

INTERVIEW WITH A NINTENDO GAMEPLAY COUNSELOR

> OTTO HANSON *limbofunk*

Tom Kristensen's start with Nintendo began innocently enough when he was hired as a GamePlay Counselor in Nintendo's infamous call center back in 1990. Little did he know at the time, this job would lead to a career spanning nearly 2 decades in the gaming industry (but we'll get more into that later)! Tom was gracious enough to take the time to answer a number of questions regarding his time at Nintendo and beyond. Within the interview, he divulges some of the inner-workings of the call center, some of his personal experiences while working there and much, much more!

[Limbo]: How exactly did you go about becoming a Nintendo GamePlay Counselor? Was it something you were actively looking to do or did you just fall into it by happenstance? Was there some sort of test where you had to prove your skills as a gamer?

[TK]: I had recently graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in Political Science. I only had vague notions of what I wanted to do in the real world – perhaps law enforcement or teaching – until one day when a roommate found THE ad in the classifieds.

It read something like: “How would you like to get paid to play games for a living?” I thought that sounded like a great idea to help me pass the time until I chose a “real” career. My folks were none too pleased at first (“We put you through college for THIS!?!”) but they came around eventually.

I don't recall any screening tests – if you knew how to turn on a system and start a game, you were pretty much good to go. As it turned out, your gaming skills were helpful on the job, but they weren't the primary



focus.

[Limbo]: About how long were you employed with Nintendo as a GPC?

[TK]: I worked at NOA for 5 ½ years, and I was in the Call Center for 4 ½ of those years.

[Limbo]: What did a typical work day consist of? Was it very laid back, or moderately strict?

[TK]: Fairly strict, for sure. Punctuality was crucial, and schedules were strictly adhered to. There was a low tolerance for the habitually late and the total slackers. Having said that, the atmosphere was fairly laid back in general. There was no rigid dress code, and I would be lying if I said people didn't try to have fun and goof off a bit. I mean, come on – we were playing games and helping other gamers play their games – on the average day, that's not a bad way to spend your time at work!

It should be noted that GPCs had performance metrics to live up to. Once you hit ‘Ready’ on your phone, you put yourself in the queue to take a call. When the call was completed, you went into ‘Wrap Up’ where you needed

to enter the code for the call you just took (each game and/or situation had a unique code assigned to it). If you needed to fill out any paperwork, etc, you could also do that. There was also ‘Idle’ which was used for grabbing a drink, stretching your legs, chatting with your fellow cube farmers, etc. But you could only spend a certain amount of time each day in ‘Idle’ and ‘Wrap Up’ – Big Brother was watching!

The antithesis of the typical work day took place during Hell Week – the week or so immediately following Christmas day. We were slammed! The CSRs were helping everyone hook up their new systems, and the GPCs were helping ev-

eryone with their new games. On an 8 (7.5 with breaks) hour shift, it was not uncommon to take over 200 (!) calls. That's what, about 25 to 30 calls an hour, roughly 2-3 minutes per call if you didn't get a long one to mess up the average. That's a LOT of talking!

[Limbo]: How was the hierarchy of GamePlay Counselors set up (ie: subsections of teams, each with a team lead or something else)?

[TK]: When I was there, the Call Center was open 20 hours a day (4am to midnight), and the GPCs were sorted out according to their shift. The morning teams started at 4, 5, and 6 I believe; the day teams from roughly 8 to 10, and the evening teams from 1 to 3.

There was the overall department manager, the three shift supervisors, and then each GPC team had a Lead and an Assistant Lead.

And of course there were also teams of CSRs (Consumer Service Representatives), who did tech support and pretty much any non-gaming question as well as the Correspondence Department for good old snail mail questions and issues.

[Limbo]: Were there any particular games or even specific obstacles within games that you remember receiving calls about all the time?

[TK]: Wow, I wouldn't know where to start with this one. How much space do you have? The Warp Whistles in SMB3; the Minus World in SMB; how to find a specific item in Zelda, Metroid, etc; how to navigate a particular room in Legacy of the Wizard (ugh) or Solstice (double ugh); some well-hidden items in Destiny of an Emperor...

[Limbo]: Did you receive a frequent amount of ‘No-brainer’ questions throughout a typical day (i.e.: Where do I get the first sword in Zelda, I start out with no weapons!)?

[TK]: Oh yeah, did we ever. But those calls were your bread and butter calls, the kind you could answer from memory while playing your game and not miss a beat. The GPC training program made sure you knew the answers to the most common FAQs from the core titles – Mario, Zelda, Metroid, etc.

[Limbo]: Were there any outlandish, ridiculous or just plain peculiar calls you remember receiving that still resonate with



NINTENDOAGE TIMELINE

NintendoAGE suffers server crash	AI Bailey's Sudoku is released	Hounder's scam exposed	Dangevin and Battymo become mods	NA eZine debuts	Battymo launches NintendoAGE radio	NintendoAGE reaches 400 members
6/26-29/09	7/5/07	7/20/07	8/20/07	9/3/07	10/5/07	6/11/07

> *counselor interview, cont.*



you to this day?

[TK]: For me, one of them was something along these lines:

(caller) "Help! I'm stuck in a room of the castle in Dragon Warrior!!!"
(TK) "If there are no exits in the room, do you see any stairs in the room? Go up the stairs."

(caller) "Yes, I can see the stairs, but I can't go up them!"

(TK) "Call up your menu and choose the 'Stairs' command."

[the caller fumbles around for a bit and then comes back]

(caller) "It didn't work! Do you even know what you're talking about?!"

(TK) "Look, if your character is standing on the stairs and you activate the 'Stairs' command, you WILL go up the stairs. Honest!"

[the caller fumbles around some more, and eventually an exclamation of success is heard]

(caller) "Hooray! It worked! Thanks...now what do I do?"

*(TK) *sigh* "OK, what level are you? Where have you been? And what have you done?..."*

I have no idea what the malfunction was. Maybe the caller was facing the stairs, but not actually standing right on them. Or was he standing on the square above the stairs, and decided that he was "on" the stairs? Was he pressing the A Button to execute the 'Stairs' command, or did he keep canceling it with the B Button? Hard to tell, since you have no visual reference.

Another GPC call legend is regarding a young gamer who was playing SNES Zelda: A Link to the Past, and had been waiting for his Uncle to come back (this is right at the beginning of the game). After a long line of questioning, it finally came to light that the young gamer was heeding the on-screen instructions of the Uncle to "not leave the house" and had yet to walk out of the house and search for his missing Uncle in the game. Heh.

And many gamers from the South, they cracked me up when they would talk about "mashin' them buttons" on the controllers. Thanks for playin' y'all!

[Limbo]: Were there people who called the hotline so frequently that you got to know them?

[TK]: Yes, after a while, you would begin to recognize certain callers. And some consumers wanted to know your Agent Number (3-digit extension) to they could request you every time. Official policy was to not transfer callers unless they were instructed by a GPC to do just that, or if they were becoming "difficult" to put it nicely. I helped a gentleman by the name of Jim from St. Louis quite a few times. He was a fan of RPGs, and I was able to help him out of a jam once, so he tried to speak with me if possible. Nice guy.

Of course, we also got to know a small handful of crazies, too. "Christine" was this gal who was missing a few contacts on her 72-pin connector, you know? She rambled, she vented, she accused, she was just plain nuts. We were obligated to help all callers, and as long as they were not cussing you out or threatening you, you just tried your best. When consumers became unglued or irrational, you could always turn to a Lead or Assistant Lead for support. Now if they were just plain nasty, you ended the call right away. Some GPCs were more patient than others.

[Limbo]: How were personal calls handled?

[TK]: If someone needed to contact you at work, they needed to call your team lead. Each lead had a standard phone on their desk in addition to the super gee-whiz Call Center phone. Of course, if someone knew your extension, they could just call the GPC line and ask to get transferred to you. But that was against official Call Center policy, and if your lead or supervisor happened to catch you taking personal calls on the GPC line, you were busted.

[Limbo]:

The fiasco with Tengen's licensing has always been a big point of interest with NES fans and it seemed that Nintendo has always held a grudge, even taking Tengen's three licensed Nintendo games (RBI Baseball, Pac-Man & Gauntlet) and Cyberball (Developed by Tengen) off of their official released games list. Do you remember any notices that came out about Tengen or helping callers with any of their games?

[TK]: The policy was this: Nintendo GPCs could ONLY answer questions on officially licensed games. So yes, Tengen games were excluded, the Wisdom Tree Bible-themed games, bootleg multi-pak games, and games played while using products like the Game Genie were not supported. If it did not have the Official Nintendo Seal of Approval on it, you were out of luck.

[TK]:

Since the GPCs and CSRs (Consum-



ers)



NINTENDOAGE TIMELINE

Original Hall of Shame debuts	First Poll of the Day "Sit down to pee?"	Retrozone releases Airball	Nerdy Nights makes 1st appearance	NA is relaunched with new layout.	Dain announces Collection Tool coming soon	Collection tool announced
10/30/07	10/30/07	11/1/07	12/5/07	1/21/08	2/12/08	3/13/08

> *counselor interview, cont.*

er Service Reps) were the front lines of consumer contact, we were the ones who caught grief from consumers who didn't care about the difference between licensed and unlicensed games, or were too young to understand the difference.

I don't recall ever helping anyone with any Tengen games, licensed or unlicensed. I know I had to turn at least a few calls away from folks with unlicensed Tengen games. I'm pretty sure some GPCs would answer quick questions about Tengen games if they didn't think they were being monitored, but those were always the exception to the "we don't support Tengen products" policy.

[Limbo]: I've heard some stories of people calling the Nintendo hotline back in the day for codes/passwords for certain games and being told by GPCs that they weren't allowed to divulge that type of information. Was this due to Nintendo's internal policy, or was it just that a few GPCs decided to be snarky and wanted to rile up some of the kids who called requesting them?

[TK]: This was a sore spot for a lot of callers back in the day. NOA had a strict policy: NO codes or passwords were shared with consumers. The logic was if you gave out codes and passwords, the consumer was losing out on quality gameplay with their particular game. In other words, what's the point if you go out, drop \$40-50 on a new game, come home, call the GPCs and get something like an Invincibility code and beat the game in one day? Kind of a let-down. In other words, NOA wanted you to play the game as it was meant to be played. You needed to earn any codes or passwords that may have been available in any given title.

Like I said, it wasn't a very popular policy with most consumers. I can't remember what we did if a code was published in Nintendo Power – I think we asked them to write in. Not 100% sure on that one. In any event, the No Code/Password policy was eventually reversed. My opinion was pretty much in agreement with NOA – just play the game and try to have fun, OK? After the policy reversal, I remember more than a few calls were consumers said they just bought a game, got all the codes/passwords, and beat the game in a matter of a day or two, or even less than a day. Wow, got your

money's worth out of that one, didn't you? *sarcasm off* To each his own, I guess.

[Limbo]: On your bio from 1990, it says your favorite NES game was a tie between Metroid and Final Fantasy...do these games still hold top honors with you or have they been replaced?

[TK]: I'd have to go with Metroid, for sure. FF is good, but after you play through it more than once, it gets old real fast. Zelda and Link would also be high on my list, along with SMB3.

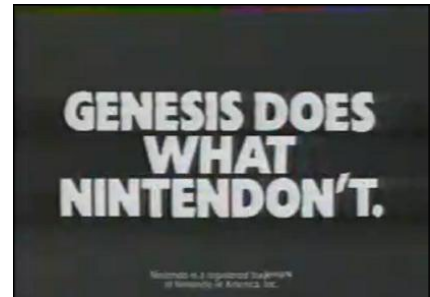
[Limbo]: Your bio also states that your best accomplishment at the time was completing Jackal with one jeep which is quite an accomplishment! Are there any other amazing feats of gaming greatness that you remember doing?

[TK]: The Jackal stunt was a pain because I started over quite a few times, but eventually I really did finish it with one Jeep. I don't recall trying any similar stunts, except maybe things like trying to score crazy goals in games like NES Goal! and SNES NHLPA '93.

[Limbo]: Your GPC bio in Nintendo Power is one of the few I have ever seen that didn't have a mullet. Are there any peculiar stories you remember regarding your co-workers' mullets? Did you ever feel any peer pressure to grow one yourself?

[TK]: LOL! I did a couple of years in the UW's Army ROTC program, and liked the short-hair look, so a mullet was never even on my hair radar. But yeah, we did have our share of mullets, rocker hair, and whatnot. The GPCs were the melting pot of NOA, from guys like me (short hair, clean-cut, t-shirts & shorts) to rockers to a couple of guys who actually wore suits to work every day. The GPCs were pretty much as non-conformist as it gets in a big business.

[Limbo]: There have always been open rivalries between competing companies in the videogame hardware market, with hordes of fanboys choosing sides throughout...the time you worked for Nin-



tendo as a GPC was prime for the Nintendo vs. Sega war. What are your thoughts on this, and were there any points while at work that this 'war' made itself known?

[TK]: It was a lot of fun back when the Sega vs Nintendo war was in full swing. Sega fans with nothing better to do would call us up and tell us "Genesis does what Nintendon't!" and tout "Blast Processing" as well as the usual intelligent statements like "Nintendo sucks!" and lesser jabs, many of which are not printable. It was always fun to ask the callers "Tell me, exactly what IS Blast Processing?" and listen to them stumble over some clumsy reply, because of course "Blast Processing" was pretty much just a clever marketing phrase cooked up by Sega. Most of the time you usually just got a hearty "Nintendo sucks!" in reply. Heady days, indeed.

I will give Sega credit for waging an effective battle, though. They knew how to use catchphrases and marketing tactics effectively, and their commercials were usually pretty good. Everyone remembers the SEGA! shout at the end of almost every commercial at the time. Nintendo pretty much tried to stick to the "put up or shut up" approach, using commercials that mostly featured gameplay footage rather than gimmicks and mudslinging.

It's too bad Sega eventually went out of the console business, because they did



NINTENDOAGE TIMELINE

Geminim by Sivak released	NGD's Hall of the Century	Dr. Morbis becomes a moderator	Jumpman Jr. becomes a mod.	Tower of Radia is released	Zzap's Chunkout 2 is released	Burdger becomes a moderator	Sivak releases Siamond
3/14/08	4/3/08	4/9/08	4/16/08	4/21/08	5/1/08	5/17/08	5/19/08

> *counselor interview, cont.*



have some good products. I think it's ironic that a lot of people were predicting Nintendo was going down the same road, insisting that dominating the handheld market with the DS and developing future consoles like Wii were signs that Nintendo was finished in the console business. Heh.

Speaking of Nintendo's premature demise, I can't tell you how pleased I am with their success with the Wii. I too was one of many who thought Wii was waaay out there, even for Nintendo. But I can honestly say I have always rooted for them, so of course I am pleased that Wii has done as well as it has to date. All the haters, all the Sony and Microsoft fanboys, all the media who laughed and wrote off Nintendo – how do you like them apples now? That's what I thought.

[Limbo]: I've heard of community binders that were full of walkthroughs and tips for everyone to use, and have also heard mention of items called 'Game Tip Notebooks.' Could you explain what both were and what each were used as?

[TK]: I'm a little fuzzy on the names, but this is what I remember: each GPC had a set of Green Binders with FAQs, maps, walkthroughs, and notes. You could expand them with your own work, and copies of info provided by your fellow GPCs.

And now that you mention it, I can picture a big flip-file type setup at the end of cube rows here and there throughout the Call Center. I think they had game info plus items like copies of instruction manuals and the like.

Of course, that was before ELMO – when we finally joined the PC age! I think



ELMO was an AS/400 database, but then again, a tech guy I am not, so my apologies if I am wrong on this account. It was a beast of a system, but it worked – most of the time. Still, we kept the Green Binders around until ELMO was housebroken. And even then, some of us still kept our own personal binders with maps and notes, stuff

not always found in ELMO.

[Limbo]: What were some of the games you contributed to making walkthroughs or maps for? Were you assigned to the games you played during work hours or did you get to pick and choose what you played? Obviously there were some stinkers put out for the system so someone had to play them...

[TK]: I remember doing extensive work on Dragon Warrior II, and a bunch of lesser titles too. Some teams assigned to the games you played during work hours or did you get to pick and choose what you played? Obviously there were some stinkers put out for the system so someone had to play them...

And yes, sometimes you played a game that you personally did not like, but



NINTENDOAGE TIMELINE

Batty & Braveheart Heist of Century	NA reaches 1000 members	Braveheart69 becomes a mod	Site update with trans. & feedback	Random good BIN debuts	Joel makes epic first post. Hilarity ensues.	Antofarabia SE debacle	NA Mobile site is launched
6/3/08	6/4/08	4/9/08	6/12/08	6/13/08	6/22/08	6/26/08	7/23/08