



Steve Lowe, owner of the Game Over Cafe, owns more than 350 games systems

PLAY ON AT THE GAME OVER CAFE

Anthony Enticknap took a trip to a recently opened internet cafe that serves up more than just coffee and web terminals

As I drive around the streets of Old Portsmouth, following the satnav on my phone, I notice how oddly busy this part of the city is for a Tuesday morning. People are milling around everywhere, congregating at road crossings and coming in and out of buildings. This, no doubt, has something to do with my close proximity to the University of Portsmouth, as well as the Portsmouth Museum.

Sitting in the car behind me is my seven-year-old daughter, brought along through the necessity of half term. Programmed into the satnav is 16 High Street, Portsmouth, located on a long road lined with

a mixture of elegant Georgian buildings and more contemporary constructions. And beneath one of the more attractive-looking buildings is our final destination: the Game Over Cafe.

Only recently opened, this is an internet cafe with a difference. As well as providing PCs with web access, and reasonably priced drinks and snacks, the Game Over Cafe is dedicated to retro gaming, so anyone who comes here can play some classic games, before perhaps heading to Facebook to tell everyone about it or just getting online to check their emails.

I've come here today not only to play games, but also to speak to the proprietor, Steve Lowe, a local resident and also the owner of the largest personal collection of games machines in the country. In fact, he has more than 350 consoles and games systems at present. Before opening the cafe, he kept these things at home in a dedicated display area of his garage, a photo of which now adorns the cafe's official business cards.

As I arrive, walking down the stairs to the basement in which the cafe resides, Steve is there, busily getting things in order.

We exchange hellos and shake hands, but before I've even asked a question, I pause to look around the room. Unsurprisingly, there are screens everywhere, but what's really striking is the decoration that lines the curved basement ceiling of the cafe. Using more than 5,000 tiles, Steve has created a retro-style mosaic of iconic Space Invaders characters, as well as displaying the name of the cafe. Looking around, I also notice by the entrance a display case, showing off a selection of original boxes for some of Steve's collection. In short, it looks the business.



I ask him how he got started with his collection, and he tells me that it all started with "a Vic 20, then after that it was an Atari 2600, with some games. And it really went on from there. As people were upgrading their machines, I'd either buy their old one off them or they'd just give it to me."

Today, many of those systems live in the cafe, but with such a huge collection, it's not possible to have them all available to play at once. Steve's plan, therefore, is to rotate them on a regular basis, so those who return to the cafe will get to try all kinds of new (or old, depending on how you look at) things.

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But why let people play these systems at all? Why not just put everything in a museum, where they'd be safe? For Steve, it's all about getting people to actually interact with the machines and not allowing that would miss the point: "If I'd opened a museum, I'd need to have everything in glass cases" – not the kind of atmosphere he wanted to create.

Of course, letting the public come in and play with original equipment might seem risky, but Steve isn't concerned. "As people come in, I just say to treat it as if it's their own, and so far no one's been that rough with any of the equipment. They've all been very respectful."

Clearly, he wants the Game Over experience to be as hands-on as possible, and as I look around at the busy cafe, I see people of all ages, playing on all kinds of machines, some ancient and some relatively modern. I ask him which are the most popular. "Actually the younger generation seem to prefer the old 8-bit machines, the really basic games. But we've also got a PlayStation 3 and an Xbox 360, so children who are unfamiliar with the older systems have a comfort zone, then from that, they'll go on and use something else."

What, though, is the appeal of playing with these systems? With emulators being so easy to download and install, why do people like Steve, his customers and, indeed, me find ourselves drawn to playing these games in a setting like the Game Over Cafe?



"I think it's the social interaction with other people. With every station, I've done my best to have two controllers, so people can use the equipment together. And I've noticed especially with young children, one of them is on the machine and the other is on Wikipedia or Google, looking up more information about it or cheat codes, or whether there's a sequel. So there's the historical value as well."

That's an interesting notion, one that highlights the combination of old and new that's at the heart of the cafe. On one hand, customers have access to the internet, the very epitome of modern technology, while on the other, they're interacting with computers built before they were born. And these ancient systems are being fed into Windows 7 PCs, which output the signal to something that a modern flat-screen monitor can display, even allowing for gamers to record their sessions via built-in capture cards, probably for the results to be shared on YouTube or social media.

Steve may not have opened a museum, but it's not hard to believe that people who come to the Game Over Cafe are going to do more than just have fun.

"The younger generation are going to come away thinking 'That's what they had before now; this was the PlayStation 4 of their day', and they can see games in all their simplicity.

"A lot of games now tend to be simulations," Steve tells us. "While they're extremely complicated and very enjoyable to play, I think there's a lot to be said for something as simple as *Space Invaders* or *Pac-Man*. And you get the older generation who go

away with a big smile on their face because it's brought back happy memories of what they used to play, who they used to play with."

I couldn't agree more, so I thank Steve and look for something to play myself. By this point, my daughter has found something to do while I was chatting, and I find her in front of a PlayStation 2, currently running a Rayman title – a name she recognises from more contemporary systems.

That's all well and good, but I'm far more interested in introducing her to the older equipment on offer. I see an Atari 2600 and consider starting her education there, but I figure that's a bit too basic to begin with, considering what she's used to.

Instead I opt for a Mega Drive, first to play *Sonic the Hedgehog* and then to have a go at an Alex Kidd title. There's also an old *Space Invaders* table that catches her eye, so we head over to that. As it turns out, it's been retrofitted with new hardware and also a multi-game software setup. We sit at opposites of the table and play *Breakout*. I win.

Eventually, we settle down in front of a Binatone TV Master 4 Plus 2 and play a bit of tennis and squash. As we sit in front of the large, modern flat screen, twisting dials to move two white lines up and down the screen, one thing in particular strikes me: it's incredibly hard. But difficulty level aside, it's actually a lot of fun, and even my daughter, more accustomed to Nintendo 3DS, Wii and Apple iPad, seems to enjoy it.

And that ultimately says it all. As I look at her, the light of the electronic tennis bats reflecting in her eyes, I again think about the combination of the old and new, and how with the right technology and in the right setting, our differences can be set aside for just a moment. Like the Windows 7 PCs sitting between the Mega Drives and the LCD screens, here we are, with a piece of electronics acting as a conduit between us, bridging a gap between the past and the present...

And then I pull myself out of this self-indulgent reverie and notice she's actually managed to score a couple of points while I wasn't looking, so I quickly get back to letting her know who's boss (yes, I'm one of *those* dads)...

For more information about the Game Over Cafe, and to book a session, head to gameover.cafe.mm

About Steve Lowe

- Steve, a Portsmouth resident, is also a software developer. "I started off programming in BASIC in 1982, and by 1984 I was programming in machine code, then in 1988 and 1989, I won the programmer of the year IBM competition. I wrote two pieces of software related to graphics and animation handling."
- His favourite games machine is the Vectrex, a vector-display-based console released in 1982.
- The item that Steve found the hardest to get was the Spectavideo SV-318, which he eventually had to import from the Netherlands.

About The Game Over Cafe

- Two-hour sessions cost £5 each.
- Soft drinks and snacks are available from just 50p.
- You can find the cafe at Basement, 16 High Street, Old Portsmouth, PO1 2LP
- Tel: 077 0105 9629
- E-mail: booking@gameover.cafe