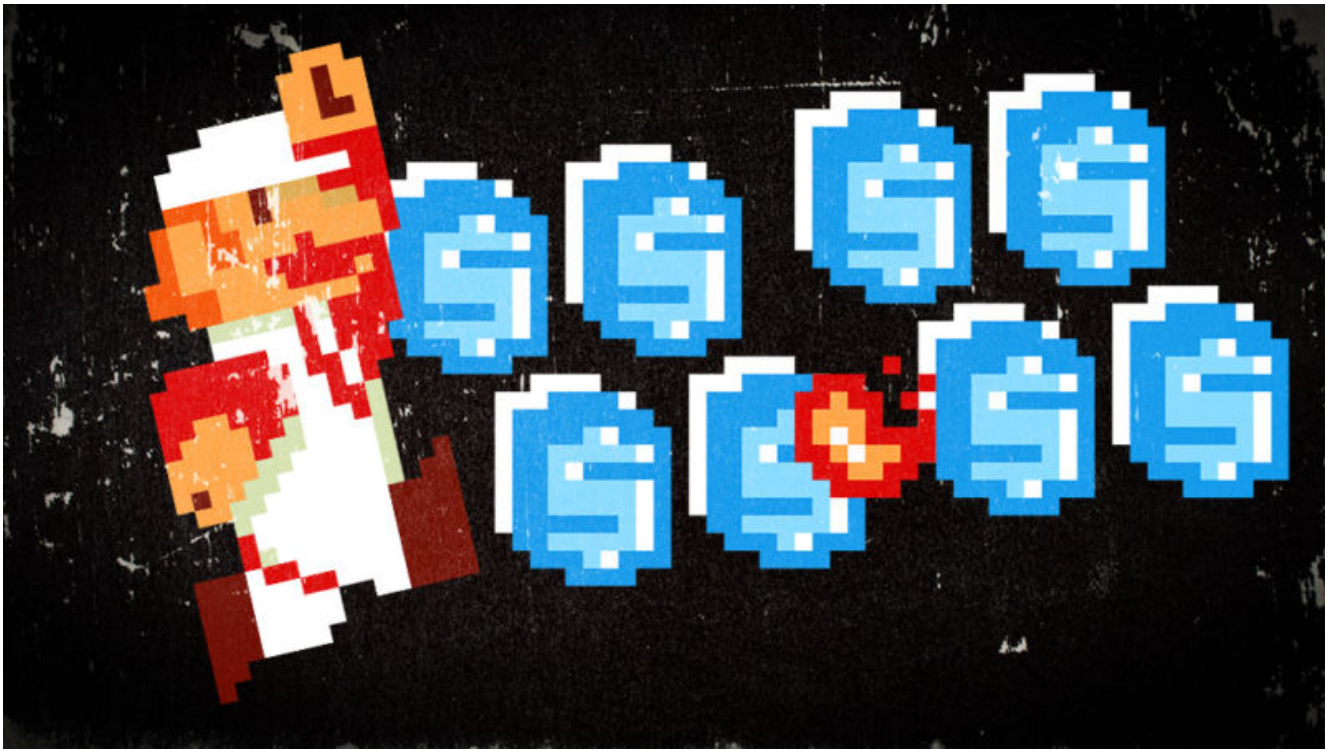
$100K Mario seller: “It’s probably the wrong move, long term, to sell”



Enlarge / Ba-ding!

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Last week, a copy of the first printing of *Super Mario Bros.* in pristine condition sold for just over $100,000. This week, the collector who sold that gem told Ars that he’s been preparing for this moment for years.

The seller—who asked to remain anonymous to protect his privacy but goes by the handle Bronty online—told Ars he didn’t even have an NES growing up. He just played games like *Super Mario Bros.* at a friend’s house. But around 2002, at age

27, Bronty was gripped by a desire to once again play the NES games he hadn’t thought about for well over a decade.

A quick trip to eBay got him his nostalgic gaming fix and sparked an interest in a new hobby that fewer people were paying attention to at the time. “Having already been a comic collector for many years, I had an interest in collecting in general,” Bronty told Ars. “I started thinking, ‘Would this be an interesting thing to collect?'”

“I started fairly early on, and back in 2002, sealed game prices were nothing like today,” he continued. “Stuff that is worth 10, 15, 20 thousand dollars now was $200 to $400 then. The other people I was competing against… they were largely students maybe in fourth year university or something. I was a little older, 27, I had a bit of a job [in a financial field], so it was a little easier for me to afford.”

By 2007, Bronty had amassed a near-complete collection of well over 600 NES games, all still sealed in their shrink wrap. And he said he knew he was well ahead of where the market would be. “I 100 percent just saw this as ‘A’ material. Not to this extent, but I saw this [increase in value] coming,” Bronty said. “I knew that these were special items and that my window to buy was now. I spent everything I could, sold all my good comics, went into debt, I went all out.”

Even with his all-in approach, Bronty’s biggest single sealed-in-box find was still to come.

Finding the “holy grail”

By all rights, a sticker-sealed *Super Mario Bros.* should probably not even exist in such perfect condition more than three decades after it was first put on store shelves. When it comes to sealed games, the “great, great, great majority” come from unsold inventory found in stores that have closed, Bronty said. “There was one lot I found through eBay that had 3,000

sealed NES games," for instance.



Enlarge / Even shrink-wrapped old games aren't often found in the pristine condition of this sealed *Super Mario Bros.*. These examples were found in an abandoned video rental store.

The problem with that kind of sourcing, though, is that "even in a lot that big, most of it is garbage… because it's unsold inventory," Bronty noted. "And what went unsold? The garbage titles [released] from '90 to '92, because that's when a lot of these closeouts happen. The stuff from '85, '86, '87, it sold the minute it hit the shelves."

That stuff includes the 17 "black box" games that were sold in extremely limited quantities as part of the NES' test market launch in New York and Los Angeles starting in late 1985. These "sticker-sealed" games, which were never protected by shrink wrap, were never going to sit unloved on store shelves for decades. "Something like this from the very, very beginning [of the NES' lifespan], it just doesn't happen," Bronty said. "The install base was still very small. The stock that went through the sales channels was very, very tiny."

Deniz Kahn, CEO and founder of game grading service Wata Games, estimates that only 2,000 to 10,000 copies of each matte-sticker-sealed test-market NES game were ever made. The vast majority were likely opened and played, and even those that weren't opened likely got dinged up over the years due to

the lack of shrink wrap. Kahn estimates that only “single digit” numbers of each individual sticker-sealed title still exist unopened in 2019, and he has only heard hearsay about one other sticker-sealed *Super Mario Bros.* existing in beat-up condition.

So you can understand that Bronty was surprised to see a good-condition sticker-sealed copy of the original *Mario Bros.* (the NES version of the arcade game) pop up on eBay in late 2012. He acted. And after winning that auction (for about $8,000), Bronty discovered that the Wisconsin-based seller had over 100 *other* sticker-sealed and early shrink-wrapped NES games for sale.

It was this particular lot that just so happened to include a sticker-sealed copy of *Super Mario Bros.* that may well be one-of-a-kind.

The original seller told Bronty the bounty had come from his father, who had recently passed away and left these sealed boxes behind. Apparently, as the son tells it to Bronty, this late collector had been purchasing pretty much every major new video game since the late ’70s on the day of release. “He started buying in the Atari days, he was opening and playing them at that time,” Bronty said. “When it got to the titles that were later in his collection, they were all unopened; he had stopped playing.”



Close up examples of the sticker seal that only appeared on

games sold during the NES' test market launch.
"It took somebody doing something that made no sense for this copy [of *Super Mario Bros.*] to survive," Bronty continued. "A grown man buying video games and putting them on the shelf without playing them, that just didn't happen back then. They're like $50 each [in '80s money], to do a large collection of that, somebody would be spending thousands of dollars on something they're not going to use, which makes no sense. They weren't thought of in any way whatsoever as collectibles."

In most hobbies, Bronty said, when you see someone preserving new purchases like this before a secondary market has developed, "it's usually somebody who has more of a hoarder mindset than someone who's doing this as a collector out of foresight. It's obsessive behavior, a compulsion more than anything. But hey, it's amazing because for geeks like us 30 years later, it provides pristine examples we can enjoy."

Hidden in plain sight

After a bit of bargaining, Bronty and a fellow collector (who asked to go by the name "Kevin" for the sake of anonymity) partnered up to spend $50,000 to $60,000 on a total of 60 to 75 NES games that had been preserved in that single lot. But the box that would eventually become the first six-figure private video game sale wasn't even considered the jewel of the bunch at the time.

In making their collective offer, Kevin told Ars that the pair "individually considered each game and assigned what we thought was a fair value." Kevin and Bronty valued a few early NES rarities like *Clu Clu Land*, *Kid Icarus*, and *Donkey Kong* in the $5,000 to $6,000 range, Kevin said. The sticker-sealed *Super Mario Bros.*, on the other hand, was worth "in the $2,000 to $4,000 range," by their estimation. "These were typical going rates for these games at the time, so we were careful

not to underwhelm with our offer and risk not making a deal," Kevin said.

"We both knew [*Super Mario Bros.*] was special and it was definitely something we both saw as being very desirable and one of the best games in the lot, but it wasn't [considered] head and shoulders above everything else, no." Bronty told Ars. "Even then, *Super Mario Bros.* was very much recognized as being a special piece, just maybe not to this degree."

- The sticker-sealed *Super Mario Bros.* in its original VGA case, where it stayed until a re-rating by Wata Games last year.
- The back of the box. Don't worry, that tape is closing a plastic bag outside the outer case.
- The sticker-sealed *Super Mario Bros.*, as it was first shown to Bronty and Kevin in a dark, low-quality photo from the original seller.
- The sticker-sealed *Super Mario Bros.* sits next to a sticker-sealed *Mario Bros.* which the buyers actually valued much more highly in 2012.
- The sticker-sealed *Super Mario Bros.* sits with a few other pieces from the same lot, waiting for grading and authentication by the Video Game Authority.
- It wasn't just Nintendo-developed games in the lot. This shrink-wrapped copy of *Mega Man* was also quite rare and valuable.

Back in 2012, it was more difficult to assess the true rarity and value of these early games, Bronty continued. "You have to keep in mind, when I started collecting… the amount that people understood about the chronology of the different variants was very, very little," Bronty said. "We all understood there were different [versions] and sort of knew a little bit about some of them being a little bit harder to find, but we had no idea about which ones came first and which ones came truly later… It's only through different bits of

research by different people over the years that we started to understand this stuff."

Indeed, Wata Games Chief Grader Kenneth Thrower told Ars it took years of collective effort from the community to compile a definitive list of all the variant versions of Nintendo's first 30 "black box" NES games. Over time, collectors were able to cross-reference sealed boxes they had in their possession with lists of release dates provided by Nintendo. This allowed them to figure out when certain features started appearing and disappearing from the production line.

"Maybe the biggest smoking gun was that the last three [black box] games made in 1987 were the only ones that have never been found with sticker seals," Thrower said. Meanwhile, he added, "1985 releases are also the only titles to have Matte sticker seals (1st possible printing) while 1986 releases are only available in Gloss sticker and later (2nd possible printing). Nintendo's earlier Game & Watch handheld games were also sealed with this sticker seal, so it further fortifies the timeline."

But none of this was common knowledge in 2012, even among serious collectors. So when the time came to divide up the lot, Kevin said he prioritized personal favorites like *Metroid*, *Donkey Kong Jr.*, *Rygar*, and *Mega Man* over the sticker-sealed *Super Mario Bros.*. "I knew [*Mario*] was valuable, but so were many of the first-round games we bought," Kevin said. "At the time, we didn't really consider the sticker seal all that much more valuable over a 'regular' sealed copy."

Reflecting on last week's sale, Kevin said he's "a bit surprised at the dollar value of the *Super Mario Bros.*… but I suspect I'll continue to be surprised more and more as time goes on." Looking back, Kevin still doesn't have any regrets about what he calls an amicable splitting of the sealed NES lot with Bronty.

“I’m very happy for [Bronty] to have gotten [*Super Mario Bros.*],” Kevin said. “He… was the one who got his foot in the door with the seller and orchestrated most of the deal. He deserves it! I was just along for the ride for the most part, [and] I ended up [with] several nice pieces myself, so no complaints here.”

“When you are splitting things up at a point in time, you do your best as to what’s fair then,” Bronty added. “What’s fair eight years later might not be the same.”

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