

# 40 YEARS OF SNK

FROM ARCADE MACHINES TO CONSOLES AND FROM FIGHTING GAMES TO THEME PARKS, **SNK** HAS DONE IT ALL. WE SPEAK TO STAFF FROM THE COMPANY'S PAST AND PRESENT TO FIND OUT ABOUT THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF THE LAST FOUR DECADES

Words by Nick Thorpe

**W**ith 2018 being SNK's 40th anniversary year, the company is celebrating as its fans would hope. SNK is healthy and creating brand-new

games, as well as celebrating its heritage with a mini Neo-Geo and a compilation of early arcade games. But its road to this milestone hasn't always been a smooth one. The company has been one of the arcade industry's top players and was the first to prove that a market exists for luxury consoles, but it has also experienced bankruptcy and even seemed to have left the videogames market behind in the not-too-distant past. But whatever its fortunes, SNK has always been a fascinating company to follow.

SNK was founded as Shin Nihon Kikaku (New Japanese Product) in 1973 by Ekichi Kawasaki, but its history as a videogame developer only dates back to its incorporation as a stock company in July 1978. The company started with capital of 3 million yen (less than \$25,000 at the time), with the company setting up its office in Higashiosaka. SNK's earliest games were *Ozma Wars* and *Safari Rally*, but its first major hit was a shoot-'em-up called *Vanguard* which offered four-way

shooting and levels which scrolled in different directions. The game didn't just hit big in Japan, as *Centuri* licensed it for the North American market and the game's success there saw it licensed for home conversion by Atari. This success was followed by more games including *Lasso*, *Marvin's Maze* and *Vanguard II*.

The early years of SNK were characterised by the explosive growth of the company. By the end of 1983, the company had ten times its starting capital. In 1984 it moved its headquarters to Osaka, where the company grew at a rapid pace. In September 1985 it had increased its capital by 18 million yen, another 60 per cent growth in less than two years, and the following year was a landmark. 1986 saw the company officially change its name to SNK, which it had been using on marketing materials for some years prior, and it introduced some notable hit games that proved popular with gamers such as *Ikan Warriors* and *Athena*. Both games received follow-ups to capitalise on their success in the form of *Victory Road* and *Psycho Soldier*. The company also moved into the development of games for home systems, most notably the NES.



\*[Arcade] *Ozma Wars* is a fantastic early take on the shoot-'em-up genre and it still presents a challenge today.



# HARDCORE HARDWARE

SNK released four distinct home systems in the Nineties - here are the fast facts on each



## NEO-GEO AES

**RELEASE DATE:** 1990  
**FINAL RELEASE:** *Samurai Shodown V Special*, 2004  
**LAUNCH PRICE:** ¥58,000 / \$649 / £399  
**GAMES:** 117  
**NOTES:** Initially offered as a 'Gold System' bundle with two controllers and a game. Later models included the Controller Pro joystick.

## NEO-GEO CD

**RELEASE DATE:** 1994  
**FINAL RELEASE:** *The King Of Fighters '99*, 1999  
**LAUNCH PRICE:** ¥49,800 / \$399 / £399  
**GAMES:** 97  
**NOTES:** Three versions of the console were released - a front-loading model, a top-loading model and the CDZ.

## NEO-GEO POCKET

**RELEASE DATE:** 1998  
**FINAL RELEASE:** *Samurai Shodown!*, 1998  
**LAUNCH PRICE:** ¥7,800  
**GAMES:** 39  
**NOTES:** 39 Neo-Geo Pocket Color games also support the original Neo-Geo Pocket hardware.



## NEO-GEO POCKET COLOR

**RELEASE DATE:** 1999  
**FINAL RELEASE:** *SNK Vs Capcom: Card Fighters Clash 2 Expand Edition*, 2001  
**LAUNCH PRICE:** ¥8,900 / \$699 / £599  
**GAMES:** 73  
**NOTES:** Backwards compatible with all nine original Neo-Geo Pocket games.

## "GAME CONSOLES IN THE EIGHTIES HAD VERY LIMITED DISPLAY SPECS"

Hiroko Yokoyama

► One of the developers that joined during this period was Kasatoshi Yoshino. "I would say there were roughly 100 people working at SNK when I joined the company," remembers Yoshino, who joined in April 1985. Hiroko "Minako" Yokoyama, who joined SNK in April 1987 as an illustrator and graphic artist, provides a little more detail. "I mostly remember the development division, which was divided at that time into four planning, one sound and one software departments for approximately 30 employees. There were four to five people in each planning department." Although videogames tends to be considered a male-dominated industry, Yokoyama wasn't the only woman at SNK. "There was at least one female staff working in every development department, but also at the sound and the marketing divisions."

**Y**oshino's job as a developer was a varied and enjoyable one. "I took care of the follow-up on the planning and debug on all the titles released between 1985 and 1987," he explains. "I was really excited to be involved in game development. I had a lot of fun and good times when I went for lunch with my coworkers, and talked with them about videogaming." However, this

excitement went hand in hand with hard work. "I also remember being busy, sleeping for a few hours in a hotel close to the company, and working from early in the morning until the middle of the night searching for eventual bugs and issues on titles just before release." Yoshino's recollection of SNK as a place where enthusiastic gamers worked hard explains how he ended up doubling up as a sound composer on *ASO* and other games. Despite the size of the company at the time, there was a surprising degree of flexibility around each person's job. "As the sound department had no staff when I joined SNK along with a programmer, we started working at creating sound," was later promoted as "super adviser", which allowed me to give my opinion and advice on sound creation." Continuing from that, Yoshino later became SNK's PR manager. "I was mainly doing marketing research. I was in charge of events in collaboration with game magazines, planned game strategy books, community fan books such as 'Video Game Land', telephone services, and many more projects."

Yoshino wasn't the only one who found that SNK was a place to experience new challenges. "I remember it was very hard at the beginning as I had to learn and remember tons of things," explains Yokoyama. "I was from design school, which means drawing was the only thing I was able to do when I joined SNK. I had no experience at all with computers, and had a lot of busy days at SNK."

"It depended on the game, but I was usually involved from half a year to one year per project. I also remember working two full years on a project. Dot pixels before the Neo-Geo were mainly made with Sony's SMC-777 development tools. SMC-777s were used to create *Ikar Warriors* on MSX-2. We had a lot of difficulties and headaches when porting arcade games to home consoles, due to the technical limitations of those systems. Game consoles in the Eighties had very limited display specs."

Yokoyama's explanation of the design philosophy behind SNK's games at this time goes a long way to explaining their success. "Mr Oba [Koji Oba] made

sure when he was working on titles such as *TNK III*, *Ikar Warriors* and *Guerrilla War* that the enemy positions as well as the game difficulty would slightly change at every try for endless replayability. He also made sure to add an 'exit way' to every in-game situation that looked unescapable. These difficult games were not just giving frustration to players, but hid also the pleasure to see enemies changing their position and behaviors depending on [how] these games were played."

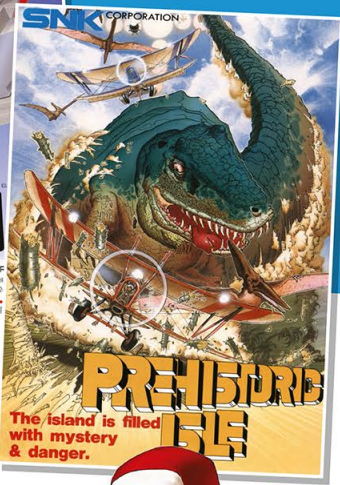
**A**s it reached its tenth birthday, SNK was in a strong position. The company had just moved into a new headquarters, and 1989 saw the company release more arcade games than any previous year. The momentum continued right through to the end of the Eighties, with plenty of arcade releases including the company's first ever one-on-one fighting game, *Street Smart*. The company was also becoming a more ambitious developer of games for home systems, starting work on the Game Boy with *Dexterity* and finding receptive audiences on the NES with original projects such as *Baseball Stars* and *Crystals*.

However, it was in 1990 that SNK's arcade division took its next major step into the future. The company introduced a popular lightgun game called *Beast Busters* that year, utilising a unique cabinet with three mounted guns. It's notable not just because of its heritage, but because it marks the end of the pre-Neo-Geo era. The Neo-Geo range kicked off with the MVS arcade board. Games were offered on relatively affordable replaceable cartridges, and boards featured up to six cartridge slots, allowing for owners to add more games without taking up additional floor space. Other companies had previously marketed similar systems, but these had generally been based on home console hardware, which lagged far behind what could be found in arcades. SNK approached the situation from the opposite direction, as the MVS was a thoroughly modern arcade board - and the home console equivalent was, too.



• [Left] An early arcade flyer, showing of SNK's interesting isometric take on Pac-Man, Marvin's Maze.

• [Below] SNK's flyers did a great job at making arcade owners excited about stocking its latest games.



• [Neo-Geo] *Geomark of The Witches* is considered by many to be one of the finest looking 2D fighting games of all time. It's hard to disagree.



• Yasuyuki Oda joined SNK as an artist and now a producer



• [Above] *Fantasy* was an impressive early release from SNK that featured all sorts of varied levels and a strong narration.

• [Right] *Alpha Mission* is known as *ASO: Armored Scrum Object* in Japan.





## "AT THE TIME IT WASN'T UNCOMMON FOR PEOPLE TO PULL ALL-NIGHTERS. THERE WAS ALWAYS SOMEBODY AT THE OFFICE"

Yasuyuki Oda

▶ Apart from being very convenient and affordable for arcade operators, the system offered a good mix of games. Early titles included such diverse games as *NAIM-1975*, *Puzzled*, *King Of The Monsters*, *Magician Lord* and *Super Baseball 2020*. One early hit that proved pivotal was *Fatal Fury*, a fighting game from former *Street Fighter* creator Takashi Nishiyama. Following up on the success of the game and popularity of the genre, SNK started a number of series including *Art Of Fighting*, *Samurai Shodown* and eventually the crossover *King Of Fighters* series, and gained a formidable reputation as a developer of fighting games. These were all successful games that allowed the company to grow rapidly, and as time went on SNK specialised in the genre. "Since I studied animation in school, I thought I'd work in either the games industry or the animation industry," says Yasuyuki Oda, who joined during this period of expansion and worked on many fighting games for SNK until 2000, before returning to the company in 2014. "I'm from Osaka, and in Osaka you've got Konami, Capcom and SNK. I applied to all three in 1993 and was accepted at SNK."

You might be surprised to learn that even working with the Neo-Geo, developers still felt limited by the hardware. "The specs for the system weren't actually that high, so we had to develop tricks to get the games to display as we wanted them to display," says Oda. "For example, to create a weak punch, you'd have three frames of animation, and display them one, two, three, two, one to show the arm coming back. For a heavy punch, you could reuse the first two frames and then finish with a new fourth frame for the hit, then go backwards from three to one as the arm comes back."

Despite the company's growing success, the culture at SNK remained the same, with creators who were passionate about what they made. "There was competition between the teams, but it was a positive kind of rivalry. My favourite game from the other teams was *Samurai Shodown II*." Of course, that meant



▶ (Neo-Geo) Showing off some impressive fiery effects in the enjoyable tertiary plotline *Magician Lord*.

but the culture of hard work also persisted. "The laws are very different now, but at the time it wasn't uncommon for people to pull all-nighters. There was always somebody at the office," Oda recalls. "There was a time that I was so busy that I was only allowed two hours on Sunday to go home and get clothes for the week. One week, the train fare from Shin-Osaka to the office in Osaka was 160 yen. When I came back, the fare was 180 yen and that was when I was finally able to read that there was a new prime minister."

**B**uoyed by its success and aiming to bring its games to a wider audience, SNK announced the Neo-Geo CD console at the Tokyo Toy Show in June 1994 and released it in September. The theory behind this move made sense. Although CDs were slow to load (especially with the console's single-speed CD-ROM drive), they were cheaper to produce than the smallest Neo-Geo cartridges and offered greater storage capacity than the biggest. A bit more work was required to convert the games but they could be enhanced with CD audio and sold much more cheaply, with prices ranging from 4,800 yen to 7,800 yen. Greater third-party involvement and dedicated home games were also slated for the system, including reports of an updated version of *Crystalis*. With its sights firmly set on mass market success, there was no rental trial for this machine – instead, SNK embarked on a promotional tour of six cities, starting in Hokkaido.

The Neo-Geo CD hardware itself was introduced at a high price because the system required significantly more RAM than its cartridge counterpart, but that didn't stop the system selling out its initial stock of 30,000 on day one. The Neo-Geo CD had over 30 games by the end of 1994, and in 1995 it started to receive games like *Puzzle Bobble* that didn't appear in cartridge form, and received exclusive developments such as *Crossed Swords 2*. However, these were thin on the ground and the flagship game *Samurai Shodown RPG* was heavily delayed. What's more, the Saturn and PlayStation both launched within a few months of the Neo-Geo CD's introduction, and both consoles were cheaper and capable of displaying ▶

## SNK'S STARS

SNK has produced some iconic characters over the years. How many of these do you recognise?

### TERRY BOGARD

■ Whether he's wearing his iconic red jacket or his stylish *Mark Of The Wolves* outfit, the 'hungry wolf' is SNK's most noteworthy hero. He originally pursues revenge against Geese Howard, and later becomes an adoptive father to Rock Howard.

### MAI SHIRANUI

■ Introduced in *Fatal Fury 2*, Mai is one of SNK's most popular fighters. She's smitten with Andy Bogard, who trained with her family, and she's recently cameoed in *Dead Or Alive 5: Last Round*.

### GEESSE HOWARD

■ The most recognisable villain in the SNK universe is emblematic of difficult fighting game bosses. Despite his propensity for falling off of tall buildings, he's a constant thorn in Terry's side and even makes a cameo appearance in *Tekken 7*.

### HAOHMARU

■ This swordsman is the most recognisable character of the *Samurai Shodown* series, and is a lover of food and sake. He has a deadly rivalry with his former training partner Genjuro Kibagami.

### NAKORURU

■ A reluctant fighter who is dedicated to her mission of protecting nature. Though her weapon has a short range, Nakoruru is fast and has the assistance of her hawk, Mamahaha or her wolf Shikuru.

### AMAKUSA

■ A vengeful spirit resurrected by the malevolent god Ambrosia. Amakusa's goal is to bring Ambrosia into the mortal realm.

### MARCO ROSSI

■ The combat leader of FF Squad, the heroic faction of the *Metal Slug* games. His resignation was denied after the events of the first game, and surprisingly he's also a talented programmer.

### TARMA ROVING

■ A member of the PF Squad and a friend of Marco's, Tarma is less serious than his comrade. He had intended to set up a motorcycle shop after Morden was defeated, but his superior coaxed him back into service.

### GENERAL DONALD MORDEN

■ The main antagonist of the *Metal Slug* series. He was driven to insanity after his son was killed in a bombing, and joined the rebel army. Morden has been known to make odd alliances, including teaming up with Martians.

### G-MANTLE

■ This masked fellow is an oddity – though he's never been the star of his own game, he was frequently seen in early Neo-Geo advertising and has cameoed in games such as *The King Of Fighters 2000* and *Card Fighters Clash*.

### NEO POKE-KUN

■ A Neo-Geo Pocket mascot and the star of *Ganbare Neo Poke-Kun*, a game in which Neo Poke-Kun lives in your console and makes minigames. He also cameos with Yuku in *Neogeo Bottle Cadeum*.

### ATHENA

■ A princess who lands in the *Fantasy World* as a result of boredom and curiosity. Her descendant Athena Asamiya is in *Psycho Soldier*, and she's a secret boss in SNK vs Capcom: SVC Chaos.

### KYO KUSANAGI

■ Introduced as the face of *The King Of Fighters '94*, Kyo is a student who has the ability to create flames, which makes him a devastating fighter – and a target for organisations which wish to clone or kill him.

### IORI YAGAMI

■ Introduced in *The King Of Fighters '95* and quickly became popular. He bears a personal grudge against Kyo, and his purple flames are caused by the curse of the evil Orochi.

### RUGAL BERNSTEIN

■ A ruthless arms dealer and the organiser of the *King Of Fighters* tournaments in 1994 and 1995, this villain likes to preserve the bodies of foes in liquid metal as statues. He was created to be the ultimate boss, and he's tough as nails.

### RYO SAKAZAKI

■ *Art Of Fighting* introduced us to this serious karate practitioner, as he searched for his kidnapped sister Yui. His dog is always looking for recruits, and he's got a bit of an eye for his former foe Kyo.

### ROBERT GARCIA

■ Another Kyodogen karate user, Robert joins his best friend Ryo in the search for Yui. He's hot-headed and wealthy, unlike Ryo, and despite being from Italy he speaks Japanese with the Kansai dialect, which is commonly associated with comedians.

### MR KARATE

■ A fearsome fighter wearing a Tengai mask, and the final boss of *Art Of Fighting*. He's later revealed as Takuma Sakazaki, a karate dojo owner working for Geese Howard because of threats against his children Ryo and Yui.



▶ (Above) Rari Warriors was one of SNK's first big surprise hits in the west.

▶ (Right) It might look superficially similar, but *The Last Blade* is very different to the *Samurai Shodown* series.





## DESIGNER PIXELS

Hiroko Yokoyama explains the graphical development of some of SNK's most recognisable games

How much support did you have from the *Ikaru Warriors* arcade team when working on the MSX2 version?

Mr Oba [Koji Oba], who was the main leader of the team in charge of the arcade version of *Ikaru Warriors*, helped us a lot when porting the game to MSX2. He shared with us the dot pixel data of the original game. Unfortunately, the map data was missing, and we had a lot of trouble because of this.

What sort of materials did you use for reference and inspiration when working on *Guevara* (*Guerrilla War*)?

There were almost no books about Che Guevara in Osaka in 1997. I had to go to one of the biggest book stores in Osaka, where I finally found three books about Che Guevara's life. There was also very little documentation about Cuba at that time, but I found a few pages about this country and its streets in a magazine for men. It was way after I thought I should have searched in secondhand bookstores for books about Che Guevara that were published in Japan in Sixties and already out of print.

*Crystalis* had a fantasy theme, unlike the military games you worked on beforehand. How did you come up with the character designs for this game?

The development of the game had already started when I was involved in this game, and I was told by the original team members that I could draw freely, as long as the main character had red hair and was wearing blue armour. I used manga and anime that were popular in Japan at that time for my reference, and proposed to the planners three variations of Media. After being informed on the details of the Four Sages, I started working on their design. I also made sure to draw Athena and Kenou as adult versions of Psycho Soldiers. I drew monsters in dot pixels, but also some imagined from the game settings and atmosphere. After the planners chose and approved the design of the Four Sages, I polished and added details to these characters until their final design got approved.



«[Arcade] SNK is known for its stellar sprite art, and that's been a fact since its early games like *Guerrilla War*.



«[Neo-Geo Pocket] SNK's first portable console didn't last long before it was given a colour upgrade.

► 3D graphics. SNK introduced the Neo-Geo CDZ in December 1995, which delivered faster loading times, but it couldn't halt the format's decline – there were fewer games released in the Neo-Geo CD's last four years than its first four months.

Even as early as the mid-Nineties, the original Neo-Geo hardware seemed to be nearing the end of its natural life as a flagship product. Still, SNK made advances in other areas, as the company launched a chain of Neo-Geo Land arcade locations. The first Neo-Geo World was launched in Tsukuba in December 1995, offering a variety of attractions including simulator rides, bowling, karaoke rooms, restaurants and plenty of arcade games. In 1996, the Neo Print amusement photo booth was introduced, which allowed users to decorate their photos and print them to stickers. The company also began to develop games for other platforms again, beginning with Neo-Geo conversions for the PlayStation and Saturn in 1996.

SNK had plenty of reasons to think that the future would be bright. In order to prepare for that future, a number of changes were made in 1997. Neo-Geo AES and CD consoles were discontinued, though game production would continue as the MVS continued to receive support. In the home, SNK would continue to produce arcade conversions, but also original projects for the PlayStation. For arcades, SNK launched an MVS successor: the 3D-capable Hyper Neo-Geo 64, with the driving game *Road's Edge* as its debut release.

"I WASN'T A BIG FAN OF THE HYPER NEO-Geo 64. I WOULD'VE PREFERRED TO WORK ON THE PLAYSTATION"

Yasuyuki Oda

Unfortunately for SNK, that bright future was a false dawn. Part of the problem was that the Hyper Neo-Geo 64 failed to succeed the Neo-Geo MVS. One key reason for this was that it sacrificed one of the key selling points of its older hardware. The arcade market was shifting away from games with joysticks and buttons, towards dedicated driving and lightgun cabinets. The Hyper Neo-Geo 64 had to support them, and it did. But the beauty of the MVS was that it was a universal platform, and Hyper Neo-Geo 64 boards weren't – hardware designed to play driving games wouldn't play the fighting games, for example.

**H**owever, there were bigger problems than that. "I wasn't a big fan of the Hyper Neo-Geo 64. I would've preferred to work on the PlayStation, it had better specs," says Oda. However, the board wasn't just underpowered – its 3D interpretations of *Samurai Shodown* and *Fatal Fury* failed to achieve the same acclaim as the 2D originals. "This is just my opinion, this isn't an official line from the company, but the people who worked on the Hyper Neo-Geo 64 weren't the same people who worked on the original Neo-Geo. I think that was the main problem." Hyper Neo-Geo 64 game production never overtook MVS production, and the board saw its final release less than two years after its debut. This left SNK in an awkward situation, reliant on the aged MVS hardware, and without the resources to attempt a second successor.

One area in which SNK could still leverage its expertise in creating 2D games was the handheld market, and it developed the Neo-Geo Pocket for introduction in 1998. However, the console, a black



«[Neo-Geo Pocket Color] It doesn't have a vast library of games, but the NGPC does have some cracking titles.

and white handheld, launched just as Nintendo finally moved the Game Boy line into colour. Early sales were brisk, but the console would never leave Japan – the rest of the world would receive its successor. "In 1998 I met with John Barone who showed me a prototype of the Neo-Geo Pocket Color," says Ben Herman, who joined SNK America in 1999 as vice president of sales and marketing. "The opportunity to set up sales and to sell the product with its great titles was too great of an opportunity to pass up. And a salary too!"

The Neo-Geo Pocket Color was a serious attempt to gain a foothold in the market, with wide distribution and visible marketing. When the console arrived in 1999, it was cheaper than the Game Boy Color, offered better visuals and similar battery life. Versions of its arcade classics including *King Of Fighters*, *Metal Slug* and *Samurai Shodown* were all made available within the first year. What's more, SNK established partnerships to bring *Pac-Man*, *Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Puzzle Bobble* to the platform, although it did have to develop some of these internally. By E3 2000, the Neo-Geo Pocket Color had claimed a two per cent share of the North American handheld market – a small percentage, but it represented an audience that was

able to make the operation profitable. "With third-party support, we could have hit three per cent in three years. It's all about the games," says Ben.

That opportunity would never come, as SNK was in trouble. In January 2000, pachinko manufacturer Aruze purchased SNK and absorbed it as a subsidiary. By April, the company employed 185 fewer people than it had a year prior, and in June the company withdrew the Neo-Geo Pocket Color from non-Japanese markets. Boxes and manuals were pulped, and cartridges were intended for reuse in the Japanese market. This wouldn't come to pass and most stock wound up back in the wild via liquidation.



«Ben Herman spent two spells at SNK in the USA between 1999 and 2008

**S**NK enjoyed a high profile in 2000 thanks to its crossover projects with Capcom, which saw both companies produce great games. But as its characters fought for supremacy in fighting games and trading card games, SNK was fighting to survive. "Aruze bankrupted SNK," opines Ben, and it's certainly true that the company went into rapid decline under its ownership. Arcade game production diminished to the point that *The King Of Fighters 2001* was contracted out to external developers, and in Japan the Neo-Geo Pocket Color turned into an outlet for Aruze-branded pachislot games. In October 2001, SNK went bankrupt. However, the SNK story was far from over.

"Playmore was a brilliant move. SNK overcame the bankruptcy situation in court," says Ben. SNK founder Eiki Kawasaki had seen the bankruptcy coming, and established a holding company in August 2001. The first step to overcoming the collapse of the original company was purchasing SNK's properties, allowing the company to resume production of Neo-Geo arcade games. These still had to be developed externally – Playmore worked



«[Arcade] *Samurai Shodown* was one of several games that SNK released on Atomiswave hardware.

40 YEARS OF SNH





# NEO-GEO WORLD TOUR

A guide to global SNK hotspots

"I HAD MORE AUTHORITY TO MAKE SNK STRONG AGAIN IN THE USA"

Ben Herman

40 YEARS OF SNH



» [Dreamcast] Cool Cool Time was a sequel to the Neo-Geo Pocket's Cool Cool Jam

► with Eolith on *The King Of Fighters 2002* and had Mega Enterprise develop *Metal Slug 4*. But in 2003, Playmore was able to sue Aruze. The former SNK owner continued to use the SNK properties in spite of the rights having been sold. Playmore won the case and was awarded 5.64 billion yen in damages.

With its security assured by a full-on revival by regaining the rights to the SNK name and rebranding as SNK Playmore. "I received a phone call and was asked to come to SNK HQ in Osaka. I did not know why and was offered the position as President to reopen USA HQ. It was an honour," recalls Ben. "I had more authority to make SNK strong again in the USA." The American operation at this time was based in Wall, New Jersey and had a tiny staff of just five people. How does a company run with so few people? "I outsourced everything from warehousing to sales reps, which was very efficient," replies Ben.

» The Neo-Geo Mini has just been released and features 40 classic games. Look out for a review in a future issue

Unfortunately good things can't last forever, and Neo-Geo game production was discontinued in 2004 with the release of *Samurai Shodown V Special*.

"What kept it alive was the fans," says Oda. "But there were a lot of Chinese copies of the cartridges, that ended up hurting the system." If you want to know how SNK Playmore felt about that, the plot for 2005's *Neo-Geo Battle Coliseum* concerns an evil corporation called WAREZ with the ability to clone powerful fighters. New arcade game development moved to the Dreamcast-based Atomiswave platform, and the company also entered the lucrative pachislot market with a *Metal Slug* machine in 2004.

In the home market, the company continued to convert its arcade games to consoles, although it occasionally ran into problems – in particular with Sony, which wouldn't approve certain games for standalone release in the North American market. "We did combo packs for PS2 to overcome that," remembers Ben, although some games couldn't be combined – most notably *SNK vs Capcom: SVC Chaos*. Ben also remembers problems with the competition. "Xbox was a headache as mid-stream Microsoft started 360 while we were developing for Xbox," he says. The company also experimented with 3D versions of *Metal Slug* and *The King Of Fighters* on the PS2, and published the mobile dating sim series *Days Of*

## 01 OSAKA, JAPAN

■ The home city of SNK, and a frequent background location in the *King Of Fighters* series. The company has had a number of offices in the area over the years.

## 02 TSUKUBA, JAPAN

■ The first Neo-Geo World location was opened here in December 1995. This indoor theme park offered a variety of attractions including 0-2Z laser tag, Drift King cart racing and a horror attraction called The Walk. Additionally, you could enjoy a game of bowling, karaoke, games and a variety of cafes, and there was even a Tsutaya video rental shop.

## 03 TOKYO, JAPAN

■ The second Neo-Geo World opened here in March 1999. The rides at this indoor theme park included the car chase simulation New York Galloway, the shooting adventure Agent Metal and a hostage rescue walking attraction called No Fate. The company has also had local offices here at various points in time.

## 04 TORRANCE, CA, USA

■ SNK's first American office opened here on Kashiwa Street in the early Eighties. The company moved back to an office on Earl Street in the early Nineties.

## 05 SUNNYVALE, CA, USA

■ When SNK formally established its American subsidiary in 1986, its first office was in Sunnyvale Way.

## 06 SAN JOSE, CA, USA

■ SNK returned to the Bay Area in 1997, relocating to Great Oaks Boulevard in San Jose.

## 07 CYPRESS, CA, USA

■ SNK NeoGeo USA Corporation, the arcade distribution arm of SNK in the late MVS years, was located here.

## 08 WALL, NJ, USA

■ SNK operated out of a very small office during the Playmore years. Established in 2003, this was far from SNK's traditional California locations.

## 09 KOWLOON, HONG KONG

■ 1992 saw the establishment of SNK Asia, which kept the same offices up until the branch was dissolved following SNK's bankruptcy. SNK Asia was re-established here in 2015.

## 10 SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

■ SNK's first branch in South America was established in 1993, and the MVS was very popular here. Some of the Neo-Geo World locations it operated still exist, albeit under different companies.

## 11 LONDON, UK

■ SNK Europe was established here in 1994, initially occupying an office in Albemarle Street before moving to Regent's Park Road in Finchley in 1996.

## 12 SINGAPORE

■ Other offices including SNK Singapore and SNK Middle East operated from these locations, but both subsidiaries were closed by 1999.

## 13 OSAKA, JAPAN 14 NAGAKUTE, JAPAN 15 NARA, JAPAN 16 KATO, JAPAN

■ These cities all hosted Neo-Geo Land arcades. These typically offered a mixture of games, karaoke and pool, although smaller locations had fewer offerings. SNK held events at these arcades, the most popular of which were the location tests of new arcade games. Osaka was lucky enough to have two, one of which remained open under Sun Amusements until 2004 – you can see it in the background of *King Of Fighters* games often.

## 17 YOKOHAMA, JAPAN 18 CHIBA, JAPAN 19 FUKUI, JAPAN 20 FUKUOKA, JAPAN

■ Each of these cities had a Neo-Geo Bowl facility, offering bowling, games, karaoke, pool and cafe facilities. Sun Amusements kept the large out-of-town facilities in Chiba and Natori running for a few years after SNK's 2001 bankruptcy.

SNK

## THE GREATEST VIDEO SYSTEM LINE UP

NEO-Geo up to 16 games, 1 game and 2 games at one time. Operators can easily insert or remove the soft cartridges, and game title cards are on the changed results.

The NEO-Geo monitor can play the Neo-Geo games on the MVS cabinet and the NEO-Geo home system.

The NEO-Geo system provides a higher and more stable income than the conventional arcade game.

MVS 250LT

MVS 450LT

MVS 650LT





## IN AND OUT

SNK has absorbed a number of companies over the years, others have split off from it, and some even went full circle

### IN ADK

■ Alpha Denshi was a prolific developer for all SNK hardware, producing games such as *Twinkle Star Sprites*, *Beast Busters*, *Second Nightmore* and *Crush Roller*. The company closed in 2003 and its properties were bought by SNK.



### IN NAZCA CORPORATION

■ This group of former Irem staff only had its logo on two games – but those two were *Neo Turf Masters* and *Metal Slug*, two of the very best Neo-Geo games. SNK wisely folded the team into its own ranks before long.



### OUT & IN BREZZASOFT

■ Formed during SNK's troubles in 2000, Brezzasoft launched its own cartridge-based arcade board and was credited on games including *The King Of Fighters 2001*. It was purchased by Playmore not long after formation in 2002.



### OUT & IN SUN AMUSEMENT

■ This company took over Neo-Geo Land and Bowl operations following SNK's 2001 bankruptcy, as well as distribution of Neo-Geo MVS and AES games. It was purchased by Playmore in 2003.



### OUT DIMPS

■ Takashi Nishiyama and Hiroshi Matsumoto formed this company in the run-up to SNK's 2001 bankruptcy. It has been a prolific developer, working on games including the *Sonic Advance* series and *Street Fighter V*.



### OUT NOISE FACTORY

■ Former SNK and Atlus designer Koiko Ijau founded this developer, which worked closely with SNK for many years on games including *Sengoku 3*, *Metal Slug* games from *Metal Slug 4* onwards and *The King Of Fighters Neowave*.



■ [PS4] *King Of Fighters XIV* is an impressive return to form and features nearly 60 playable characters.

"A LOT OF KIDS PLAYED THESE GAMES AT RELEASE, AND MAY STILL HAVE MEMORIES ABOUT THEM SOMEWHERE IN THEIR HEART"

Hiroga Yokoyama



■ [DS] *Metal Slug* continues to be a strong franchise for SNK that's appeared throughout its history.

► Memories featuring its popular characters. As the generation continued, the company found success in publishing retro-focused compilations on the PlayStation 2, PSP and Wii.

The next generation proved to be difficult. Though digital distribution enabled SNK Playmore to distribute its back catalogue, the high costs of developing packaged games meant that few were released, and those were usually arcade conversions. Even this was a struggle, as *Samurai Shodown Sen* was poorly received on Xbox 360 and *The King Of Fighters XII* was beautiful but limited in content. Original titles were instead created for the Nintendo DS, including *SNK Vs Capcom: Card Fighters Clash DS* and *Metal Slug 7*. *The King Of Fighters XIII* released in 2010 and would become the company's final original game to launch

in arcades first (though it remains active in the market today). It was ported to PS3 and Xbox 360 in 2011.

What followed was a period where SNK focused on pachislot machines and mobile games. That changed in 2015, though. "For quite a while the company had invested itself into pachislot," explains Oda. "The laws changed and it became much more difficult to thrive in this market space, so the leadership decided they wanted to return to console game manufacturing, which is what allowed me and a lot of other former staff to come back." The majority shareholding in SNK Playmore was also acquired by Iced Millennium for \$63.5 million in August of that year.

The first major project under SNK's new focus on games was *The King Of Fighters XIV*, released in 2016. The game shows SNK's current approach to game development – it's for home platforms first, and the first in the main *King Of Fighters* series to go 3D. Both changes have required some adjustment for Oda. "One of the biggest differences is that the volume per game for consoles is much greater. You've got a bunch of different modes that you have to worry about, plus the options menu and things like that," he explains. However, there are some advantages. "Because you don't have to worry about getting players to put in another 100 yen, you can actually lower the difficulty level a bit." Given his animation background, the change of graphical technology has also been a challenge for Oda. "The cool thing about 2D is that

depending on how good your artist is, you only need to draw the cool stuff. The way 3D works is that everything has to be rendered. The hard thing with 3D is how you hide the parts that don't necessarily look as cool." The game has been positively received and was followed by *SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy*.

Today, SNK is celebrating its heritage with a number of projects. Its early years are being celebrated in *SNK 40th Anniversary Collection* for Nintendo Switch, and a dedicated mini console has been created for fans of the Neo-Geo era. But what is it about the company and its games that keeps players' interest? "Games made before the Neo-Geo were created at a time where there were plenty of technical restrictions, which led game creators to think a lot about how to make enjoyable games," says Yokoyama. "A lot of kids played these games at release, and may still have memories about them somewhere in their heart." For Yoshino, it's also nostalgia. "I'd say that players probably now over their forties will enjoy games such as *ASO*, *Athena* and *Ikar Warriors* the same way they did when they first played these games three decades ago," he says. Ben agrees, citing "Great retro products, great IPs and great gameplay."

But for Oda, who has the chance to shape SNK's future, we're wondering which parts of its past might be part of his plans. If he could bring some old series back, which ones would he choose? "One is *Ikar Warriors*, and the other is *Athena*," he answers. "But this is just what I'd like to do! These were games that came out when I was in middle school and high school, and I played them a lot." Best not start the rumour mill turning then: these are not concrete plans. However, the company has announced the return of *Samurai Shodown* for 2019, so it's clear that SNK's past is still a big part of its future.

SNK is many things to many people. Some will associate it with the rotary joystick of the *Ikar Warriors* era, while others can't think of the company without picturing its sprite art or expensive cartridges. None of these are things that SNK does today, yet the company retains a distinct identity – when you look at Terry Bogard, you know he's the *Fatal Fury* protagonist. When you see that the Neo-Geo Mini replicates an arcade cabinet rather than a console, it's easy to see the spirit of a company that didn't have to produce £150 cartridge games, but did so because it could. And that's why we hope to see SNK celebrate many more birthdays – ultimately, there's not another company like it. ★

■ [Switch] The latest browser from SNK features an all-female cast.



## FEARSOME FEMALES

Producer Yasuyuki Oda discusses the design of SNK's latest fighting game, *SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy*

How did the *SNK Heroines* project get started? Soon after *The King Of Fighters XIV* was released, we decided to start with a new project with popular female characters from throughout the whole SNK library. That's where this came from.

There was a game on the Neo-Geo Pocket Color with a similar theme, *SNK Gals' Fighters*. Was any inspiration drawn from that for this concept? Actually, it was kind of an opposite influence. Because we had already made a game like that, we wanted to make sure *SNK Heroines* wasn't just a rehash of what that was, but a complete differentiation and a new game within that concept of using female fighters.

How did the team decide which characters to include in the game? There were three different categories – popular characters from SNK, characters that we want to make more popular, and what we call the "special box".

We're curious, what does the "special box" entail? If you've played *The King Of Fighters XIV*, you might know that everyone gets revived at the end of the story. So it was kind of a way to bring back *Shermie*.

The concept of a tag-team fighting game is familiar to most players, but the *Dream Finish* system is a new concept. Could you please explain a bit about that for us?

The only way you can win is with a *Dream Finish*, so even if you get your opponent's energy meter all the way down to zero, that opponent will not be defeated until you use a *Dream Finish*. The reason that this is important is because rather than a traditional fighting game where you're using many combos or trying to chain things together, it's for people who maybe are not particularly great at that. It's more of a timing thing – waiting to build up your *Dream Finish*, and then waiting to get your enemy down to low energy, and then unleashing it at the right moment. Or maybe your playable character has used all of their stamina gauge, and so you switch out to your character in reserve who has the *Dream Finish*, and do it right then.

You mentioned that the *Dream Finish* system was tailored towards gamers

who aren't so good at pulling off combos. Is it fair to say that you're aiming *SNK Heroines* towards an audience that is less familiar with fighting games? Yes, the idea is to be as broad as possible with who is able to play this game. Of course there's practice involved, you still have to practice and learn how to play the game well, but it's very welcoming for everyone.

*King Of Fighters XIV* had features to help newcomers, such as autocombos, and *SNK Heroines* is geared towards players who are new to fighting games. How important is it to get new players invested in the genre? We still plan on making games for the more hardcore audience, but especially at demo events or games shows, most people are just going to grab the controller and start pounding the buttons. Being able to have something cool happen when they do that is pretty important to keeping them interested in the game overall, so that's part of our strategy to increase the amount of fans.

What modes are included? Story mode, versus mode, survival mode, training mode, online mode – and there's an option within the online mode to watch other players and bet points on their battles.

What is the purpose of the points that you accrue? Those are used for customisation – there's lots of costumes, lots of accessories, you can buy different backgrounds and take screenshots using them. The in-game currency is the way to get all this stuff, the betting is just a quick way to get it so you can unlock more things that you'd like to use.

SNK has been giving ongoing support to its competitive games. Is that something you plan to do with *SNK Heroines*? In addition to the Neo-Geo World Tour, we also offer support to esports communities, and we plan to continue doing that with *SNK Heroines* as well as *The King Of Fighters XIV*.





# RESTORING THE PAST

SNK was lighting up arcades long before its Neo-Geo hardware came along. Brandon Sheffield and Frank Cifaldi explain why those early games are crucial, and how they're preserving them with the SNK 40th Anniversary Collection

Words by Darran Jones



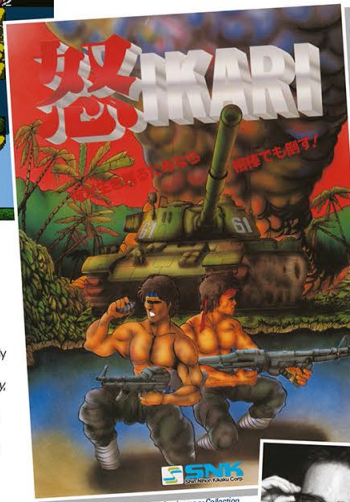
» [Arcade] Athena is one of SNK's earliest success stories in the west and was converted to several systems, including the NES.

If the recent closure of high-profile ROM sites like Emuparadise has taught us one thing it's the importance of having access to classic games that you can legally own and play as the developers originally intended. Of course, preserving games in the form of compilations is certainly nothing new, but developers have really been upping the stakes in recent years. Compilations like *Rare Replay*, *Street Fighter 30th Anniversary Collection* and *Mega Man Legacy Collection* are as much about the heritage surrounding the franchises as the games themselves. No company knows this better than Digital Eclipse, and it's been working its own special brand of restoration magic for years and most recently wowed us with the aforementioned (and 91% scoring) *Street Fighter 30th Anniversary Collection*.

Digital Eclipse has now turned its attention to the early arcade and NES games of SNK in the form of a brand-new compilation, the *SNK 40th Anniversary Collection*. Exclusive to Switch and designed to show off those halcyon days when the company was first finding its feet, it features an eclectic range of games and according to Frank Cifaldi, has been in the works for some time. "SNK and Digital Eclipse have been wanting to work on something together for years, but we could never connect the dots before now," he says. "I think this specific project needed a historian's touch, which is what we excel at." He has a point. Nowadays, there's so much focus on SNK's Neo-Geo that it's easy to forget it's the same developer that delivered arcade thrills in the form of *Ikaru Warriors*, *Pheasant Isle* in 1930, *Athena* and countless other games, which meant Frank, who works as head of restoration, knew he and



» [Switch] Blasting dinosaurs in the excellent *Pheasant Isle* in 1930. What's not to love?



» The Museum mode of SNK 40th Anniversary Collection features plenty of classic art for games like *Ikaru Warriors*.

his team has a unique opportunity. "Every SNK fan knows those later games, but they don't really know much about what came before them," he says. "For us it was a dream project: it's easy to sell people on *Mega Man* or *Street Fighter* but we wanted to prove that there's an audience for lesser-known titles if they're treated with care and respect. I think people who are into older videogames are willing to go exploring for hidden gems, and it's so rare that a game compilation encourages that."

Brandon Sheffield, who is involved with the project in a writing capacity, is also keen to point out that it highlights an important slice of SNK history, which is often overlooked due to the popularity of its later home consoles. "This collection shows where SNK came from, before the hardware was standardised, when the company was still finding itself," he explains. "There are great games in here that have very rarely been played, but they're very much a part of the evolution of the company, and very fun to play in their own right. It was also really important to us to give developers like Yokoyama-san and Yoshino-san their due. Whenever people talk about SNK, they talk about the Neo-Geo. But this collection highlights the innovations of the staff of that time, when each new arcade board was made from scratch, to meet the specs of a specific game or series. Those wild and free days are what we are celebrating here. On top of that, there are games in this collection that have never been properly emulated before, and thus weren't even playable in their correct form until now. Even if they were on prior collections."

At the time of going to press, 18 games have been announced, which range from early releases like *Fantasy* and *Vanguard*, to the popular *Ikaru Warriors* series.



» Frank Cifaldi is Digital Eclipse's head of restoration and is immensely proud of his work.

RESTORING THE PAST

## THE ULTIMATE MUSEUM



One of the most impressive aspects of *Mega Man Legacy Collection*, *Rare Replay* and *Street Fighter 30th Anniversary Collection* are their extensive "museum" modes which are bursting with information about the featured games. *SNK 40th Anniversary Collection* will be no different, with Digital Eclipse collating a huge amount of information about the featured games and SNK's history. "It's about as comprehensive as we could get it within the constraints I mentioned – the games had to be developed and published by SNK," reveals Brandon. "We don't have less all discussed, with flyers, screens, info, stories, and more."

As more and more modern gamers begin looking to the past, companies are realising that it's no longer acceptable to release bare-bones collections that feature a bunch of ROMs and poorly sourced artwork, and we appear to be entering an exciting new age for compilations. "This is the most comprehensive look at pre-Neo-Geo SNK that has ever been published," continues Frank. "This is the first time a complete list of developed titles has ever been made in English, and we solved several mysteries that nobody else has in terms of the company's history. My goal with all of our projects at Digital Eclipse is that people buy them for the bonus content. One of the nicest compliments I ever got about *Street Fighter 30th Anniversary Collection* was from someone who told me that they played the game for hours and loved it, but they haven't actually played the games yet. That's exactly what I want! To me, the games themselves are the bonus features, I want to create a brand-new audience of people who buy our interactive history lessons just to learn and celebrate."





WATCH AND LEARN



A unique inclusion for Digital Eclipse's compilation is called Watch. It's a innovative new idea that features complete playthroughs by Frank of every single game on the collection, from *Athena* to *Prehistoric Isle*. It's a useful prerecorded tool-assisted run that allows you to get a feel for certain parts of the game if you're struggling with your own run. You can pause, fast-forward and skip through any sections you want, but by far the most impressive aspect of Watch is that you can literally drop into any game at any point, allowing you to play the game yourself. It's a wonderfully clever idea that according to the team was very difficult to implement. "The 'video' is in fact a ROM playback," explains Brandon about the team's innovative feature. "It's actually emulating Frank's playthrough. No other collection has this feature." Here's hoping we see similar things like this in the future.



» [Arcade] SNK's compilation is out shortly. Expect a review in our next issue.

» [Arcade] You won't find the Mega Drive version of *Kunlun* here due to the licence being owned by Takara.



Interestingly, in addition to arcade originals, the collection also features a number of NES conversions, including the acclaimed RPG, *Crystals*. "Something unique about SNK is that every home version offered something unique that was not in the arcade original," continues Frank. "Plus, a lot of these ports were made in-house at SNK, sometimes by the same people who made the arcade games. This collection is a snapshot of SNK as it was in the Eighties, I like to call it an 'interactive art book.' That snapshot would not be complete without the home versions."

If choosing to focus on the pre-Neo-Geo games was a relatively straightforward decision for Digital Eclipse to make, collating the assets that were needed was a lot more difficult as Brandon reveals. "SNK doesn't have a lot of the original boards, and it's tough for them to get interviews and the like, because reaching out to past employees can be a bit of a faux pas for Japanese companies. So we took a lot of it on ourselves. Frank sourced dozens of arcade flyers, cleaned up logos and fuzzy screenshots, and bought arcade boards to test them against existing ROMs to ensure they were correct. As for myself, I found and interviewed several former SNK employees, which is easier for me to do as a third party, versus SNK doing it themselves." Equally useful from Digital Eclipse's viewpoint was being able draw on the experience of those employees. "It was such a relief," says Frank, "as some Japanese companies won't acknowledge past employees. Because of that we were able to get a lot of insight that we could never possibly get otherwise."

We've long told stories in *Retro Gamer* about how source code can go missing or get destroyed, so it's unsurprising to hear that Digital Eclipse faced similar issues while collating its selection of games. What is surprising are the sheer lengths that the team went to in order to secure the titles it wanted. "I took a seven-hour bus and train ride through rural Japan to a shop in the middle of nowhere that rents out arcade boards,"



» Brandon Sheffield went to great lengths to ensure SNK's history is as accurate as possible.



reveals Brandon. "This was the only known location of *Space Micom*, one of SNK's very first games. I managed to play it, confirm a massive amount of info it has a CPU, prior to this we didn't think it did, and gather intel about a number of other undumped SNK titles. That relationship is ongoing, so no promises, but anything that comes out of that will be quite exciting for the preservation of SNK's history."

Of course, tracking down games is only part of the problem, you also need to faithfully emulate them and ensure they work in a way that's acceptable for modern gamers. It was a challenge for Frank and his team, partly because of SNK's love for a certain type of joystick that was popular at the time. "The biggest challenge has been dealing with the Loop Lever games," explains Frank. "The Loop Lever was this weird joystick used in several games, including *Klari Warriors*. It was basically a joystick that you could twist: you'd tilt to move, like a regular joystick, but you'd twist it around 360-degrees to aim your gun. I don't know about yours, but my Switch didn't come with a Loop Lever, so we had to figure out how to make these games play right and feel good using stock hardware. What we ended up doing – and this was not easy – was forcing the games to play like 'twin-stick' shooters. When SNK re-released these games in the past, the best they could do was map buttons to 'rotate clockwise' and 'rotate



» [Arcade] *Psycho Soldier* is the second game to feature *Athena* and includes a track sung by Japanese pop idol, Kaori Shimizu.

counterclockwise,' which to me does not replicate the arcade experience at all. In the arcade, if you were good, you could turn quickly in any direction you wanted to just with muscle memory, which is impossible if you're waiting for your character to rotate where you need him to on screen. Technically 'twin-sticking' these games is making them a little easier than they ever were, so it was a tough decision to make, but we believe this is the best way to preserve the intended feeling of playing the actual games in the arcade."

While Digital Eclipse wants the games to look, play and feel as accurate as possible. It's also keen on ensuring its collection becomes the definitive word on SNK's early history, a difficulty Brandon is only too aware of as he's collated the information, developer diaries and trivia about the available games. "I did as much work and research as possible to ensure the information was accurate," he admits. "It's tough, because once this game comes out, whatever I have written becomes the truth, if you know what I mean. This is the official SNK standpoint once it comes out. But we're relying on old documents, old memories, old interviews. None of that is perfect, and when I had two pieces of conflicting info from two different developer testimonials, I had to do extra research to figure out who



» [NES] *Crystals* is one of SNK's few original NES games, so its inclusion here is a welcome one.

RESTORING THE PAST

"I took a seven-hour bus and train ride through rural Japan to a shop in the middle of nowhere that rents out arcade boards"

Brandon Sheffield



» [NES] *P.O.W. Prisoner Of War* is the first SNK game that Frank played.

to trust. Reading it, it's all pretty simple stuff in there, but you won't imagine the work that went into it. I've got a pretty short description of *Micom Block* and *Space Micom* in the collection, but if I hadn't taken that journey out to rural Japan, it would've been wrong, because the available information about the game was either incorrect or insufficient."

If there's one thing that's obvious about Digital Eclipse, preservation of the past is incredibly important and it's pleasing that companies like Digital Eclipse, M2 and many others go to great lengths to ensure that a new generation can enjoy the classics of yesterday. "Preserve" is a loaded word, but I think the important part of what we're doing here is contextualising the games," concludes Frank. "If it's just a compilation that loads some game ROMs, to me, that's not a very compelling product. But because we offer easy access through Watch so you can experience the whole game without learning it, and because our Museum mode teaches you about the games and their place in history, people can do more than just play these games, they can understand them. And to me, doing that right now is vital. We're in a unique time where we're celebrating the golden age of this medium while its authors are still alive, and that's not going to be the case for much longer. The more we can do to capture these stories, the better off the future will be in understanding gaming's roots." It's something Brandon agrees on. "With this collection, we have brought SNK games back to life in a way that they can be played correctly for the first time in years. And as the developers get older, the memories about this time fade. Frank and I realised this might be our only shot at preserving SNK's history... and there's so much we couldn't fit in to the compilation. If we don't preserve these memories, nobody will. And SNK's history is extremely interesting to me. They defined that Nineties arcade game feel. They defined the 2D fighting game world, outside of *Street Fighter*. They brought sound synthesis and vocal theme songs to arcade. They pioneered RPG systems in coin-ops. I mean... I wish we could preserve it all, I really do."

