



In 1997, I finally decided that I wanted to get a PlayStation. I admit that the first batch of games that I'd seen for the system hadn't really impressed me, with the occasional exception; *Wipeout*, *Philosoma* and *Resident Evil* were the most intriguing games I'd seen. The fall of '97 promised the release of several fantastic new games, and the one gathering the most attention was *Final Fantasy VII*. Everyone I knew that was into gaming was excited about it.

Now, if you think that I was among those dying to get their hands on Squaresoft's latest epic, you'd be dead wrong. I was looking forward to *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, Konami's first 32-bit *Castlevania* entry.



*The reason I bought a PlayStation.*

Thanks to Shaun (the former owner of the Video Game Warehouse, which had closed down the previous year), I had managed to get a copy of the import a few months earlier. However, I was unable to play it. It required a Japanese PlayStation to run, and even if I had owned an American PlayStation, it wouldn't have run due to Sony's regional lockout, encoded into all of their games. Japanese games wouldn't run on an American PlayStation, and vice versa. There was a complicated "swap trick" that would let you play Japanese PlayStation games on American PlayStations: while keeping the disc cover open, and the switch that told

the PlayStation that the cover was closed pressed down, you would load up an American game, then remove it at the PlayStation logo screen and insert a Japanese game. If you timed it just right, you would bypass the region detection and the Japanese game would load. However, the swap trick **only** worked with the first batch of PlayStations, as Sony found out about it and modified the next batch so that the trick would no longer work.

Luckily for me, Shaun had one of those early PlayStations, so I borrowed it from him, used the swap trick and played through the game. Despite the fact that I couldn't understand the story, or much of anything else text-wise, I had fun playing through it. I vowed to get the U.S. version when it was released, along with a PlayStation to play it on.

Sure enough, the day it was released I walked out of Electronics Boutique with a brand new PlayStation and a copy of *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. I went home, hooked it up and spent the next few hours glued to the television.

Over the next few months, my PlayStation collection slowly started to grow, but I was frustrated by my inability to play Japanese games. Also, I was still upset that Konami had not released *Gradius Deluxe Pack*, *Salamander Deluxe Pack Plus* and *Gradius Gaiden* outside Japan. I was determined to get them.

I already knew about the myriad of import stores that were out there, the ones that ran ads in *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *Die Hard GameFAN*. I had used one of them a couple of years earlier when I got my copy of *Akumajo Dracula X: Chi no Rondo* for my Duo. I started checking the ads and calling the various stores to see if they had any of the games available.

As it turned out, none of them had the *Gradius Deluxe Pack*. It was out of print and they had sold out of their remaining stock months before. Damn. One down. The other two games were readily available, so at least I was in luck there.

While on the phone with one of these stores, the guy on the other end of the line asked me if I had a "mod chip" in my system. I had no idea what he was talking about. He told me that this chip would allow you to play import games, and that without one you'd need a PlayStation that would let you perform the swap trick. I knew I didn't have an original system, since I had just bought mine a couple of months before.

I then asked how much one of these chips cost. He quoted a price that included installation, then told me about a special that his store was running. If you bought one import with mod chip installation, the price was reduced, and if you bought two imports with mod chip installation, the price was reduced even more. I immediately opted for the two import deal, as they had both *Gradius Gaiden* and the *Salamander Deluxe Pack Plus* in stock.

The only catch was that I had to send my console to them so that they could do the installation. I was a little hesitant to do so at first, but my desire to play both games (and a myriad of other imports) won out. The next day, I packed up my PlayStation, drove down to the post office and shipped it out. I had opted for express return shipping, so I knew I only had a few days to wait before my system was returned to me.

The time passed so slowly. While I waited, I spent my free time playing all of my old *Gradius* titles, including *Gradius II: Gofer no Yabou* for the PC Engine, which I had picked up a few months earlier. I was enjoying the old games, but the suspense was killing me.

Luckily, on one of my days off that week my return package arrived. I ripped it open, and there was my PlayStation: I inspected it briefly and everything looked fine, so I hooked it back up, then decided to do a test run to see if this mod chip worked. I put in my Japanese copy of *Symphony of the Night*, held my breath and turned on the power.

It loaded right up. I grinned, then pulled both of my new games out of the box and reverently examined them. They were here, in my hands, and one by one I removed the shrink wrap. I flipped through both manuals, then decided that I'd waited long enough. I inserted the *Salamander Deluxe Pack Plus* and turned on the power.



*The reasons I had my PlayStation modded.*

I was greeted by a CGI opening that was incredibly awesome. There was the *Vic Viper* and the *RoadBritish Space Destroyer*, in full 3D, blasting Moais, Golems and squadrons of enemies familiar to anyone that has fought their way through *Life Force*. I had been blown away by the openings to the Super NES *Gradius III* and the PCE *Gradius II*, but this made those look ancient. From the main menu, I found that I could select either *Salamander*, *Life Force* or *Salamander 2* to play (aside from *Life Force*, none of them had ever been released in U.S. arcades). I was impressed with all of them, especially *Salamander 2*, which had intrigued me since the first time I'd laid eyes on a blurry screenshot of its first stage in the back of an issue of EGM.

I was ecstatic—not only were these classic Konami shooters, but I was playing actual arcade games at home. That was astounding to me. Until now, the only way I had been able to play arcade games at home was to pick up the ports that were released, and those were usually watered down in various ways because they couldn't be adequately replicated for whichever reason.

Then it was time for the main event: *Gradius Gaiden*. It was everything I had hoped it would be, bringing classic *Gradius* gameplay into the 32-bit era and

giving it the visuals and soundtrack to match. The wizards at Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo had put together a game that, as I put it for the longest time, did for *Gradius* what *Symphony of the Night* did for *Castlevania*. I played it well into the night, not caring that I might be late for work the next day.

My import collection started increasing in size after that day. I eventually got ahold of a copy of the *Gradius Deluxe Pack*, and with that my PlayStation *Gradius* collection was complete. I obtained several other imports over the years, all of which worked beautifully, with one exception. Around 1999 or so, Sony got wise to all of this modding that was going on, and started to include mod chip detection routines in certain imports. I picked up the Japanese release of *Strider Hiryu 1 & 2*, only to find out that the lockout was in full effect. When the set was released in the U.S. as *Strider 2*, I picked it up, only to receive an unpleasant surprise. The *Strider* disc worked, but the *Strider 2* disc still contained the mod chip detection routine. I was so disappointed. I never upgraded my mod chip, and as such never played the Japanese version of the game. At least when I got my PlayStation 2, I was finally able to play the U.S. version.

I continued to use my original PlayStation to play imports until early 2004. Sadly, this was when my system died. I was playing *Night Striker* one night and noticed that there was a peculiar sound coming out of my console. Then it refused to load the next level of the game, so I turned the power off and on. The system went right to the CD player screen. It didn't even try to load the game, nor would it load any other games. I didn't even dare to send it to Sony for repairs, as not only had I violated the warranty when I had the mod chip originally installed, but to my understanding their repair department would remove and destroy any mod chips found inside consoles sent to them for repairs, and if there was a parallel I/O port on the console, as there was on the earliest PlayStation consoles released, it would be welded shut. So I consigned my PlayStation to the trash heap, giving it a memorial service at the dumpster.

With that, my original PlayStation was gone. Rather than buy another American console to replace it, along with another mod chip, I decided instead to buy a Japanese PSone, which was a redesigned, smaller PlayStation. I saved myself a lot of time and trouble that way. Since my U.S. PlayStation games play just fine on my PlayStation 2, I now have the best of both worlds—and I didn't have to violate any warranties to do it.

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*Written by Rob Strangman. This excerpt from the book *Memoirs of a Virtual Caveman* is © 2008, 2014 SCAR Productions. Please do not distribute without the author's permission. Direct all inquiries to Rob at [gradiusone@yahoo.com](mailto:gradiusone@yahoo.com)*

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