



THE SUMMER OF IMPORTS

BY STEVEN "RVG FANATIC"

Nothing completes childhood quite like sharing it with a best friend. While I had my legendary gaming crew, I was also blessed to have a best friend outside of that group named Nelson who lived within walking distance. We grew up together best friends since Kindergarten. I loved my old gaming crew, but they were a car ride away which meant I only saw them whenever my parents were available. In other words, my gaming crew and I met up only once or twice a month. Nelson, on the other hand, I saw that bastard every single day. We were often in the same grade together and we shared the same interest in just about everything. We spent nearly every waking moment of the weekends hanging out playing games. It certainly made for some memorable times. Whenever I think back to my childhood or the glory days of gaming, inevitably, Nelson always comes to mind. The big guy and I had some great times. I could write a whole book about the coming-of-age adventures Nelson and I shared growing up. Actually, I sort of did. Well, an article, anyhow. You can read that piece on my website, RVGFanatic.com, entitled "Nelly."

Before Capcom made crossovers infamous back in the late '90s, at least in the gaming world, there was one epic time-stopping moment in 1994 when my gaming crew and Nelson's paths finally crossed for the first time. Nelson had at long last come face to face with my out of town best friend, Zack. It was a classic star-studded crossover. But, I digress.

Before moving on, I'd like to take a moment to pay my respects to the memory of renting games back in the early-mid '90s. Every weekend my dad would take me to the local rental stores and I would pluck out one game to bring back home. My brother, Kevin, was too shy or embarrassed, or both, to go rent games, so he always made me his little grunt to carry out the deed. Even though I was renting the games he wanted, at least most of the time, there was always something magical to those mini-adventures my dad and I shared. Sometimes, Nelson even joined for a special cameo on those renting excursions. This is the story of the summer Nelson and I would never forget. It was the summer of discovery. **The summer of imports.**

The year was 1994, and as the final piercing school bell of the year rang, the euphoric cries of 800 kids rang out even louder. We all knew what stood before us: three relentless months of splendid carefree summer days: no teachers, no

homework, and no school to interfere with our final days of childhood. As much as I loved the fall season for Halloween and Christmas, there was nothing, and I mean **NOTHING**, like summer time, especially when you had a best friend like Nelson to share it with. He and I had just finished the 5th grade together. It was the best year of my childhood. My best friend was in my class; we had Mr. G, the best teacher ever; we had the two hottest girls in our class, Elaine and Jennifer, and Nelson and I were simply at the top of our games. We were 10 years old, going on 11 that summer. We had come of age, and that summer of '94 was fit to be one for the ages. Nelson and I made a verbal pact to make it the best summer ever. Man, what a summer it would turn out to be.

The very first Saturday morning of that summer, Nelson rode his bike over and my dad took us to Game Hunter. Game Hunter was a legendary privately owned video game rental store. It was renowned in my neck of the woods for catering to the diehard gamer. Game Hunter didn't bother to waste time with movies. It had every video gaming system library under the sun, from the 8-bit Nintendo to the Neo Geo, which back in those days was truly an awe-inspiring and mythical system. Being able to touch and pick up those classic bulky Neo Geo boxes was nothing short of amazing. Game Hunter even housed an arcade machine or two, and a small anime section! How many stores could lay claim to that, plus the rentals of even portable games? Yup, there's a damn good reason why Game Hunter developed a cult-like following in my town. It was simply the stuff dreams were made of.

But, what made them stand out to me and everyone else was their unforgettable import selection. Keep in mind, back on those days, imports symbolized a whole lot more than merely just "the Japanese version of a game." Indeed, back then, imports held a certain aura of mystique about them, especially when you read the little blurbs on those games in *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *Die Hard GameFAN* on a monthly basis, realizing that they were an ocean away and that you would never even so much as sniff one. So you have to understand that being there, seeing a wall covered with exotic Super Famicom boxes, never failed to amaze my little ten year old eyes. They sat on the very top shelf, purposely out of reach. It was symbolic, even. They would cover the entire upper wall from left to right, A to Z. You would be completely mesmerized as your eyeballs scanned the imports one after another, seeing games that were either Japanese exclusives, or Japanese versions of games that were set to hit the U.S. a month or even months later. It was nothing short of magical.

One Saturday morning in 1992, my dad and I were making on a renting mission at GameHunter together. I made my way over to the Super NES section looking for my brother's requested title of choice. When I happened to gaze up, I discovered the upper shelf teeming with hypnotic Super Famicom imports. At that point, all bets were off as I had officially gone rogue. Sorry, Kevin. *Power Athlete* caught my eye.

Dad lifted it off the top shelf and I examined the back of the box. It was a *Street Fighter II* clone. SOLD! My dad obliged and I came home that day with the

Japanese version of *Power Moves*. My brother flipped out because I disobeyed him AND we found out that it didn't even play on our Super NES, as it refused to fit inside the cartridge slot. I had never seen my brother so angry before. I promptly called Game Hunter to let them know of my plight, and they explained how I had to rent the device that allowed me to play import games on an American Super NES. Thanks guys, you could have warned me about that before I left. Yeah, let's just say Game Hunter was never known for their stellar customer service.

Luckily, they still had one in stock, and said they would hold it for me. So, being the great father that my old man was, we traveled back to Game Hunter to pick it up. This time, even my brother came along as he himself wanted to see this new store I had hyped to the moon as the end-all, be-all gaming haven. Once there, my dad rented out the special converter adapter for a dollar while Kevin and I stood there gawking at the import selection. The very next week, he and I went back and we picked up our 2nd import game, *The Combatribes*. We enjoyed terminating Martha Splatterhead and her goon squad several times over. Game Hunter had become our new favorite store. It was revered within my gaming circle for a damn good reason!

Flash forward back to that Saturday morning of June, 1994. There Nelson and I stood, eyes popping, drool coming down the sides of our mouths. On the very top shelf we saw it. Sitting there as pretty as a supermodel, it was the Super Famicom versions of *Fighter's History*, *King of the Monsters 2* and *Muscle Bomber* (U.S. name *Saturday Night Slam Masters*). These were three arcade-to-Super NES conversions that Nelson and I were dying to play! And on that idyllic Saturday morning, there they stood right before our very eyes.



cue the heavenly choir, again

Their U.S. counterparts were still weeks or even months away! After a brief moment of stunned silence, Nelson and I looked at each other in astonishment. Just like how it was over a year and a half ago when I first saw

Power Athlete, at that precise moment in time I had forgotten whatever title my brother wanted me to rent. Once again, I had gone rogue.

The only dilemma was picking which one of those three games to rent. The greatest thing about having your best friend along with you meant he could rent one and you could rent one. Nelson was adamant on choosing *Fighter's History*, the infamous *Street Fighter II* clone that Capcom even attempted to sue. I was plenty happy about that as I loved *Fighter's History* in the arcades and was long anticipating the Super NES port. So it boiled down to *King of the Monsters 2* versus *Saturday Night Slam Masters*. I had played *Slam Masters* a fair bit in the arcades. I loved Capcom's representation of the zany pro wrestling world cranked to the 10th degree, thanks to *Slam Masters'* comic book-like mayhem and wacky wrestlers that were even more outrageous than those found in the WWF. *King of the Monsters 2* and I were like ships passing in the night. Somehow, we always missed each other. I never played the arcade once. As a staunch supporter of the original, I was dying to play the sequel. From 1992 to 1994, finding a *King of the Monsters 2* arcade became my white whale, so to speak. None of the local arcades had it for whatever reason. And the one time that I did find it, it was at an arcade two hours away from home, but of course the machine was broken. Standing there with a choice between *Slam Masters* or *King of the Monsters 2* it suddenly became apparent which one I was going to choose.

As Nelson and I rode home in the backseat talking excitedly about our two new import finds, it suddenly dawned on me that I soon had to face the music. The last time I went rogue and rebelled against my brother he did everything but tear up the house. But I figured with Nelson by my side maybe Kevin would be less demonstrative. After all, in public, or whenever guests were around, Kevin had no choice but to uphold a certain degree of decorum. Nelson knew this without my even having to ask him for backup. That's how close he and I were. Like I said at the beginning, nothing completes a healthy childhood quite like having a best friend support you through thick and thin. He gave me a nod as my dad pulled into the driveway. I knew he had my back. The moment of truth was now at hand.

"Did you get it??" my brother asked excitedly, opening the front door.

"Uhhh, no. But I got this," I stammered, handing the game over to my brother as though it was an adequate consolation prize.

"*King of the Monsters 2?!'*" he exclaimed, with a mix of shock and disgust in his voice. "Was my game there for rent or not?"

Now, I could easily have lied right there, "No, your game was rented out." But I was a straight shooter. In hindsight, maybe I was being foolish. But I had made my choice to disobey my brother. The least I could do was be honest about it. When I told him I forgot to look for his game once Nelson and I caught sight of the imports, my brother lost control. The scary thing was this happened even in front of Nelson. I can only imagine how much crazier it would have been had Nelson not been standing there next to me. My brother flipped out, stomping and screaming expletives like a drunken sailor. Then he ran to my room, ran back and threw my Crash Dummy break-apart plush buddy, Spin, out the door. It smacked

me in the face so hard that the head actually flew off its shoulders. Thank goodness it was plush! Nelson retrieved the head which had rolled onto my front lawn, and placed it back on Spin's headless Velcro neck. You would have thought that I killed my brother's puppy or something! He stormed off, leaving the door open. I took one glance inside and then back at Nelson. Once again, without saying a word, we both knew what I was thinking. Just to confirm, Nelson said, "Yeah, let's go back to my place for a while..."

And so it was. On the first Saturday afternoon of my last carefree childhood summer, I found myself walking along with my best friend to his house. He clutched his copy of *Fighter's History* while I had in mine *King of the Monsters 2* and my Crash Dummy action plush buddy, Spin.



Heading down the street to Nelson's house.

That afternoon at Nelson's was some of the greatest gaming we ever had. We started out playing *Fighter's History* against the computer, rotating turns. We both felt it was a rather spectacular translation of an arcade game we had both adored. Then, we swapped it out for *King of the Monsters 2*. He selected Cyber Woo, the King Kong clone, and I selected Super Geon, the Godzilla lookalike. We waded our way through the various cities, demolishing everything underneath our feet. We conquered all the bosses in the game, 2-on-1 style. It was simply mindless monster mash 'em up fun! Finally, after several hours of switching between the two games, late afternoon descended upon us and we decided maybe Kevin had had enough time to cool down already. Nelson headed back with me. He was always a loyal soldier like that. Sure enough, cooler heads had prevailed and Kevin was suddenly interested in giving *King of the Monsters 2* a shot. The three of us would take turns playing through the game. Some stages it was me and Kevin. On

others it was me and Nelson. Even Kevin and Nelson teamed up, as I watched much to my delight. It was a blast. The three of us played *King of the Monsters 2* and *Fighter's History* to death that unforgettable weekend, before returning it late Sunday evening.

Game Hunter eventually closed shop in the mid-late '90s, as rental stores started to become more and more a thing of the past. It was fast going the way of the dinosaur. While their service wasn't always top-notch, I will always remember them for their import selection. Game Hunter arrived during a special period of my childhood, and at a special time in gaming when renting games blindly and making quasi-lengthy trips with your dad was all part of the magic and wonder of the hobby. Sometimes, the game you wanted was already rented out at the first two or three local rental stores, so you had to go to your 4th or 5th options around town to find it, and sure enough, it would be there. It just meant more hunting and more quality time spent with your old man. I will never forget those days when my dad and I used to hit up all the rental stores every Saturday afternoon, rain or shine. They symbolized a simpler time in my life. A time where bills, junk emails and clogged six-lane highways didn't yet exist. The renting relics of my youth were more than just brick and mortar. They are deeply embedded in what made gaming as a child so magical and wondrous. And I'm so thankful I was able to enjoy it all with a best friend who had my back through thick and thin. Indeed, the summer of 1994 was memorable for many reasons. It was the summer of discovery in many ways, as well as the summer of imports. It's hard to believe those halcyon days are almost 20 years old now. I credit Game Hunter, the Super NES and Nelson for helping to create so many fond memories. It was in large part thanks to those three that made the last carefree summer of my childhood, bar none, the best one ever.

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