Preserving Our Digital Heritage. Experiences from the Pelikonepeijoonit Project.

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Pelikonepeijoonit is a private Finnish computer and game console museum project run by three collectors. During its 7 years, the project has evolved from a small personal collection to a digital heritage preservation project, also bringing together other individuals with shared interests. The Pelikonepeijoonit museum currently hosts around 250 different devices, thousands of games and several hundred related items. The collection can be viewed online at http://www.pelikonepeijoonit.net/. In this paper, we discuss the overall goals of the project, its current status and draw conclusions on the meaning and challenges of such work.

The museum-owned devices mostly range from the 1970’s to the 1990’s, which obviously coincides with the domestication of the microprocessor and related appliances. Suominen (2003) and Saarikoski (2001; 2004) provide an overview of the period from a Finnish point of view. Saarikoski focuses especially on hobbyist use such as computer games. The compact overview by Haddon (2002) provides an international perspective to the same period. For more in-depth discussion we direct the reader to Kent (2001), Forster (2005) and Bagnall (2005). From these sources alone, the vast number of different artifacts becomes apparent, setting a challenging goal for museums wishing to obtain a comprehensive collection. As an example, according to Bagnall (2005, p. 468) over 1200 games were released for Commodore 64 in both 1987 and 1988.

When compared to tangible artifacts, the digital artifacts have two notable properties: they can be infinitely reproduced and they are easily lost for good. The thirty-year old home computer history is already in threat of lost heritage because of aging hardware and software, inaccessible media, lack of know-how and supportive legislation (UNESCO 2003). Books and other written material are one way of preserving the heritage, but even more important is the preservation of artifacts in order to facilitate future research. Personal collections and community websites such as old-computers.com with archives are two common ground-level approaches to the preservation. Such approaches are static and communicative by nature, whereas emulators running old software provide users with an interactive experience. From a heritage perspective, it is unfortunate that emulation is inherently illegal because of copyright legislation.

The Pelikonepeijoonit project originates from the private collections of three enthusiasts who wanted to display their collections online and find like-minded hobbyists to share views and trade items with. The oldest of the collections, that of Mikko Heinonen, dates back to 1992. The Pelikonepeijoonit.net website was first published on May 2nd, 1999 and has been online since. At time of writing, the website has had slightly over 200,000 visitors. Presenting the material in English has enabled people
from all over the world to visit and exchange ideas. Due to its unique nature, especially within Finland, the site has also received a fair amount of public attention. Parts of the collection have been on display in various locations, ranging from gaming industry trade shows to actual museum exhibitions. As the site is a private project with no interests for profit, most of these projects have been carried out simply to promote popular knowledge of vintage computers and video games.

Especially in Finland, interest in the history of computers and digital games was almost non-existent when the museum project started. This was clearly reflected in the way significant additions to the collection could be found in second-hand stores and in people’s willingness to donate entire systems. During the past 7 years, we have seen public interest increase to a level where it is not uncommon for second-hand gaming items from past decades to go for hundreds of euros in online auctions. Game companies regularly re-release their classic titles, and indeed, the latest gaming system from Nintendo, the Wii, is not only backwards compatible with the previous system, but can also download and play games ranging back to the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1985 (Kent 2001, p. 296).

However, while this development has been beneficial for the general understanding of our digital heritage, it has done little to promote the actual preservation of it. Games and software downloaded from the Internet and used on new systems do not contain the original case artwork or manual. Very often, they have been reprogrammed to a degree to allow them to run on new hardware. Also, promotional material is often discarded immediately once new games, computers or other systems become available. This is understandable, since the industry progresses extremely rapidly, but at the same time, important parts of history are in danger of being eradicated completely.

At the same time, most public museums are concerned with items of traditional antique. It may be hard for them, and their visitors, to acknowledge something 10 years old as being of relevant historical value. In the context of digital entertainment, however, this is a significant portion of recorded history (cf. UNESCO 2003). Private collections and hobbyists are able to help; if the items are stored properly, they will be available for mainstream historians in due time. The problem of the private sector is, however, that it is still too dispersed. Individuals collect and archive items for their personal reasons, and there may even be unwillingness to share findings with other collectors. The rising trend of online auction prices has lead many owners of individual items to try and sell their historical artefacts to the highest bidder — who may or may not be willing to share, say, the contents of a ROM chip containing a prototype stage game in the interest of preservation.

It is our opinion that, in order for our digital history to be properly preserved, a new type of co-operation needs to exist among hobbyists as well as between hobbyists and researchers. Hobbyists need to be more aware of the importance of their work, while historians need to broaden their views in terms of what may be considered ‘historical’. Only this way, we can store items once they become obsolete, and at the same time, build a comprehensive understanding of our digital past.
References


Kent, Steven L. (2001): *The ultimate history of video games: from Pong to Pokemon — the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. Prima Publishing.


