interview| TREVOR GRUPE

In November 2020, I sat down with Catskills-based video game collector Trevor Grupe, who started avidly playing video games as a tween in the 90s and whose interest in video games eventually transitioned into a more dedicated hobby of collecting and stumbling upon rare finds along the way. We talked about his 5000+ piece collection, the mysterious "power stone" that accompanied an old computer game, and the games he'd never part with.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

NC: For how long have you been collecting video games and gaming systems?
TG: I've been collecting games since probably [the time when I was] 12 or 14 years old.

NC: What got you interested in collecting?
TG: I think [initially, gaming] was just a social thing that my friends and I did, [and eventually] it became this idea of [creating a] collection that could possibly [lead to] retro game nights with friends and [continuing] what we had as kids.

NC: Yes, a little nostalgia goes a long way. How big is your collection?
TG: I started categorizing things quite a few years ago, and then it got to be too overwhelming, so I stopped. I think at one point the count reached 5000 games, and that's not breaking them down into any categories nor including duplicates. (There was a time when I think I had 20-30 copies of a certain game!)

NC: What was your biggest "score"?
TG: The most memorable, I would say, was one yard sale [where] I found *DuckTales 2*, complete in the box, so that was pretty cool. I also found two Vectrex[1] systems, which, just finding those, they're so weird and unique that to find those is interesting. I'd say the biggest score… for some reason someone was selling nine Sega Saturn[2] systems. The Saturn is pretty hard to come by as it is, so to find nine of them was pretty exciting. That might've been one of the biggest things I've found over the past couple of years.

[Pictured left: the Vectrex Arcade System, courtesy Trevor Grupe collection; photo by Justin Maiman]

NC: What are some of the items in your collection you would never part with?
TG: I have two storage containers [with] the very beginning of my collection. Those are the things I started collecting in the early to middle 90s, and it's a lot of Super Nintendo and N64 stuff. And those two containers, I don't think I could get rid of anything in those two containers

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[1] The Vectrex Arcade System, released in 1982, was a standalone 8-bit gaming system with black and white vector graphics and color overlays. It was designed to recreate the arcade experience for the home. I also consider it to be one of the most impressive innovations in both game console and home computer technologies.
[2] The Sega Saturn is a video game console released in North America in 1995. It struggled to compete against Nintendo's consoles and the Sony PlayStation. It was discontinued in 1998.

because it's like *GoldenEye*[3] for N64— it's the game that my friends and I played for hours every weekend in the late 90s — and *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*[4], and certain games that are so vivid [to me]; I remember playing them.

NC: What's the oldest item in your collection?
TG: My original idea about collecting was to start with Nintendo because that was where I started playing games, and then I kept finding opportunities where the games I was finding were getting older and older, and they were pretty cheap, so I [felt I] had to pick them up. I would say, as far as age, I have bins full of Atari 2600 games and some going back to the 800 and 400, and I believe those are from the late 70s.[5]

NC: Do you have any old computer games?
TG: I do have some; I know that some of them are *Ultima*, and one of the originals that I have, I don't even know which number it is, but it's in a box and it comes with a "power stone."[6] It just looks like a polished rock, but apparently, it's a collector's item, and people go nuts over it.

close-up of magic stone

[Pictured: original *Ultima VI* computer game with cloth map, 48-page manual, and magic stone, courtesy Trevor Grupe collection]

NC: What have you learned about video games over the years through collecting?
TG: Being a gamer for 30 years or so, [it becomes clear that] your interests certainly change over time. I remember as a kid I didn't play RPGs at all. I just couldn't get into them. And then in the late 90s, I played *Final Fantasy VII*, and that sort of changed my whole interest in gaming, and I got into RPGs.
When it comes to video game collecting, I think there are a lot of people that feel that when a game is worth a lot, like hundreds or even thousands of dollars, then the game must be fantastic. But in a lot of cases, it's the opposite. When it comes to a lot of these expensive [retro] games, the games originally didn't sell well

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[3] *GoldenEye 007* (1997) is a video game based on the 1995 James Bond film called *GoldenEye*. The game was a popular and critical success, and it redefined the first-person shooter style with advanced realism and a more stylized approach, modeled on the signature breaking of the fourth wall in the James Bond film franchise.

[4] I'm thinking here of Victor Luckerson's article for The Ringer in 2018 titled "Why 'The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time' Will Always Be the 'Best Game Ever'" (https://www.theringer.com/2018/10/23/18012564/legend-of-zelda-ocarina-time-best-game-ever-1998; Accessed January 5, 2021). He begins, "Art may largely be a matter of taste, but one conclusion is close to inarguable: 1998 was the best year ever for video games, producing an unparalleled lineup of revolutionary releases that left indelible legacies and spawned series and subcultures that persist today."

[5] While the Atari VCS/2600 was a video game console (and a popular one to boot), the Atari 400 and Atari 800 were personal computers that launched in 1979 to directly compete with Apple.

[6] This prompted a quick side conversation about "feelies", which were supplemental items that accompanied computer games to help bring the mostly text-based experience to life. I later did a quick search for what kinds of feelies were included with the *Ultima* games. According to Wikipedia, "Starting with *Ultima IV*, small trinkets like pendants, coins and magic stones were found in the boxes. Made of metal or glass, they usually represented an important object also found within the game itself." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultima_(series); accessed January 5, 2021.)

because they were terrible. Not in every case, but in a lot of cases. So nobody bought the game because it was bad, so then there are fewer copies, and now people want to collect it [because it's rare]. When in reality it's a game no one wants to play; you only want it to complete your collection.

NC: What's the first video game you ever played?
TG: I would say the first game I really remember getting into was the first original Super Mario Bros. That was the game that my brother and I played a lot and really got into.

NC: What's the first gaming system you ever owned? Do you still have it?
TG: The first gaming system I remember getting — my brother and I wanted a Super Nintendo[7] really badly — and I remember setting it up and being so excited. I still have that system; it's the *Donkey Kong Country*[8] edition with the game pack. And I do have that still in the box and everything.

NC: You probably don't like to play favorites, but what game is at the top of your list right now?
TG: Definitely the best stuff I've played this year [are] the *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, which ended up turning out so much better than I expected, being a huge fan of the original; and I also really, really enjoyed *Death Stranding*. Which is funny because there are some people that hated it, which I understand because it's a pretty divisive game, but I did enjoy it. I also have to admit that *Animal Crossing*[9] is pretty addictive. It was the perfect game for this year.

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[7] The Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) — or Super Nintendo or Super NES — is a 16-bit home console gaming system that was released in Japan in 1990 and arrived in North America in 1991. It directly competed with the Sega Genesis, a competition that produced a well-documented rivalry. Some may remember one of Sega's advertising campaign slogans: "Genesis does what Nintendon't." But, in terms of sales, the SNES was the most successful console of that generation.
[8] Released in 1994, this is a reboot of Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* franchise.
[9] The inadvertently perfect timing of the release of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* on March 20, 2020 (the first substantial release since 2001) allowed this game to be an ideal form of escape, diversion, and access to a virtual global community during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. As Imad Khan for the *New York Times* writes, "With the world in the grip of a pandemic, the wildly popular game is a conveniently timed piece of whimsy, particularly for millennials." (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/arts/animal-crossing-covid-coronavirus-popularity-millennials.html; accessed January 5, 2021.)