

# RETRO

Inspirational stories from computing's long-distant past



## Ravers of the lost art

Collecting retro PC games in their original big boxes is more popular than ever, but don't expect to get rich quick, and watch out for crooks. Particularly **David Crookes**, who reveals all here

**A**nne Bras is a king. The PC King. Or at least that's what he calls himself, and for good reason. His huge collection of boxed PC games is officially the largest of its kind on Earth, earning him an entry in the Guinness World Records. When he was bestowed with the honour in 2017, he had amassed 1,832 items. Today, he owns more than 2,000.

As with many vast collections, it started with a solitary purchase. "*Day of the Tentacle*," he said. "It was the art of the box that grabbed my attention." He'd played the game many times but had never seen it on the shelves of a game store until that point. "I had no idea what the original box looked like," he explained. "Seeing it for the first time was a really amazing experience."

Visit a game store today and things are very different. You're more likely to see a plush toy based on a major videogame franchise than you are a PC game in a cardboard box. Digital distribution is now the main way to obtain games made for a computer, with Steam reaching an astonishing \$6.6 billion in gross revenue in 2021.

Despite that, there remains a great deal of fondness for the packaging of old, with lots of gamers still enjoying the feeling of running fingers over rows of shelves filled with boxes. "I slowly started to realise that there were more amazing-looking PC games in a big box out there," Bras recalled of his motivation to collect. "And when I started collecting, every PC game came out in a big box."

At first, he selected games for nostalgic reasons – "just knowing if a game was good made me want it more" – but he gradually began hunting out the big box games for their sheer beauty. In the same way

record collectors love a vinyl sleeve, he was prizing the artwork and the presentation. "Sometimes the publishers made these boxes special," he said.

Bras is by no means alone in his love of the big box. There are many collectors willing to spend good money stacking their shelves with colourful cardboard, and you only need to go on Facebook to find numerous groups with literal names such as Big Box PC Game Collectors and Big Box Games Buy Sell Swap.

Benjamin Wimmer, who lives in Vienna, Austria, is among them, starting his stash with the 3D game *Castle Master*. "At one time, cassettes in single jewel cases were the norm in the local shops in my area and throughout Europe, but due to their size, the cover artwork was rather limited and there wasn't any space for screenshots or descriptions either."

"Deciding what game to buy often came down to the cooler-sounding title or tagline, a 'number one' sticker or who was the publisher and, to be honest, most covers weren't that good looking – they were an attention-seeking mess."

"Not *Castle Master*. That was quite a revelation: the ominous cover artwork presented boldly without any taglines, slogans or stickers. The back listed the game's features and a couple of screenshots. It definitely felt like a step up in quality."

### ■ Making an impact

Many artists made the game boxes their own, but the size of their canvas varied hugely. "At first, every publisher did their own thing," said Wimmer.



**ABOVE** Never mind *Game of Thrones*, this is Anne Bras' throne of games

"Some were more streamlined, such as the early Infocom titles, some followed the lead of the bigger players, and some, such as Origin, were more adventurous."

There was a spell primarily in the 1980s, however, when games sold at full price would be distributed in smaller cardboard packages, essentially the size of a couple of cassettes. Even so, they still provided sufficient room for artwork to shine, and this was an era which heralded the great work of artists such as Bob Wakelin, who made a name for himself among users of 8-bit and

**BELOW** *Dune* opened up to reveal an open-mouthed sandworm



16-bit computers by producing up to three designs a week for the game publishers Imagine and Ocean Software.





Wakelin's notable hand-drawn covers included *Batman: The Caped Crusader*, *Operation Wolf* and *New Zealand Story*, and he created nearly 100 illustrations overall. After spending days researching the theme of each game, he'd draw in pencil and airbrush over the top. The results stood the test of time – so much so that posters sold by Wakelin at numerous retro fairs up and down the country decades later sold incredibly well.

Other early notable creators included British comic book artist Simon Bisley, known for his work on the magazine *2000 AD*. He created the artwork for the Bitmap Brothers' achingly cool game *Gods* in 1991. Then there's Roger Dean, a man responsible for the album covers of bands such as Yes and Asia but who also did much work for game publisher Psygnosis.

Dean's unique fantasy style adorned the covers of *Barbarian* and *Obliterator*, and he also created the cover for *Shadow of the Beast*, which made a particularly big splash on the Amiga. Artworks such as this created a cult following, but the ultimate aim was to ensure a package stood out on the shop shelves. In some instances, it was possible to identify a publisher simply by looking at the art style.

## Box clever

The games industry had other ways of encouraging gamers to part with their cash. Over time publishers gravitated towards packaging that rolled in at nine inches tall and seven inches wide – a size eventually used by numerous publishers such as Broderbund,



Sierra, GT Interactive and Microsoft – but there were some tricks that could still catch a gamer's eye.

"The possibilities of creating a unique box were endless, combining all of the tricks the printing industry had up its sleeves including different finishes, die cut holes, irregular box shapes, gold letters and so on," Wimmer said. For collectors, they can be on a par with the shiny Panini stickers that were once highly prized in playgrounds up and down the land.

"Every once in a while, you could come across a box with a weird or beautiful shape," said Bras "There was a special collector's version of *The 7th Guest*, which had a box in the shape of a book. When you opened it, you would see a hallway with a door at the end and when you opened that door you would find a VHS tape with a 'making of' programme on it."

*The 7th Guest* was developed by Trilobyte, a company founded by Graeme Devine and Rob Landeros. "We were of course delighted and flabbergasted that you could charge £99 for a collector's edition," Devine told *PC Pro*, revealing that the idea came from Keith Greer and Martin Alper at Virgin Games.

"For a premium collector's edition, you had to make the box look really high value," Greer said. "Using foils, a

**TOP** Anne Bras has the world's biggest collection of big box games

**ABOVE LEFT** The *11th Hour* came in an elaborate clockwork box

**ABOVE RIGHT** The Big Box PC Game Collectors group on Facebook has 6,500 members



thicker gauge cardboard or increasing the size helped them to stand out on the shelves of retailers such as Electronics Boutique or Radio Shack or wherever they were sold."

Trilobyte was also behind *The 11th Hour*. "That game had a box [that] opened up like the gears of the box," Bras recalled. "I also remember the *Gabriel Knight* origami-shaped box, the *Ultrabots* box, which transformed into some kind of machine part, and the *Dune Sandworm* edition, where you'd fold open the front of the box to allow the sandworm to appear and open its mouth."

## Tried and tested

The regular boxes are just as collectible, however. "All you need is stunning cover art that's enriched with a good printing job," said Wimmer.

In Europe this refers to a sturdy two-part box with a glossy finish. "But in the US, one-piece boxes were more common, featuring gate-fold covers and embossing, but it also resulted in a more flimsy box that required an inner cardboard for stability," Wimmer added.



That may be so, but many of those one-piece examples are also highly collectible. “My all-time favourite packages are Electronic Arts’ flat folders,” said Spanish collector Jaime González Soriano. “They were similar to vinyl record sleeves and they included interviews with programmers and artists of the games as well photographs of them, often dressed as characters.”

Such flourishes proved a hit with many collectors, as did the wealth of material that would usually end up inside the boxes. “Some manuals were as good as an academic paper. *Timothy Leary’s Mind Mirror* is a great example, although it’s not actually a proper game; it’s an exploration of your mind,” Soriano said. “Others had maps and books full of hints and clues. Infocom and Telarium [formerly Trillium] were very good at this”.

It was certainly easy to add extra goodies inside the boxes given how much space there was inside. Floppy or compact discs would take up only a fraction of the interior. “Being a fan of computer role-playing games, a title that included a good-quality cloth map or coins always made me smile,” said Wimmer. “They were little artefacts that linked the virtual world with your own, and Richard Garriot did a wonderful job with his *Ultima* series.”

Bras reels off a list of the best stuff, from T-shirts, mousepads, a soundtrack and map to a VHS tape, figurine and stickers. “Some of my favourite feelies were the napkin from *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*, the cloth maps from the *Ultima* games and the *Jack Jackrabbit* plush, which came with *Jack Jackrabbit 2* on the Mac.”

His all-time favourite goodies are those within the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* box by Infocom in 1984. “It came with fluff, destruction orders for your home and planet, a ‘Don’t Panic!’ button, Joo Janta 200 super-chromatic peril sensitive sunglasses, ‘no tea’ and a microscopic space flea.”

## Digital unboxing

To showcase the wide variety of boxes, Wimmer has spent a great deal of time scanning the 691 game boxes he physically owns before uploading them to his website, **bigboxcollection.com**. It’s become a faithful digital reproduction of the game shelf in his home (“I rarely sell boxes, but if I do, I also remove the virtual ones”, he said).

The project began because he wanted a visual catalogue of his games, and he says a big part of collecting is sharing what you have. “I started with photographs of my boxes but I

wasn’t satisfied with the varying quality of my pictures so I started scanning them,” Wimmer explained.

“I then turned those flat scans into 3D – in contrast to how we’re scrolling through our digital purchases on Steam, **gog.com** or consoles these days. We’ve lost the tangible nature of playing computer games, haven’t we? It’s similar to putting on a vinyl record compared to just hitting that play button in Spotify.”

There are numerous threats facing collectors of big boxes, however. Bras says games need to be kept out of the sunlight and they must be stored in areas with low humidity. “I try to keep them in a dust-free, enclosed environment and I advise against stacking games because the pressure can damage the boxes,” he explained.

Sadly, scammers are also waiting for collectors’ cash, and it emerged this year that a large number of clever forgeries are lurking around the retro market. Some were printed using materials untypical of the time of release and discs inside boxes were found to contain no data.

“The rarer a game, the harder it is to spot a fake because you can’t easily compare it with verified copies,” Wimmer said.

According to Bras, the rise in forgeries has aligned with growing interest in collecting big box games. “For a long time, the big box PC game collectors’ community was still very much untouched by forgeries and reproductions, but finding games became harder and harder and the prices became ridiculously high very fast. Where there used to be 100 collectors and 100 games on the market back in the day, there are now 1,000 collectors and ten games.”

“The trend of grading everything doesn’t do anyone a favour either,” Wimmer said. “The prospect of getting rich quick by selling your old games found in the cellar isn’t really true but fraud becomes a real

**BELOW Benjamin Wimmer in front of his large collection of big box games**



possibility the more people buy into this idea of retro games being a lucrative market.”

Bras agrees, pointing to some sellers asking for high amounts in the hope that they strike lucky. “Because of this rapid rise in popularity, the PC gaming community has unfortunately now become the target of forgeries, fakes and reproductions.

“I’m not a fan of reproductions at all and I believe the person making one should always ask the IP owner for permission and it should always be extremely clear that it’s not an original. They should always work within legal limits.”

## Changing times

Games in big boxes began to decline in the early 2000s as console gaming took off and retailers needed publishers to release titles that took up less space. Fast forward to today and you’ll find most games are offered as game codes or keys online, with only the odd standard issue game released in a DVD case.

If you’re to find a modern big box

PC title, it’s more likely going to be a collector’s edition (the sizes and shapes varying wildly) or a Kickstarter perk. When games in recent times are issued in the boxes familiar to millions all those years

ago, however, they still turn heads, as Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick’s *Thimbleweed Park* proved in 2017.

Bras is at least helping to keep the feeling of game boxes alive. Having founded Pedestal Games in 2021, he develops his own titles – which he prefers to call “pieces of art” – and, for one of them called *Mini Prince*, he not only offers a free download but the chance to snap up a limited edition mini-box that’s large enough to fit an SD card along with a manual and two-sided poster.

It’s all great fun, and that’s the way Bras wants the collecting scene to be. “Maybe the biggest threat collectors

are facing is a lack of money

or fun,” he said. “Sometimes collecting can become less like a hobby and passion and more like an obsession, and you have to be careful when that happens. It’s important to focus on the end goal and ask why you want to get there.” ●

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**BELOW Collectors are reviving the lost art of big box PC games**

