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Feature 2, Draft 1 "V is for Voltage, B is Best"

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The game store is a small, tucked away part of South Warren Street in downtown Syracuse, filled to the brim with video games of all kinds; Sega, Wii, Playstation, and much, much more. But at Voltage Video Games, selling top games of all kinds is what is the most important. And for general manager Ben Shearer, making sure everyone has fun playing video games is what is the most important.

Having been a part of the store for 6 years, Ben Shearer is as much of a fixture at the store as are the games that he sells. Customers are thrilled to talk to him for anything from gaming recommendations to technical difficulties. Nothing escapes his notice and he is always happy to give his attention to all customers, regardless of gaming experience or knowledge. To cut a long story short, you do not have to be the world's best gamer or of a certain gender. Everyone is welcome.

The art of the video game itself holds a deep personal meaning for Shearer and the many gamers that he sells games to. It's not just about the video game, it's about spreading the word of a movement.

"There are games with great political messaging and empowering and all kinds of things like that," Shearer said on the game's message. "But like everything, there are two sides to the coin, and like all art forms, it is the expression of the person who made it and there's no controlling."

Upon arriving at the store, there were numerous amounts of gaming figurines as well as countless numbers of gaming consoles on the wall. Unlike GameStop, the Nintendo 64 is not just a game console plunked on a wall here and there at this store, it's a selling point here as well as several other types of consoles and video games. Some of the games featured like Dungeons and Dragons or Cards Against Humanity don't even require consoles. All they require is patience and a sense of imagination.

"For people who are just getting into [gaming], it's gonna take a while before someone really gets into it and gets their skills up," said Matt Colwill, former Vice President at the G.A.M.E. Club at Lynn University. "And it also depends what kind of genre you're going into. If they want to go into a different genre, if they want to go more into multiplayer, the tip that I'd say for them is you're going to get frustrated if you're just going into a multiplayer for the first time."

For Dungeons and Dragons (D+D) lovers, manuals lined the walls on how to be a good Dungeon Master or which spells to use on which creatures. And while there are no current D+D sessions at Voltage, Shearer says that there are groups (both online and in-person) that specialize not just in Dungeons and Dragons, but plenty of other games too such as “Kingdom Hearts” for Playstation 2, “Cooking Mama” for Wii, and even “Horizon Dawn” for Playstation 4.

There were even walls covered with video games and consoles, nothing was left out, not even a Simpsons arcade-based game that I spotted when I walked in. From the XBox 360 to the SEGA Genesis console from the early 1990s, no game console has been forgotten. To say that Voltage Video Games caters to just about everyone is an understatement; both the owners and the staff want to make sure that every gamer is happy and satisfied with their experience when they walk in and when they leave.

“It's never too early,” Shearer said. “But if someone's trying to get into Pokemon, I'd say you need to at least have a certain reading level. I was four when I got my 64 and played Mario 64 for the first time, so I'm definitely a testament to ‘There's never too early.’”

Like many gamers of his generation, 30-something Shearer grew up going to Toys R Us and experiencing firsthand the excitement of Mario 64 whilst learning how to play Pokemon. In his own words, he “went all over the place” as he learned how to play all sorts of games ranging from “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone” on Playstation One to “Superman” on Nintendo 64. While he did not talk much about his personal life, he was more than happy to discuss his favorite games and consoles.

But there were also games that he did not like, he mentioned to me with a sly grin. “A “Superman 64 I rented it when I was a kid and started flying through rings and it was just awful,” Shearer said. “There are so many terrible games out there. But if I had one that really sticks out to me is like a childhood memory of an awful game, that's got to be the one.”

Vintage video games have always been an interest for Shearer. Shearer had applied to both Gamestop and Voltage, but Voltage was always the first choice for him. As soon as Voltage wrote him and told Shearer he was hired, Shearer left Gamestop and has been at Voltage ever since. And according to his Instagram, making people happy is what matters. There is even a photo of a thank-you note from a happy customer, showing just how much the gamers value Shearer and his opinion.

Since the COVID-19 lockdown, the store’s sales boomed as did many other stores across the country. With people being stuck at home, gaming sites and stores everywhere were selling games faster than one could ever imagine. Old gaming classics quickly became new favorites for

a new generation of gamers, which works perfectly for Shearer as his favorite era of video games ranges from 1995 to 2001.

“A lot of people that were trapped in the house wanted to play games,” said Shearer. “Maybe they weren't up on the new games as much or haven't played a game since the 90s or whatever. They were coming in to buy things and a lot of them have held on to it. So we've seen prices go up just due to a surge in demand, and they haven't really totally stabilized yet.”

Moving on from the games, Shearer proceeded to walk through the store, making a point to show games that were in high demand as well as making sure that customers that walked in were helped accordingly. One of the highlights that Shearer made sure to point out was the disc polishing machine, a common sight at vintage stores across the country as well as the many action figurines of characters and their Gameboy counterparts. Some of these action figurines and consoles can easily sell for \$600 in retail, more than twice their original value.

As my visit drew to a close, I noticed that Shearer's attention to assuring customer satisfaction that truly draws people into Voltage Video Games, not the price tag or the video games themselves. If anyone deserves to be credited with what makes Voltage succeed as a video game store, it's Ben Shearer.