

INTERVIEW WITH A NINTENDO GAMEPLAY COUNSELOR pt. 2

> **OTTO HANSON** *limbofunk*

[TK]: Being a GPC was a pretty good gig. You helped people with their games, and you played your own games on the clock. And NOA paid you to do this! If you were A) a people person and B) a gamer, this was the job for you. The problem was not everyone on fell under category "A" on the phones. Even for the majority of GPCs who were good with consumers on a daily basis, well, everyone has their limits. It wasn't the run-of-the-mill calls that wore me down, as those were just too easy to answer and move along to the next. It was the problem calls – the irate/bitchy callers, the "hold my hand and tell me how to do every last thing I need to do while I do it" callers, the obnoxious kids, and the hopelessly clueless (you could explain something ten different ways in three different languages, and they STILL DON'T GET IT). Those examples are what caused people to either leave NOA, or think about moving elsewhere within the



company.

GPCs would bust their asses to score some off-the-phone time. Writing letters in Correspondence, working on FAQs and walkthroughs, conducting GPC training for the latest batch of new recruits – if it involved time off the phones, you wanted it.

I managed to land a few positions that reduced my on the phones time: GPC Trainer, Team Nintendo, and Assistant Lead. Running training was both fun and stressful – you needed to send people out to the Call Center who were ready to take calls. If they struggled or failed, it often reflected poorly on those who trained them. When I was one of the Trainers, my boss was Blaine Phelps. He was this big, loud, imposing figure who stomped around the Call Center and caused people to cower and avert their eyes. Of course once you got to know him, you find out he's a big softie and a great guy – just not at work!

Team Nintendo was a group of GPCs who were the face of NOA. We did public appearances, press tours, shot promotional material for in-house use, that sort of thing.

As an Assistant Lead, I helped my team leader with his duties – mostly monitoring call quality, providing assistance to GPCs who had questions or needed to hand off problem callers, stuff like that. Nothing glamorous, but it got you off the phones for a spell, and if you didn't screw up too bad, maybe even get yourself noticed for bigger and better things...like getting out of the Call Center once and for all!

For me, that moment came 4.5 years after my first day as a GPC. I was hired as a Product Coordinator in the Treehouse (Product Acquisition and Development). I wrote instruction manuals, evaluated concepts, tested games, bought toys for developers (it's true!), recorded gameplay footage for in-house use, and played VGA Planets (only on breaks and lunch...wink wink nudge

nudge).

[Limbo]: Team Nintendo sounds really interesting, could you explain how the team came about, what they did and what your role was within? Were there any events in particular that you would like to share?

[TK]: Team Nintendo started out as a very small group of people (something like 3-4 GPCs) who could not only do PR work, but could actually speak about games and knew what they were talking about. The aforementioned Blaine Phelps was one of those early Team Nintendo talking heads. Eventually they expanded the team to around 8 or 10 GPCs, and I was lucky enough to earn a spot on the team at that point in time.

I was fortunate to do a lot of different events both locally and across the U.S. We worked with the folks from Golin/Harris, NOA's PR firm. Everyone on Team Nintendo could share the same type of war stories – events that were a blast, cool people, fabulous locations...along with events that sucked, things that went south, uncool people, and forgettable locations.

CES and E3 were always big events for us. Long days, lots of interviews, on your feet most of the time, loud music, booth babes, and trying to squeeze in personal time to check out new games. Whew!

I could go on and on about Team Nintendo, but I'll just mention a couple of memorable trips. My favorite trip was during the StarFox rollout tour. Not because I was sent to a Super K-Mart in Cleveland, but because Mercury astronaut Scott Carpenter was our special guest. I shared a limo ride with him from the hotel to the K-Mart, and let me tell you, he is a true gentleman. He was easy to talk to, genuine, and not full of himself at all. At the event, you could tell he was a real believer in getting the next generation of future astronauts excited about the space program, even though the tie-in with a fictional space shooter video game was a stretch at best.

My "Waterloo" was in Dallas during the SNES NHL Stanley Cup rollout. I didn't know until I arrived on location that I was going to emcee the event in the middle of a mall! I do just fine with the press, with the gamers, radio, TV, print...but when you thrust a microphone in my hand and expect me to wing it, to be charming, to keep the event going smooth...picture tumbleweeds, crickets chirping. I bombed. I even managed to get the evil eye from three Dallas Stars hockey players when I said they would be happy to sign a few autographs, when in fact they weren't. Oops!

I had a blast doing Team Nintendo, and would do it all over again in a heart-



> counselor interview, cont.

beat.

[Limbo]: Could you elaborate a bit more about when you worked in Product Acquisition & Development? What exactly did that department handle and what was your job within? Also, why was it called “The Treehouse”?

[TK]: The Treehouse - PA&D was just that. We were responsible for acquiring and developing new titles. Some of the big games and deals of the time (DKC, StarFox, Killer Instinct, Cruisin’ USA, etc) were filtered through our group.

I was a Product Coordinator, and I did a lot of everything. I wrote and edited instruction manuals, worked with vendors to create masters for boxes and manuals, acted as a go-between for our department and the developers such as Rare and DMA, and evaluated games on the formal NOA evaluation chart system (it was kind of an asterisk-shaped chart, and I think the numbers ran low to high from the middle out, and then you connected the dots to form a polyhedron of sorts - I don’t recall how many categories or how many points were possible, though).

I recorded gameplay footage. LOTS of gameplay footage! I would go to a local shop called Western Video, and a technician would hook up whatever console we needed to high-end recording gear, and off I went. The gameplay footage had a number of uses: B-roll tapes that PR would mail to the media, compilations for use at events and tradeshows, in-house demos, you name it, we recorded it. I got to be a half-decent video producer, and had fun working with those folks to make tapes. I also took hun-

dreds, maybe thousands of screen shots too. And there was a fair amount of filing and grunt work too. I also continued to do a little PR work, but no longer as a member of Team Nintendo.

Sometimes games were completed but never released. SNES Comanche was one of those. At the time, I thought it was pretty weird to go through all that work and spend all that money, only to shelve it forever. Later in life, when I worked at Kemco, and we released Batman: Dark Tomorrow, I wish we had pulled a Comanche and never released BDT. But NOA/NCL had much deeper pockets than Kemco, and could afford to eat a few titles. Kemco, not so much...

Oh, and The Treehouse name - I think it was simply the name of the room we were located in. All the big conference rooms had names (Zelda, etc). I guess because ours was one of the few secure rooms & we were working on Donkey Kong Country at the time, The Treehouse name just fit.

[Limbo]: Were there any titles you had a chance to play that were unreleased and were actually enjoyable to you?

[TK]: My all-time favorite unreleased title was for the SNES. It was Taloon’s Mystery Dungeon by Chun Soft, and it hooked me big time! I was such a Taloon’s junkie that I was truly bummed when the folks upstairs in Product Testing needed the EPROM cart back. I still have my Happy Music Box that Chun Soft sent me for being one of the first Americans to reach the bottom of the dungeon - I’m not sure how true that is, but it made me very happy at the time!

[Limbo]: Do you have any memorable moments of meeting with any of the Nintendo Heavyweights (Howard Lincoln, Shigeru Miyamoto, Gunpei Yokoi, etc.)?

[TK]: The place would always buzz whenever Miyamoto-san was in the house, and I did get to meet him a couple of times. Thankfully I didn’t pull a Wayne’s World (“We’re not worthy!”) like the guys from Die Hard Game Fan magazine did to him one year at CES (or was it E3?) Mr. M didn’t really know what the hell was going on, so he just kind of smiled and bowed and moved on.

One of my first business trips was with Howard and Peter Main (Executive VP of Sales & Marketing) to New York. I even had to buy a suit and tie, which was a stretch for a shorts & t-shirt guy like me. We sat in a conference room with a bunch of Wall Street types, talking about financial stuff that was way over my head. But my part was easy; I just needed to talk about a bunch of new and upcoming titles and why I thought they would appeal to gamers, stuff like that. It earned me a nice kudos letter in my file. Howard and Peter both treated me nicely, even though I was a very junior level employee.

[Limbo]: You mentioned you’ve been in the gaming industry for nearly two decades. What did you do after your time with Nintendo, and did your time and contacts from working at Nintendo help you obtain these other jobs?

[TK]: Working as a GPC was a great start for many future game industry workers, myself included. In a nutshell:

After a year as a Product Coordinator



> *counselor interview, cont.*

in Product Acquisition & Development, I was hired as a Game Designer for Lobotomy Software (a developer founded by three former Nintendo employees). Lobotomy went under about three years later, and some of us landed at Crave Studios in Seattle. After Crave closed up shop, I eventually ended up at Wizards of The Coast as an Editor. That was actually my geek zenith, because I've been a D&D player longer than I was an electronic gamer. Working on D&D products and seeing my name in print was like the first time I saw my name in the Credits section of SNES Donkey Kong Country (it was only under 'Support' but still very cool).

Then it was time to try my hand at testing! I worked on the original wave of Xbox launch titles. If you ever thought game testing was a cushy gig, think again! It beats flipping burgers, but it's not all fun and games. Next stop was Kemco, where I was a Product Manager and then Producer. Last but not least was some contract work at Microsoft as an Editor, working on their gaming websites.

I've been a stay-at-home dad for three years now, but who knows, once my kids are older, maybe I'll see if I can get back in the game (bad pun intentional).

Over the years, I ran into many former GPCs, and yes, networking does pay off when one is bouncing from job to job. I sometimes wonder what life would be like if I had never left NOA, but I don't regret leaving - I worked with some great people

and did a lot of fun things at my various stops after Nintendo.

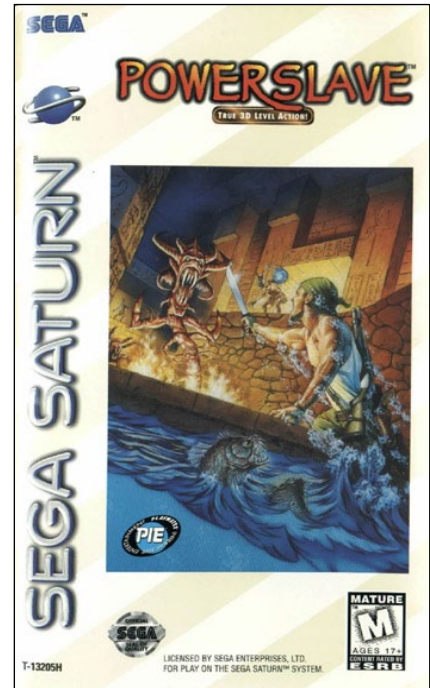
[Limbo]: Lobotomy Software had a pretty big hit with the game Power Slave. Did you do any work on that game, or their ports of Quake & Duke Nukem 3-D for the Sega Saturn? Did they have any games under development that never made it to completion?

I was the in-house test lead for Powerslave, and wrote the manual as well. It didn't do that well on the PC, but the Saturn fans loved it! I guess that explains why Quake and Duke did so well on Saturn. Awesome games. We also wasted too many hours playing Death Tank - are you familiar with DT? Death Tank, ready for action!!!

Projects that never saw the light of day...there were two I recall off the top of my head. One was Gothic, a monster-themed RTS (C&C and StarCraft were big back then). Instead of tanks and infantry, we used classic monsters - werewolves, frankensteins, etc. Heh, when we pitched the game to Playmates, we sent the concept pitch in a "Book of the Dead" style tome, and also sent a bunch of animal organs in jars for good measure! Don't worry, we got the guts from a local butcher.

The other one was Mortificator, and that was going to be a FPS based in the Mutant Chronicles universe. You would play as Crenshaw the Mortificator, and it was supposed to be a mix of stealth and firepower. I totally bought into the MC universe. I thought it was pretty cool when they finally released the MC movie. Too bad it was just plain awful! It was still fun to watch, though, because I knew the property and backstory, so that kind of made sense to me.

[Limbo]: Do your kids know that you used to work in the video game industry? If you've told



them, what do they think of it?

[TK]: Yeah, they know that both mommy and daddy used to work at Nintendo (my wife started there two weeks after I left and stayed there for 12 or 13 years). But they know that daddy had the fun job playing games, and mommy wrote contracts in the Legal department.

I'm sure when they are older it might sink in that their old man was a gamer back in his youth, and if I can maintain a decent skill level they won't totally "pwn" me in whatever games we play down the road.

[Limbo]: What are some of your favorite games of all time...any platform, any system?

[TK]: In no particular order: the Zelda series, the Metroid series, SMB3, the Mario Kart series, StarFox 64, LEGO Star Wars/Indy/Batman (360), Death Tank Zwei (Saturn), PowerSlave (Saturn), Torneko: The Last Hope (PlayStation), FIFA Soccer (various years), EA's NHL series (various years), Tetris (GameBoy). I still have a soft spot in my heart for some of my first NES games like Jackal, Top Gun, Castlevania, Goal!, Blades of Steel, and a couple others.

[Limbo]: Do you still take a break



> counselor interview, cont.

from life every once in a while to play games? If you do, do you go for the new games or stick with the classics?

[TK]: Once a gamer, always a gamer! After I left NOA, I became a lot more selective about the games I played. I think a lot of us former GPCs suffered from GBS (Game Burnout Syndrome) – after years of playing hundreds of NES, SNES, and Game Boy titles, you pretty much reach a saturation level – and for me, I stopped worrying about quantity of games played and focused on titles and genres I enjoyed playing.

I got into MMOs for some time – I played Asheron's Call for 6 years, and Everquest II for 2-3 years, but sort of burned out on those as well.

Now I spend my gaming time with my kids (5, 7, and 9) on a variety of platforms. We love the LEGO titles on Xbox 360, they each have their own Nintendo DS, and they even like to play on my GameCube and N64. I'll break out the SNES and NES one of these days!

[Limbo]: Are there any words in closing that you would like to say?

[TK]: I always look back fondly on my time at NOA. Sure, it wasn't perfect, but most companies aren't. In the end, I always think about all the opportunities I had there as well as the good people I was fortunate enough to work with. That was the one thing that hit me hardest when I decided to leave NOA to try my hand as a game designer – all the great people I would miss working with. It was like leaving my family.

Nintendo also did a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff that usually wasn't publicized. People used to be able to arrange tours of NOA, see the GPCs in action (ooh) and walk through the merchandising area (aah) to see all the cool stuff on display. I sensed for most kids it was like going somewhere top secret, a place only rumored to exist – I mean, did Nintendo REALLY have a bunch of people sitting around playing games and talking to gamers who needed help?

The Starlight Foundation arranged some of the tours for kids who were terribly sick or suffering from rare disorders... things of that nature. For those kids, the

tours were even more special than, say, a group of Cub Scouts. It was an eye-opener to me, as most people normally don't think about kids getting sick and dying way too young. Now that I'm a father, it's an experience I can look back on and the context truly falls into place all these years later.

I previously mentioned that my wife worked at NOA. She had not been there very long when she was diagnosed with advanced liver cancer. Early prognosis was not good – we were basically told to make her as comfortable as possible before she inevitably died. Well, I'm happy to report she didn't die, and has been in remission for over a decade plus now.

Nintendo was always there for her, both as a corporation and as a collection of human beings who cared for one of their own. I don't have the right words to describe my feelings, suffice to say I will always remember how generous everyone there was in a very dark time, and they will always have my humble thanks and gratitude.