated for Game Developers, more often Independent or "Indie" developers to showcase their creations by having demonstrations available for play on individual

televisions with a console and controller setup, as well as the physical commodity for purchase. At a retro video game convention, these developers are often creators who work with 8-Bit or 16-Bit to immerse people in the nostalgic/retro experience. They also will produce their games as cartridges that play on the retro consoles, although there are some who work on newer platforms and save their games onto discs.

8. Tournaments

Tournaments are a popular experience in gaming. Usually, they are all-ages tournaments centered around different genres of retro gaming. TORG Gaming Expo is an official location for the qualifiers for the international Tetris tournament and is the official home for the Dr. Mario championship. People travel from out of state and out of the country to participate in these internationally recognized tournaments allowing for increase in Social Capital exchange.

9. Panels

Whether this has become a trend because it is prevalent in other popular culture conventions or because of the desire of the videogame industry to be deemed more worthy of scholarship, panels have been on the rise at conventions. Some conventions focus more on panel quality than others. There is usually a submission application and review with guidelines at conventions that offer panels. Some conventions like Portland Gaming Expo include panels you would hear at academic conferences, other conventions like TORG Gaming Expo include panels that act as a Q&A for the special guests and industry professionals. These are there to provide more knowledge to attendees, give space for networking, and immerse people in the broad culture of gaming. Not all panels are centered around collecting, but they also include gaming as far as playability, developing, marketing, and history.

10. Other

This category is a placeholder for unique aspects conventions may have depending on how they are organized or developed. Some are run similar to nonprofits and include fundraising raffles for collectible prizes. Some have after-parties with real life Mario Party or Mario Kart and music present. Some host video game related wrestling tournaments on site. Other conventions may have cosplay contests or “best of show” contests with awards going to vendors. Some may have scavenger hunts to draw people to vendor tables, or organize hunts for Pokémon (physical Pokémon figures, cards, or standees) to further immerse attendees into the experience but to also keep the emphasis on physicality.

The third place at conventions is created by the community through volunteering to make the events successful. Most conventions are nonprofits that begin with community members and community members are the ones that put these conventions on. Eventually the conventions become larger events that are rebranded into for-profit corporations but even then the conventions put the profit back into the following year’s show – the money always goes back to the experience for the community. Conventions combine leisure with the social, just like the retro video game stores. It also includes regulars both in attendees, special guests, and vendors that are common to see at other conventions throughout the United States. Communities are built in these third places, and the physical commodities make these third places focused around conversation possible. Again, these places do include aspects of gameplay, such as demonstrations and tournaments, but the focus is on conversation surrounding the physical commodity, which makes them a third place in a way that digital gaming cannot.

Flea Markets, Garage Sales, Estate Sales, Estate Auctions and Thrift Stores

The reason I lumped all these together is because to a collector they are practically the same thing. However, with the access to the Internet and knowledge of websites such as VGPC

(as mentioned in Chapter 1) becoming more common, it is harder for collectors to source or find good deals in these environments as they would have a decade prior. However, these avenues do play a huge role still when it comes to new findings.

Recently, an item that was deemed a myth in previous years was found in a bundle lot purchased by a collector at a garage sale. The item is now confirmed and documented as the Minnesota State Lottery Cart. This cartridge is now considered a “Holy Grail” item among collectors and has proven that even myths can be found at garage sales. These physical locations are the start for most of those who stumble into the hobby. The majority of collectors begin their journey stumbling into the hobby, and most of them start the journey by purchasing a small personal collection that was tucked away into someone’s attic before it ended up in a garage sale. However, this is an important foundation for the subculture. These locations allow collectors to have “wins.” It allows them the possibility to experience luck in the hobby and gain economic capital to use for trading. It also gives them the opportunity to find something intriguing, that encourages research and networking to find out important pieces of the history behind these commodities. The reason I specify estate auctions, is because these physical auctions are very different than online auction spaces. As noted earlier, collectors do occasionally look to online auctions for their items, however, most do prefer the physical auctions because it allows for greater probability of purchasing an item at a lower price point. These physical locations are a contributing factor to the majority of a collectors’ storytelling when engaging with others. These are the “homes” to the answers to questions such as “What was your best find?” or “What is your favorite collecting story?” Conventions and game stores are often where one goes to find specific titles expecting to pay current market value, but physical spaces such as thrift stores, garage sales, estate sales, estate auctions and flea markets are where one goes to get lucky, as these are

generally the areas where people are not involved in the subculture and have no interest being involved. These spaces are considered a third place to the retro video game collecting subculture, although it is a different third place from the retro video game store and the convention. These spaces still are a leisure place like the conventions and retro video game store; it is common to run into other collectors and visit these spaces regularly to find new artifacts for the collection, and conversation can still be a focal point between individuals. These spaces also allow for level ground as socioeconomic status is not important. If the physical commodity is completely replaced by digital gaming, instead of the two-acting supplementary to one another for consumer preference, then these spaces disappear and the subculture loses its third place. Which is why collectors have started projects and introduced video games into museum settings to put emphasis back onto the physical commodity.

Museums

Retro video games have started to be exhibited as works of art in museums across the country over the last decade. I remember hearing the news about the traveling video game exhibit hosted at the Toledo Art Museum by The Smithsonian American Art Museum, called “The Art of Video Games.” It exhibited consoles showcased from private collections and narrated a history of the gaming industry. What is fascinating about exhibits such as this is that they typically aren’t just focusing on the art of the gameplay, but also on the art involved in the design of the commodity’s shell and packaging, emphasizing that there is cultural significance in more aspects of the video game industry than just its gameplay. However, most studies in video game scholarship today focus on the gameplay, aspects such as narrative, graphic aesthetics, and ludomusicology -which is one of the reasons I argue that the collecting subculture of this industry is acting as a counterculture to the new digital gaming industry by putting emphasis on

aspects that are not related to the gameplay. Counterculture is opposing the social norms, today's post-modern gaming society is tied to convenience, which gives ownership of the physical commodity away by purchasing games solely in digital format. The collectors understand this threat of the new digital gaming era, and by only focusing on aspects of the gameplay the focus will only be on the ludology of video games, instead of the culture that deserves to be studied tied directly to the physical commodity. Without the physical commodity, a lot of the rich historical elements that go into things such as console and cartridge designs are lost – and a lot of the packaging designs are influenced by the culture's ideologies and through acts of globalization are then localized to match the ideologies of that non-origin country. This is why consoles and cartridge designs differ from country to country, and the collectors value these differences, notate them, and are eager to learn why these differences exist. The collectors research and discover the differences (for example) between Tengen Tetris and Tetris that was repackaged by Nintendo.

The National Video Game Museum in Frisco, Texas opened in 2016. Although it is often reviewed as being small, it serves the purpose of conveying the cultural importance of nostalgia and the commodity. One of the current exhibits is even modeled after a 1980s bedroom. The museum's mission statement reads "Our mission is fairly straightforward and simple: To preserve the history of the videogame industry by archiving physical artifacts, information, and the stories behind its creation." (National Videogame Museum). The National Video Game Museum digitally archives and preserves video game artifacts and also works with the recently developed Video Game Preservation Society. The Video Game Preservation Society not only advocates for the importance of video game's rich history within popular culture but also restores gaming artifacts, and is developing a research library to break down barriers between collectors,

scholars, and gamers to play and study these artifacts with their mission statement reading “(Inclusion, Access, Immediacy) We believe in pursuing a world where people are inspired to discover and celebrate the stories of video game history. We’re bridging the gaps between video game fans, historians, academics, institutions, collectors, and the industry. Historical video game preservation is a collaborative process — so let’s collaborate!” (gamehistory.org).

Although a literal museum is new to the retro gaming environment, “The Game Room,” which will be discussed later in this chapter, acts as a personally curated museum that helps potentially set the standard and expectations for a proper video game exhibition for the commodity. Also, conventions – as mentioned earlier--also provide small-scale museum-like exhibitions.

The Game Room

The Game Room is a designated space in one’s home to house the collection of commodities acquired in the subculture. Usually, the commodity is displayed in one’s home like a museum and almost always resembles a retro video game store. The walls are lined with shelves and shelves of video games. Store fixtures, kiosks, and displays are all normal in a private “Game Room”. Some have playable consoles and arcade cabinets, but others are just items on display.

While walking around TORG Gaming Expo, stopping by and supporting the booths of my vendor and store owner peers, I was invited over to see someone’s “Game Room” after day one of an event. Specifically, they asked if I wanted to come to their “party” that night. I had a friend with me, who is not part of the subculture at all, who I was invited to bring. Being invited to a “party” like this to see a “game room” was like someone from a low culture being invited to a high culture event. My friend of the female gender, who was not part of this culture at all, had

no idea what to expect. The “party” was just showcasing their “Game Room,” which was filled with wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling retro games, organized in a particular way so that collector, signage, artwork, and one-of-a-kind pieces are on display as if you would see them in a video game store or a museum. The evening consisted of around ten collectors gathered around educating each other on variants and values, discussing new findings and collecting myths, conversing about grading and authentication of items. These collections are meant to display the cultural artifacts of the retro video game, emphasizing the importance to the individual, or collectors, and emphasizes its focus so that it cannot be ignored by members outside of the community.

“In both museum and private collections sets of objects are removed from circulation and displayed in specifically constructed environments.” (Gelber, 1999). Scholar Steven M. Gelber in his book *Hobbies: Leisure and the culture of work in America*, mentions how the origins of museums were based around “curiosities” of the commodities. The Game Room, although it is part of an individual’s home, still acts as a third place within this subculture. It is a third place because it combines the private place of one’s home with the social space of a museum which is important to the subculture. The subculture wants to share their collection, and they want to see others’ collections as well. Just like a museum, very rarely are collectors looking to sell their personal collection, just as a museum that is displaying artifacts is not selling but primarily displaying. However, as Gelber also mentions, even items within a museum are not completely de-commodified because they may still be traded off or sold, so it also is not unrealistic that one day a collector may sell or trade items from their private collections. There are a handful of collectors who also work with organizations and museums to display their items, and donate items to the organizations to help educate people on the importance of the rich video game

history with the hope that it is seen as worthy of scholarship and worthy as a form of art. The game room, even though it is more commonly located in one's home is typically intended to be a social space. It is a space to invite members of the subculture in for socialization, and for those who participate in playing video games, a space where they may go to play video games with others. But, with it being in the home it can be seen as a private space as well, as the collector may use that space to relax and play video games themselves or do their video game rituals after purchasing new games such as cleaning, testing, and displaying.

Conclusion

All these physical spaces are essential to this subculture, and these physical spaces would not exist within the subculture without the physical commodity. The collectors dedicating spaces to the physical commodity act as a counterculture to the digital gaming culture that is now present in society. By creating environments such as conventions, retro video game designated stores, museums centered around the commodity, and all the places in between that showcase the retro video game industry it keeps the commodity relevant and proves that the power of the commodity cannot be ignored. The digital games do not offer the same social, cultural, and economic capital that the physical games do. The digital gaming's potential third place does not offer the same cultural impact as the physical commodities' third places. By collectors developing these essential third places in physical form centered around the physical commodity they are combating the digital industry, and ensuring that the physical commodity will still be present, because without the physical commodity the whole subculture would be nonexistent because these places would be nonexistent.

CONCLUSION: SAVING THE ENDANGERED GAMERS

“I almost don’t want to get that last game because if I do, it’s over.” Deniz Kahn, Founder/President Wata (Payson, 2021)

The purpose of this research has been to not only draw attention to the disappearance of the physical commodity but also the potential extinction of the historical and cultural knowledge contained within those commodities that leaves a subculture of gamers endangered – the collectors. The gaming industry is focused on gameplay, game design, game production, and how gamers interact with the text, such that the importance of how the physical commodity interacts with society as a whole is being ignored. The subculture of retro video game collecting allows for level ground in equity. Anecdotal evidence from my time interacting with other vendors and customers suggests that the subculture prides itself on its openness and accessibility. I know several people who started in the hobby because of their lack of economic capital, only being able to play old games that they stumbled upon for free. The hierarchy that preoccupies participants in the subculture seems to be the hierarchy of knowledge associated with the physical commodity. Knowledge of the physical commodity’s history can be obtained by any member of the subculture, making it a subculture that could represent true equity in a society. This knowledge enables one to help with authentication, variants, past and present marketing, transnational strategies including localization, restoration, predicted market trends, and everything in between, which in turn helps one develop social capital through positive interactions and mentorship with other subculture members and economic capital through trading, buying, and selling. Acquiring all three of these three capitals (achieving the Triforce) is what marks one as successful within the retro video game collecting subculture.

The digital gaming era of the 21st century is causing the collecting subculture of gamers to be endangered. Once the physical commodity disappears, this subculture will inevitably become extinct. The video game industry has become so disconnected from the physical commodity through the convenience of digitally downloaded gaming that the consumers are not realizing the impact that capitalism is having on the disappearance of historical and cultural knowledge that is obtained through the physical commodity. This has also become a problem for the physical commodities tied to music and literature, now that many titles have become conveniently available digitally, causing commodity fetishism by further alienating the labor that goes into creating these games. Arguably, when you have the physical commodity in hand, the manuals and the casing share a lot of information regarding the labor that goes into the production of the commodity. Holding something tangible allows the consumer to think about the manufactured item, whereas digital commodities do not have a tangible item to represent that. Digital gaming, alone, with no physical commodity supplementing it, is causing a deeper divide between the collecting subculture and the game creators. The effect is that the knowledge that can be obtained from holding the physical object is disappearing. The physical commodity raises questions, and it can also simultaneously answer questions. For example, was Nintendo planning to introduce the lottery to the home console? Well, thanks to someone finding a physical cartridge of a Minnesota lottery cartridge the myth of it is now factual. That then leads to other cultural questions – why Minnesota? Why wasn't it successful? These questions can exist because physical commodities exist. The physical commodity encourages research in more ways than just studying the game play.

“In fact, there is a lot of young kids who are educated about retro games, and they’re learning on YouTube because the games they played and the stuff they’re growing up with today, they want to know the origin.” Deniz Kahn, Founder/President Wata (Payson, 2021)

Digital media is seen by collectors as licensing the content, not owning the content. In contrast, the physical commodity allows for ownership. Grading companies, such as CGC, create individualized numbers that are archived so that ownership can be traced – this essentially discourages theft because the physical commodity’s original owner can potentially be reunited with the object, or it can at least be reported missing. This discourages someone stealing a physical commodity from a retro video game store or convention and listing it on eBay for example. However, if a digital gamer were to have their database or digital account hacked and stolen, it potentially is unretrievable. Ownership can be reclaimed in both a literal and a nostalgic sense when there is a physical commodity present. In the nostalgic sense, someone can reclaim a specific title of the past by purchasing it again in the future – whether it is just a replacement with displaced meaning, or if the person was able to trace and find their original physical good.

Along with being a subculture, the collectors act as an Imagined Community. Benedict Anderson describes the idea of an imagined community through the lens of nations as a community socially constructed and developed by people to feel as though they belong to a community, even though the entire community will never be in one place at one time (Anderson, 1983). It is impossible for every collector to meet one another; however, collectors feel they are one community. When a commodity is discovered that allows for new gaming history to be researched and studied, the community feels excitement – as if they were the one that discovered it – giving the same sense of connection that Benedict Anderson is describing. Although every collector wants a good personal collecting story, the stories of others are stories worth telling and

bring the community together. This is why the subculture has established rules on ethics when it comes to purchasing items, especially in the online marketplace – rules, as mentioned in Chapter 1, on not taking a deal from someone else by offering more or trying to meet the seller before the first person has a chance. That is because when there is competition, then there is hostility, and when there is hostility then the community becomes divided. It is okay for a collector to want something from another collector and offer to trade or purchase it – but it is not okay for a collector to want something and unethically obtain it, because then that collector is not acting as part of the community.

The retro game collecting community transcends borders and merges cultural practices. The interest in traveling to Japan, for instance, to obtain the physical commodity from Japan's retro video game market raises the concern of Japan losing their physical commodities to foreign collectors – however, the foreign collectors – such as those in the United States, collect for the historical significance of the commodity. Having collectors who collect regional versions of particular games has led to comparative research analyses between the two commodities – such as art changes, packaging style, size, and localized content in the gameplay. The only way this import situation becomes an issue is when the primary focus is on resale value – or the person purchasing it is a reseller rather than a collector.

The collecting subculture is under threat not only from external pressures like the move to digital gaming, but also from internal pressures such as the figure of the reseller. Because resellers exist for purely economic gain, they draw attention to the collectibility of the physical commodities and introduce people who are not part of the established imagined community to the retro video game market for investment opportunities – similar to coin, comic, and card collectors. This makes it harder for collectors to obtain artifacts to restore, preserve, and display.

However, the outside media attention and constant market changes of retro video games does allow the physical commodity to still be prevalent enough in the postmodern era that corporations are finding ways to capitalize on the interest, even in the digital era. This is why throwback consoles such as the “Nintendo Classic” exist. Nintendo noticed an interest in the retro video game market through online news articles, so they produced a small version of the original Nintendo Entertainment System that was preloaded with licensed games from the time that directly plugged into the television. The interesting thing is, because this was a licensed and authentic item, produced by Nintendo, and had a short production run, it is seen as a collectible worth preserving for this subculture of gamers. This example is one of the reasons why I argue that retro video game collecting is not tied specifically to an era but it is tied directly to the production run of the physical commodity. When the commodity is no longer produced, then the commodity becomes “retro.” The question then may be “Well, what happens if production starts again?” This is when the collectors’ cultural capital comes into play, as they will understand how to identify the commodity’s production status. For example, Masters of the Universe (MOTU) figurines from the 1980s are “retro” but the new 21st century productions are not. Why? Because the commodity is still being produced, and there is substantial difference in exchange value between the two releases. This thought also works the same with books. The materiality of the commodity is essential because the production run of the physical commodity is what distinguishes the start and end of the “retro” status.

Retro video game collectors are the ones who establish the methods and spaces of preserving the physical commodity and keeping it relevant. They are the ones who open the retro video game stores that hold the values of the community and create a Third Place for its members. Collectors are the ones who start the retro video game conventions that create a

physical space for the imagined community to network, trade, and talk about the physical commodity. Collectors are the ones who established the value baseline of these commodities by creating grading companies such as WATA, resource websites like Pricecharting.com (VGPC), and resource guides like CGC provide essential information that acts as a leveler in the community. Collectors like Stephan Reese create 501(c)3 nonprofits such as Video Game Art Museum Exhibit or act as curators for video game exhibits within the Smithsonian. Collectors start foundations such as The Video Game History Foundation to communally preserve and document gaming history, and create specific museums dedicated to the physical commodity like The National Videogame Museum. Collectors establish third party companies and also work with manufacturers to create the parts, consoles, and accessories essential to restoring consoles and allowing the game commodities themselves to be used and enjoyed. Collectors start companies like Limited Run, that purchase licensing to create an authentic physical release with a limited production run of titles that otherwise would only be available in a digital format. Collectors are the ones preserving the history of video games and countering the digital culture. Collectors put the emphasis on the physical commodity and build an equitable culture surrounded by it.

If the physical commodity is extinct, then this subculture becomes extinct along with it. If the collectors are extinct and the material artefacts of the past disintegrate with no possibility of restoration, then the history becomes lost. Digital gaming has its advantages for the culture of gamers that focus on play, but it should not take the place of the physical commodity. The physical commodity has built a subculture, an imagined community, of gamers that have developed a leveled and equitable society – where knowledge is the only hierarchy and that knowledge can be obtained by anyone because of the subculture’s willingness to mentor and

share. The subculture values history, culture, art, and research. If the physical commodity continues to disappear as parts that were once valuable such as instruction manuals become less available, then information that could provide meaningful cultural analysis is lost – questions won't be asked, research won't be sought, and nostalgia potentially will lose the value that it currently holds in western culture.

Collectors value every aspect of the packaging—the instruction manual, registration cards, coupons that were included with the game, posters that were included, special editions, sticker variations--everything included in the package tells a story that documents some kind of history. Collectors research which registration card goes with which production and although it sounds small in historical significance, it gives people the opportunity to study it, to ask questions, to research it, and to draw the conclusions about society that are so important when studying culture. The digital gaming era is marked by a disservice to society because of the removal of the physicalness of gaming; it is limiting research opportunities that could uncover new information about cultures in a certain era. The physical commodity is not just a product of capitalism, but it is a product of history and it needs the ability to be preserved. The physical commodity allows for social change through studying imagined communities. It allows for future questions such as “What can we learn from retro video game collectors?” “How can we establish gender equity in everyday society like the retro video game collectors?” “Is this subculture transnational, or is it purely western culture?” We can learn a lot from studying subcultures and communities, so we can learn a lot from retro video game collectors. The physical commodity is becoming extinct, and the subculture of retro video game collectors is endangered. When the last physical game is collected, a Third Place disappears, an example of an equitable and level

community disappears, and a culture will be lost because of post-modern capitalism and consumer convenience.

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