Riley Kane

WRIT 410

**Fall in the House of Play (& Trade)**

* $99,000 (for up front total costs, plus working capital (3rd party financing available)
* 3 possible locations for site review
* The ability to secure a retail lease
* The ability to manage employees
* The ability to work hard!
* A strong desire to succeed!
  + *From the “Is Franchising Right For You?” page (Sept 1, 2004)*

On the day that my local Play N Trade closed, Matt wasn’t there. The man working the counter was burlier, bald, sprucing up DVDs and Blu-Rays like they were dirty dishes.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’re closing. This is the last of our inventory,” he responded.

Struggling to understand, I looked through the boxes of hardware and games. It was true. Half-off games, miscellaneous cords, isolated *Guitar Hero* guitars, even some rare items. None of it seemed mine for the taking. It felt wrong. But, what the heck, I ended up leaving with a $15 GameCube and that was that.

2013 marked the year that the Batavia Play N Trade shut down. The rest of them in Aurora, Elmhurst and Naperville had tanked too. Of course, corporate framed it as a noble thing: “The show’s over, but we had a good run.” There’s nothing noble about a store closing sign, but we’ve normalized them to the point of humanizing the company over individual workers.

*Sears is closing.* That’s too bad. Well, it’s because everything is moving online.

*Borders is closing.* I had a lot of great memories there. It’s all about the Kindle now.

And when Play N Trade shut down it was easy to chalk it up to an unpredictable market. Gamers were flocking elsewhere. Nothing you can do about that, after all. Store owners packed their bags, and a collective “Oh well” was uttered.

There’s something sinister that runs deeper than the gaming industry itself. It is the eschewing of honesty in an attempt to make a profit, even at the cost of everything. Play N Trade Corporate knows a thing or two about that, and they made it seem like their company was growing faster with each ensuing year. That wasn’t even their biggest lie.

Number 16 of Next Generation’s “Top people of 2007” was Play N Trade founder, Ron Simpson.

Among those named were Ken Levine (Bioshock) and Robert Kotick (President of Activision). But perhaps most surprising was making it on the same list as gaming legend, Satoru Iwata, who took the number 1 spot.

While this might not mean much, it was a testament to how large Play N Trade had grown in just several years. They cropped up in strip malls, implying less luxury but more convenience. Their target audience was anyone who had even the slightest interest in playing video games. And Ron Simpson’s dynasty was growing, raking in a whopping $20 million a year (about $25.8 in 2021).

Simpson is this small guy—he looks like any dad you’d run into at the Wal-Mart down the street—with nothing to his name except his brand. A big brand that had big plans. Play N Trade, by this time, had opened their 100th store and sold the development contracts to 200 potential franchisees. He had his sales pitch—"Try any game before you buy”. It was plastered onto promotional materials. He said it in interview after interview. As long as he kept repeating his mantra, he could convince everyone that the merit of his idea alone would keep his business afloat.

Ron Simpson made a television appearance on *The Big Idea with Donny Deutsch* in the uncertain year of 2008*.* It marks one of the only surviving pieces of footage that shows us Simpson in motion. There’s a relative plainness to him. His triangular nose and blue eyes sit on his face deactivated. A businessman is supposed to have this strong aura, but he doesn’t even seem to be excited at what he’s created. When he talks about video games, it’s in the most general sense—a guy who has only played past the tutorial.

“I love to see the video game console go from the teenagers bedroom and taken into the living room,” Simpson says to Donny. “I want the whole family to participate.”

When I asked Troy Dunn, who was on the show with Simpson, he didn’t even seem to recall his presence. “I've done hundreds of TV appearances over the years and this doesn't ring any bells,” he said. “I know nothing about this man or his company. I googled it, and I don’t see anything, so you must know more than Google does.”

Perhaps, Troy, I do.

Starting in 2009, everything went downhill. A revolving door of CEOs and higher ups created a disingenuous rift in the messaging of the company. The stores started to crumble under the pressure. Ron Simpson and associates were found guilty of altering the terms and conditions of their company—lying about the start-up costs in their contracts and writing off their subsidiaries as unassociated companies. Yakety Yak Holdings and T-Street Management were roses by any other name (but not so sweet). Whenever a hole would appear in one company, they’d send one of their guys to cover it. Yuvi Shmul (3rd CEO), Thomas C. Bozarth (President of Yakety Yak) and Ron Simpson filed for bankruptcy in March of 2014. The company dissolved, and Ron Simpson fled to Florida for an early retirement.

I suppose if Simpson had only implemented his “Try Before You Buy” policy in a more equitable way, then he could have avoided a very nasty case of buyer’s remorse.

“What news source are you from?” The man on the phone sounded irritated.

I responded gleefully. “I’m a freelancer writer.”

“Yeah, I’m not interested.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks.”

I hung up.

Chicago was the hub for one of the remaining Play N Trade’s in Illinois. I blew my chance, it seemed. The once peachy memories of baby-faced gamers perusing the store were replaced by the very uncertain and impending reality that closure was just around the corner for any surviving Play N Trade.

In a 2018 interview with Louisiana store owner, Jeff Pearson, he commented that he’s lucky to be one of the remaining few. “In January 2015, the whole thing just caved in and collapsed.” Five years earlier, Larry Plotnick (the 4th CEO) pulled some statistic that Play N Trade’s growth is, “17% above the rest of the industry.” Clearly, 17% was an overstatement. “They went from 750 stores globally, and I think they’re down to maybe 30. I’m sure someone owns the name somewhere, but they don’t want the public to know that. They owe a lotta money to a lotta people,” he said.

There are still about 3 pending court cases in Play N Trade’s name. They have to do with trademark disputes. Something about Play N Trade wanting to hold onto their last vestiges. A man named Will Lawrence got the smart idea to jump ship and start his own company: Press Start. He just didn’t do it right. Claiming this was a new franchise wasn’t exactly a 100% factual statement. Within the wires of the store’s computer was a name: Play N Trade. Because he didn’t take the necessary steps to get incorporated (and because Play N Trade was starved for money) they took him to court on a charge for theft.

“Will was a huge idiot that half assed everything in the last two years of his company,” one reddit user commented on a post detailing the closure of Press Start in Winchester, VA. “The owner abandoned this store the moment the bills were due…there are even rumors that private investigators have been looking into him due to the fact that the Front Royal store was part of another franchise called Play N Trade.”

And this wasn’t an isolated case. There was a shadiness, unspoken and snuffed out in most circles. One thing it couldn’t escape was angry customers: something Play N Trade strove to never have.

*“The Plymouth meeting PA store never had a shot with that owner running the show. Rude, nasty, unprofessional and threatened customers regularly.”*

* + PissedConsumer486142 of Denver, CO (May 6, 2014)

*“I probably spent thousands over the years and traded in over 50 games at Play N Trade and it was a huge mistake to do so. If lazy, uninterested employees, an embarrassing lineup of terrible games, way to high prices and frankly insulting trade in offers are your thing, go to Play N Trade.”*

* + PissedConsumer346227 of Cary, NC (May 20, 2013)

*“The Evergreen park location in chicago has the most disrespectful and unprofessional employees. Just because I asked to speak to someone else the guy hung up on me.and became combative when I came to the store.never again will I do business with that company again.”*

* + PissedConsumer601463 of Chicago, IL (Feb 27, 2015)

Ron Simpson’s loose ends didn’t tie up after the Play N Trade fallout. His original Vice President, Jared Turner, was part of a separate scandal that arose in 2016.

A fresh start. It sounded fantastic.

Jared Turner became Amada’s Executive Chairman in 2012. He kept a low profile, running the senior care company with relative ease. The only tragic flaw in his plan was that he neglected to mention he’d been a part of the Play N Trade bankruptcy. They say insanity is doing the same thing expecting different results; Turner fell into that trap a little too stubbornly. You can’t change the past, and you certainly can’t shit where you eat.

When all was said and done, Jared Turner was required to pay a substantial fee and life went on. Play N Trade has little more than 10 stores left in the US as of 2021. In other countries such as Egypt, Canada, and Panama, the stores seem to be fairly self-sufficient. Incompetence and corruption couldn’t spread their pretty little fingers far enough, but it’s only a matter of time before those fingernails start to grow, wanting someone to take their anger out on.

I saw Matt for the last time in 2017.

My brother and I had decided to eat Panera Bread for lunch. We saw someone across the way, eating a bread bowl with a girl. It could only be Matt. Though he wasn’t sporting his blue Play N Trade polo shirt, his chestnut colored hair was still as healthy and greasy as the day we last saw him. We noticed a decent 5 o’clock shadow, but he really wasn’t looking too shabby. He was gleaming. *Hi welcome to Play N Trade.*

I wondered how much he had buried his past as a gamer. There was a good chance she was one as well. ‘So, do you guys, like, play games together?’ I thought of a couple ways a conversation could go. I pulled my 3DS from my pocket, and my brother shook his head. Matt’s eyes hadn’t left her the entire time we were eating.

What was the use of opening up old wounds? On his last day as a store employee, I doubt he really freaked out. It didn’t seem in character. He might have been happy to be let go, considering he then had time to find his potential one-and-only. I had to think of it in good terms. Do you remember me, Matt? I hope you’re doing well.

I left the store, my head turned slightly. He looked up; I looked ahead.