BEYOND
THE NES

REDISCOVERING 8-BIT ON THE JAPANESE FAMICOM

SYNCOPLAY ○ JOE BOURRIE

COVER ART BY DUSTIN HANSEN

ABOUT THIS BOOK

When I was three my parents bought an Atari 5200 with three games: Pac-Man, Ms. Pac-Man, and Super Breakout. I had played Atari VCS classics like Pitfall, Stampede and Kaboom! with my cousins, but having my own game console at such a young age started me on a journey that would define my hobby and my career.

On my sixth Christmas the family gift was a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), and I spent the next decade of my life trying to play every game released for it. Rentals were a common way to try many different games at the time - and I spent nearly ALL my earned money renting everything from Adventure Island to Zombie Nation. I became a bit of a "walking encyclopedia" of the NES: if anybody wanted to know anything about a game, they could just ask me and I'd arguably have *too much* to say about it.

Little did I know at the time, but the NES game library only told half the story. On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Japanese kids were playing numerous games that, for various reasons, never made it to U.S. shores. In many cases, the game was based on a property unknown to the West at the time, like with Super Sentai or Mighty Atom. Nintendo's strict limitations on Western releases from a single publisher forced publishers to pick and choose which games to localize, leaving classics like Konami's Getsu Fuuma Den on Japanese shores. Some games belong to genres unpopular in the West at the time - a fate suffered by the originator of the visual novel genre, Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken. Some were left in Japan due to Western sensitivities to violence or religious content, affecting Nintendo's early hit Devil World. And because Nintendo released the Family Computer two years before the NES, arcade ports like Mappy were outdated before a Western release was even an option.

Over thirty years later, most Famicom discussions revolve around just a handful of titles. Citing that Super Mario Bros. 2 is a re-skin of the Japanese game Doki Doki Panic is so common it has become a meme. Almost everybody interested in the Famicom knows that an excellent parody of Namcot's arcade gorefest Splatterhouse exists on the system, and a little more digging will point you toward some childhood favorites, like Contra, that are even better in Japan.

But gamers often overlook the myriad Japan-only titles they can't easily judge after 30 seconds of distracted emulation. Games like Higemaru Maikaijima require some effort to start if you don't read Japanese. Quirky experiments, like Super Star Force, look generic at first glance but hide a rewarding adventure under their dull surface. Titles like Youkai Douchuki are so steeped in Japanese cultural tropes that they would not have resonated the same way in the West. And the occasional game, like Power Blazer, whose Western release was remarkably different from the Japanese original.

This book is not a checklist of reviews for every Famicom title - those books already exist, and I doubt many of you care what I think of Mahjong Taikai (although I may add "Beating Genghis Khan at riichi mahjong" to my bucket list). Instead, this

book is a guided tour through the Famicom games that an English-speaking audience can reasonably complete. Some games, like Wai Wai World, require occasional help for those without Japanese reading comprehension. This book contains spoiler-free guides for a selection of these games, allowing you to experience them the way they were originally intended - or at least as close as we can get without years of language study.

Many Famicom games, like King Kong 2, are already in English or can be finished without reading any Japanese text. In fact, hundreds of games can be played from start to finish on original hardware by an English-speaking player with no additional resources. This book contains reviews of nearly all of the Famicom exclusives that fit into this category, along with any notes you might need to enjoy them.

Some popular genres, like RPGs and visual novels, are notoriously text-heavy. Luckily, you can also play many of these games due to the hard work of fan translation groups, which provide localized versions. We will explore various ways of playing these translated games, including on original hardware.

For the adventurous, we will learn how to read the minimum number of Japanese words to navigate menus, explore the cultural significance of some gaming tropes that got their start in Japanese 8-bit, and even learn to appreciate and enjoy the occasional *kusoge* (Japanese slang for "crap games").

We will also explore games that are historically significant to Japanese gaming. Interviews with several Famicom fans who have had different experiences with the console will help us see how the Famicom and NES affected gamers in Japan and abroad. Occasionally, we may sneak in a game that only received an English release in PAL territories - the NES was not very popular in Europe, so most of the PAL-exclusive releases are still new to an American audience.

When asked on social media "What stops you from playing Famicom?", most gamers said they didn't know what games to try, and were concerned about the language barrier. This book attempts to remove these barriers so English-speaking gamers can get the most out of the Famicom's library of incredible games. Whether you're a collector wanting to display these brightly-colored carts on your shelf, or an old-school gamer with a folder full of ROMs, this book will help you discover a world of new games you didn't even know existed.

Playing Famicom is like discovering an alternate path through the gaming multiverse, where Gradius had a true 8-bit sequel, Battletoads was easy, and Darth Vader could transform into a giant killer scorpion. I started collecting Famicom carts because they were inexpensive and colorful. Now, with a near-complete retail set of loose carts, I collect them because I want to play every game on this incredible system.

So put the Power Glove back in its case (the Famicom has no games that officially support it anyway), and grab your Hudson Joy Card instead (you'll need that turbo switch for Tetrastar: The Fighter). It's time to experience the 80s again from a brand-new perspective!

- Joe@Syncoplay

HOW TO ENJOY *FAMILY COMPUTER*
ファミリー コンピュータ

1 Original Hardware

Nintendo Family Computer (Original Model Famicom)

If you want the most authentic Famicom experience, you'll want to play on original hardware. The classic Family Computer is a quirky and fun piece of gaming history, and playing on original hardware has a distinct retro charm. For the truest retro experience, connect your Family Computer to a CRT television (with wood paneling for that extra 80s vibe).

One downside to the original model is that the controllers are hardwired directly to the console with short one-meter cables—this is a big problem for modern game spaces, as many people have to pull their entire console to the sofa to play it.

The original Family Computer connects via RF (the port your cable TV connects to—does anybody still have a cable TV?) and communicates via channel 95 or 96. Before purchasing one, make sure your TV's channels go up that high!

AV Famicom

If all of this sounds a bit too inconvenient, you may want an AV Famicom instead. It supports composite output (the yellow/red/white plugs) and can use the same multi-AV cable as the SNES, Nintendo 64, and GameCube.

Unlike the original, the AV Famicom also has NES-standard controller ports, which means you can connect any NES controller: the iconic rectangular pad, the updated "dog bone" style, or even third-party controllers and special joysticks like the NES Advantage.

The AV Famicom's only real disadvantage is that some games' features won't work on it. The original Family Computer's second controller has a microphone built into it, allowing players to use sound to interact with some games. For example, the Pols Voice enemies in The Legend of Zelda can only be defeated with sound. This feature is missing from the AV Famicom's gamepads.

For a premium experience, consider the Sharp Twin Famicom (or its turbo-controller variant). Composite output, two-meter controller cords, a microphone, and a built-in Famicom Disk System make this an excellent high-end option.

If you want to hook original hardware to a modern HDTV, you'll want to invest in an HD upscaler to prevent graphical issues that render many Famicom games nearly unplayable. I recommend the RetroTink line of products for the best

price vs. performance—although a number of competing products, such as the Open Source Scan Converter (OSSC) and the Framemeister XRGB Mini, provide comparable solutions.

You could also go old-school and hook directly to a classic CRT television. These are easy to find in local classifieds but are large and heavy, and the picture quality can be unpredictable. But if you can find a high-quality CRT TV, like a Sony Trinitron, JVC D-Series, or even a high-end PVM (the professional versions of a CRT screen), the Famicom's 240p graphics will look exactly the way they did at the console's initial release.

Playing on original hardware can offer some challenges for modern gaming setups, but for retro purists, it provides the most authentic way to enjoy the Nintendo Famicom.

Twin Famicom Turbo

HOW TO ENJOY *FAMILY COMPUTER*
ファミリー コンピュータ

2 Modern Hardware

Nt Mini Noir (Analogue)

There are many reasons to consider using modern hardware to play your classic games. Some modern hardware adds special features to the games, some have native support for modern HDTVs, and many offer an inexpensive way to play multiple consoles on a single machine. Modern hardware, often referred to as clone consoles, comes in many forms that vary in both price and functionality.

One important aspect to consider when shopping for modern hardware is how accurately it recreates the original console's hardware. There are three common types of hardware, each with its own strengths and weaknesses.

At the pricey end of the spectrum, there's FPGA hardware emulation. A good FPGA console (such as the Analogue Nt or the retroUSB AVS) can

replicate the Famicom hardware at near-exact accuracy. At the other end of the spectrum is the relatively inexpensive system-on-a-chip consoles that contain hardware that closely approximates the functionality of an original console. These are often barebones units with few bells and whistles, but they tend to play most of the console's library with minimal errors. Most system-on-a-chip consoles only have a cartridge slot designed for Western NES games (like the Super Retro Trio or RetroN HD), but their manufacturers often make Famicom adapters to play Japanese games. Good for the price, but be aware that some of them do not support HDMI and, therefore, have similar TV/upscaler requirements to the original hardware.

Between these two extremes, there's a third option worth considering: consoles that use software emulation (Hyperkin's RetroN 5 or Nintendo Switch Online). Instead of trying to mimic the original hardware, these use modern processors and clever software to "translate" game code so it runs on the new device. Although this can sometimes lead to graphical and audio glitches, gameplay errors, or games that don't work at all, emulation has become advanced enough that most games run well enough that gamers see no difference.

There are a few other factors to consider before settling on your clone console of choice. Many clone consoles will automatically upscale your games to HD and even add artificial scanlines to make the image look more like a classic CRT display when played on a modern HD screen. Some can also add filters to "upgrade"

the graphics to a more modern look (although it's often debated whether this is actually an improvement).

Emulation-based and FPGA consoles often have built-in support for Game Genie codes, save states (useful for carts that lack a battery save) and even support for translation and rom-hack patches—an incredibly convenient feature for those of us who want to play Famicom games but are not fluent in Japanese. Unfortunately, it is rare to find one that supports the microphone hidden in the Famicom's second controller (although you won't miss too much without it—unless you want to sing karaoke in Takeshi no Chousenjou).

RetroN 5 (Hyperkin)

For purists and completionist collectors, modern hardware limitations might be a deal breaker—only the Famicom itself is fully compatible with every game and accessory. The average player, however, is unlikely to run into issues—especially when using the higher-end FPGA solutions. Just don't expect every $50 system-on-a-chip console to support Pokkun Mogura's custom whack-a-mole mat.

If you only play on an HDTV, have limited space for multiple consoles, or just like the convenience of save states, using modern hardware is a great way to introduce yourself to the Famicom.

RetroDuo Portable (Retro-Bit)

HOW TO ENJOY *FAMILY COMPUTER*
ファミリー コンピュータ

OPTION 3 — NES Adapters

For all its cosmetic differences, the Famicom hardware is effectively the same as the North American–released Nintendo Entertainment System. Most Famicom software will run on an NES perfectly, with only a few exceptions. To play Famicom games on an NES, however, you will need an adapter.

An adapter acts like a pass-through, similar to the classic Game Genie cartridges. You plug a Famicom cart into the top, then plug the adapter

*60-to-72 Pin Adapter
(Hyperkin)*

into your NES. It then converts the Famicom's 60-pin interface to the NES's 72-pin interface so the NES can read the Famicom cart.

European consoles, which use the PAL standard, are a bit more hit-and-miss. While some Famicom games may run just fine on your PAL NES (but a bit slower since the PAL standard has a lower frame rate), other games may malfunction or even crash due to timing differences between the two standards. If you're in Europe and you prefer to use a PAL television for that classic feel, you'll need to pick up an additional NTSC-to-PAL signal converter.

For adapters, I recommend the Hyperkin 60-to-72 Pin Adapter and the My Arcade Cartridge Converter. The Hyperkin adapter is compatible

with every Famicom title and every NTSC NES. However, due to a reversed pinout, the Famicom cartridge must be inserted into the adapter backward before being put in the console. To remove the adapter from an original NES, you pull the ribbon attached to it, and it pulls out both the adapter and the game.

The My Arcade adapter is shaped like an empty NES cartridge. You insert a Famicom cartridge into the adapter, then insert that into the NES. Since the cartridge faces forward while inserted, it looks nice as well. While this design is clever, the adapter is too small to fit a handful of Famicom titles, including the must-play Namcot platformer Splatterhouse: Wanpaku Graffiti.

Searching internet auction sites will yield a number of other adapters, and many of them work just fine. However, be careful: some adapters are incompatible with the original model of the NES. These adapters are usually easy to recognize as they use the Hyperkin adapter's half-cartridge style but without an attached removal ribbon.

Curiously, you may already own an adapter and not even know it, especially if you collect American NES games. To help get enough cartridges made in time for the U.S. launch, Nintendo took the circuit boards from many of their Famicom releases and just installed them inside NES cartridges with a 60-to-72 pin adapter inside the cartridge.

Not all launch-era NES cartridges contain an adapter, but many do—especially copies of Gyromite. If you use a Gamebit screwdriver to open one of these carts, you can remove the adapter and use it with a top-loader NES and a Famicom cartridge. Be careful not to damage the electronics during insertion or removal.

*Cartridge Converter
(My Arcade)*

Games that commonly contain a Famicom-to-NES Adapter include:

- Gyromite
- Hogan's Alley
- Wrecking Crew
- Pinball
- Golf
- Excitebike
- Donkey Kong Jr.
- Tennis
- Gumshoe
- Soccer
- Urban Champion

A Famicom-to-NES adapter can save you both money and shelf space and is a great way for a newcomer to try importing on a budget.

*Official
Nintendo
Converter
(in Gyromite)*

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HOW TO ENJOY *FAMILY COMPUTER*
ファミリー コンピュータ

OPTION 4 — Emulation Software

*Mesen - NES/Famicom Emulator
(Windows)*

Many Western gamers are first introduced to the Famicom's library via emulators, software that loads a snapshot of a cartridge's data (called a ROM), then interprets that data to reproduce the game in a mostly accurate form. Emulators are available on most platforms, including PC, Mac, and mobile devices, and come in many variations.

Any reasonable discussion of emulation should begin by addressing the elephant in the room: emulation is not piracy, but emulation software is often used to play illegally obtained ROM files. Because of this, emulation is often spoken about in hushed tones and hidden from view.

However, most console publishers actually use emulation in their own products, including the NES/Famicom games on Nintendo Switch Online and numerous retro game compilation packs released to retail by their original publishers. In addition, emulation is crucial to preserving games that might otherwise be lost to time and physical media decay. There are many opinions on the difference between piracy and preservation, but that debate is outside the scope of this book.

Emulators, especially those for the 8-bit NES & Famicom, exist for nearly every modern device. Emulation software for PCs (Mesen, FCEUX) is often the most advanced since they can take advantage of the speed of modern PCs to get near-perfect accuracy in the emulation. These programs are also incredibly useful for creating ROM hacks, modified versions of classic games, because they allow you to run the game without putting it on original hardware. Some, like FCEUX, even have built-in debuggers for tracking down issues in your homebrew hacks.

Using emulation software also allows you to run your classic games in situations where they wouldn't normally be accessible. A good example is NES.emu, an emulator for the Android OS that allows you to play retro games using your phone with an on-screen gamepad or a Bluetooth-attached controller. This portability can make it easier to try games you might otherwise have passed on at home.

Some modern emulators even support networked multiplayer, allowing you to play games online that were

developed before the internet even existed. Products like Antstream are combining online retro gaming with social streaming—and I'm excited to see what type of play the next round of emulators will offer!

With all that said, there are some downsides to experiencing the Famicom library in a purely emulated form. Even when using the most advanced PC emulators, the accuracy isn't perfect, and you'll sometimes get graphical artifacts or timing issues that affect the experience. Game collectors also often swear that there's

NES.emu (Android)

a unique "feel" when playing a game using original hardware. While there are debates on both sides of this argument, it's easy to see why using an original gamepad and a CRT television would have a nostalgic authenticity that just can't be matched on an LCD monitor with a modern controller.

Emulation can be a valuable tool for playing, studying, streaming, and upgrading Famicom games and is crucial for preserving the classics for future generations.

Family Computer - Nintendo Switch Online

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POWER BLAZER

パワー・ブレイザー

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Taito	Action	Hard

The Blue Blazer

If any Famicom game deserves to be labeled a Mega Man clone, it's Power Blazer. Clearly inspired by the blue bomber's first outing, Taito's Power Blazer lets you choose the order in which you complete six levels before taking on the final boss in the final level. The hero, Steve Treiber, wields a high-tech boomerang that you can upgrade via power-ups dropped by defeated enemies. Fast reflexes and pinpoint platforming are the keys to succeeding in your mission: reach the control center and destroy the Master Computer that is terrorizing Earth's citizens.

Reboot the Robot Rebellion

Power Blazer is notorious for its extreme difficulty, although it's arguably comparable to the first Mega Man/Rockman game. Combat can get hectic, but the game gives you plenty of health to survive most encounters. The real challenge is in certain platforming sections, which can require pixel-perfect precision comparable to the Guts Man or Quick Man stages in Capcom's counterpart. It takes some time to get used to the jump's arc—it peaks abruptly, and there's no forgiveness if you jump too late at the platform's edge. Despite these challenges, Power Blazer is beatable in an hour or two with a bit of practice.

Blazing New Trails

Power Up
Strengthens your boomerang but lowers its speed.

Normal
Restores your boomerang to its default power and speed.

Gauge
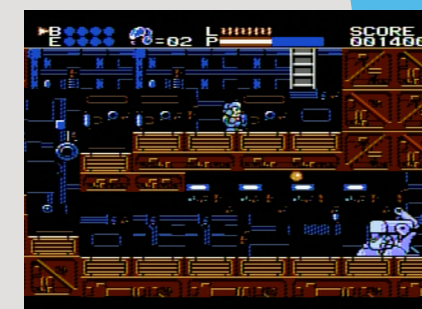Increases your throw's maximum distance.

Bomb
Use in the Pause menu to destroy everything on screen.

Energy
Use in the Pause menu to fully heal your life bar.

Extra Life
Gain an extra life. These are often placed on risky, optional paths.

Cheaters Always Prosper

Power Blazer doesn't always play fair, and one of the biggest frustrations is the meager drop rate for boomerang power-ups. Taito must have known this, as they added a handy code that lets you start with a maxed-out boomerang.

Just enter Left, Up, Right, Down, Up, Up, B, A, B, A on the title screen, then start the game as usual. You can even use this code and then enter your password, allowing you to continue with a fully powered weapon!

While Power Blazer never received a western release, it was redesigned into the excellent Power Blade with improved controls and redesigned levels.

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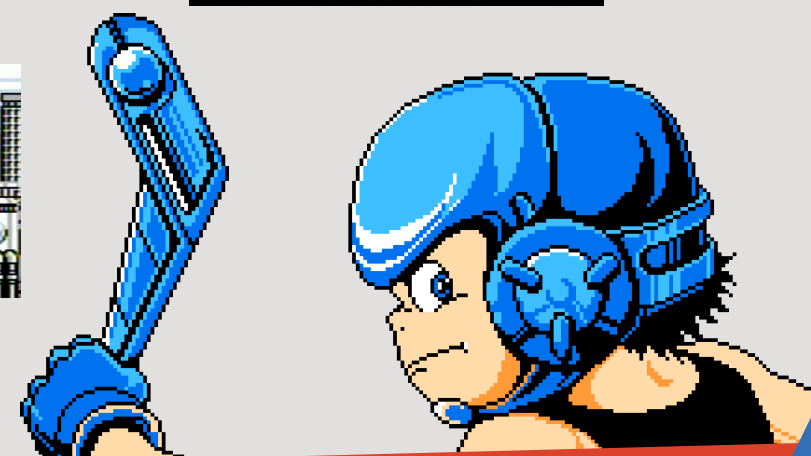
Bio Miracle Bokutte Upa
ファミリーテニス

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Konami	Platformer	Moderate

Just a year after Nintendo's smash hit Doki Doki Panic, Konami released their own competitor in Bio Miracle Bokutte Upa—a platformer starring a baby with a rattle that can inflate enemies and make them into floating platforms!

The inspirations from Doki Doki Panic are obvious: enemies as platforms, vertical scrolling sublevels with horizontal wraparound, seven worlds with three levels each, and a mini-boss at the end of each stage that you can defeat with its own projectiles. Yet Konami put its own spin on these features, giving Bio Miracle Bokutte Upa a personality all its own. Whether you're playing a digging level where Upa eats a path through a giant cake or attempting to navigate a platforming gauntlet with reversed gravity, Upa constantly presents new challenges.

The boss fights are the weakest part of the game, particularly the reused mini-boss who (unlike Doki Doki Panic's Catherine/Birdo) will quickly grate on your nerves. Konami also had a strange habit of placing low ceilings over bottomless pits, creating awkward jumps. Despite these shortcomings, Bio Miracle Bokutte Upa is a better-than-average platformer with Konami's trademark creativity.

Version Differences: The Disk System version uses the extra sound channels for more complex music, while the cart release has an easy mode that gives Upa more life.

Motocross Champion
モトクロスチャンピオン

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Konami	Racing	Extreme

Human Entertainment is best known for its innovative 8/16-bit sports games, including its highly successful wrestling, tennis, soccer, and racing series. One of their earliest sports titles was Motocross Champion, and despite the game's rough handling it rushed toward its goal at breakneck speed.

Motocross Champion is best imagined as Excitebike at high speed, with full 360-degree movement à la Super Sprint. The eight courses range from simple to impossibly complex, with ramps, jumps, soft dirt, and other riders who can (and will) get in your way and send you plummeting face-first into the mud. Your first impression will likely be that the controls are too touchy: the bike spins quickly with even a tap in either direction. But with practice, you'll find that the controls are unexpectedly lenient, reorienting you automatically whenever you hit a ramp and only minimally punishing most minor errors. The result is a racing game with a very high skill ceiling, and once you're hooked, there are hours of fun to be had in mastering all the courses. Motocross Champion isn't for everyone, but if you have the patience to master its controls, it can be very rewarding.

Binary Land
バイナリィランド

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Hudson	Maze	Moderate

Can you rub your belly and pat your head at the same time? If so, you might be ready for Binary Land. Control two penguins at once, who move in opposite directions on left/right input, and try to get them both to the end of a series of asymmetrical mazes. I find this split-brain approach to maze navigation difficult to wrap my mind around, but I know many people love it. Binary Land is a simple, well-designed, colorful, and adorable game...if you can master its paradoxical controls.

Dig Dug
ディグダグ

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Namcot	Arcade	Moderate

Namcot made the baffling decision not to release its port of this beloved arcade adventure in the West, opting instead to release its less popular sequel.

For those unfamiliar with the original, you are the miner Taizo Hori, digging your own tunnels underground while hunting the creatures that reside there. You must inflate each creature to bursting to complete the stage. Bizarre, creative, and a blast to play!

Namco or Namcot?

Gamers in the West will be familiar with Namco, one of the most influential companies in gaming history. So, the first time they see "Namcot" on the front of a Famicom game, it may look like a misprint.

Namco's home publishing arm was called Namcot, with the extra "t" at the end. For accuracy, and because it's historically interesting, this book will refer to "Namco" when talking about the arcade division and "Namcot" when discussing its home ports.

Choujikuu Yousai Macross
超時空要塞マクロス

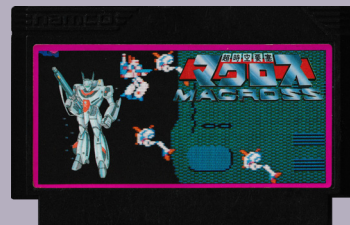| PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Namcot	Shooter	Easy

Modern reviewers tend to judge Choujikuu Yousai Macross as bad, but it's perfectly serviceable within the context of its original release. Konami wouldn't release Gradius on the Famicom for five more months, so having this fast-moving, multi-stage side-scrolling shooter in 1985 was the next best thing.

Fly through six stages as the transforming ship Valkyrie, which can take the form of a fighter jet, a battleship, and a giant mech. The fighter jet's extra speed will help you reach the end of the level before the timer runs out, but the battleship's combat power makes it far easier to fight your way through the hordes of baddies on the way. The mech is comparatively useless despite being able to shoot in two directions.

Every stage follows the same pattern: you fly through space, find the enemy ship, then breach the hull and fly in to destroy its core. However, each level has its own flavor of enemies. Level 2, for example, is packed with hard-to-dodge mines, while level 3 surprises you with enemy mechs that fill the screen with bullets. Use the Select button to hit them with missiles.

Choujikuu Yousai Macross isn't going to win any awards when put up against post-Gradius shooters, but it's a fairly easy game, and the gameplay's speed and simplicity make it worth a half hour of your time.

Moai-kun
モアイくん

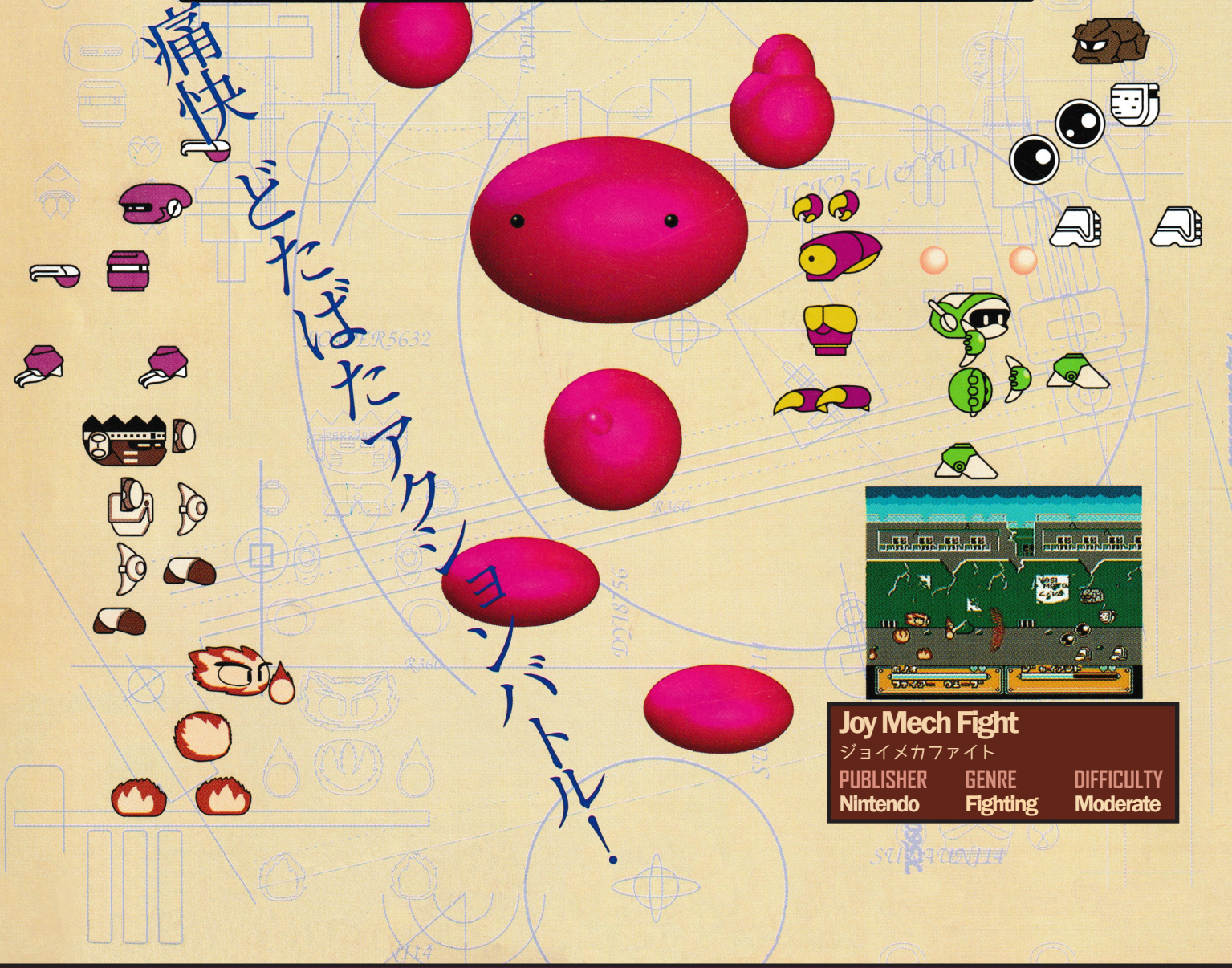| PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Konami	Puzzle	Hard

The Moai head from Gradius is the star of its own puzzler from the unstoppable team at Konami. Your jump might be wimpy, but Moai-kun is all about using your head to solve problems—literally and figuratively!

Smash walls with your rock-hard noggin, and use bombs to blast through floors across 56 brain-breaking stages. Collect all the adorable pink Pucchis in each stage and escape without being caught by the stone-cold Skull Empire's baddies. The puzzles start simple enough, but late-game levels can leave you scratching your head. The kind of quality we expect from Konami!

ジョイメカファイト

痛快どたばたアクションバトル！

Joy Mech Fight
ジョイメカファイト

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Nintendo	Fighting	Moderate

Joy Mech Fight is easily the best and most advanced fighting game on the Famicom. This fighter, released very late in the console's lifespan, comes with a whopping 26 unique playable characters—the largest roster in a fighter for five years until SNK beat it in 1998!

Each fighter is a collection of individually animated pieces, leading to the smoothest and most varied animation set possible on the Famicom's limited hardware. Joy Mech Fight is a technical marvel, but its late release made it impossible to get any traction for a Western release.

Modern gamers may cite its unusual art as off-putting and its mechanics as simplistic compared to what fighting games have become. However, a fighter of this scale and variety seemed impossible on 8-bit hardware. Luckily, 1990s Nintendo loved to do impossible things.

Mottomo Abunai Deka
もっともあぶない刑事

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Toei Animation	Action	Moderate

Based on a low-rated Japanese cop drama, Mottomo Abunai Deka can be fun in small doses…if you turn off your brain. Flickering enemies come at you constantly from all sides, and you use a combination of basic weapons to fight back. The best thing about Mottomo Abunai Deka is the simultaneous co-op, which you can play if you choose the third option in the main menu. A translation exists, and while the story isn't noteworthy, it has its humorous moments. Fast, dumb fun—nothing more.

Otocky
オトッキー

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
ASCII	Musical Shooter	Moderate

If you're reading this book, you're probably looking for a game that does something new and unique. Like me, you might even be a fan of "weird games." If that's you, don't even bother reading this review. Just play Otocky—it's exactly what you're looking for.

For everybody else, Otocky is a musical shooter—the sort of synaesthesia-inducing experience that would later be perfected in Tetsuya Mizuguchi's games like Rez and Child of Eden. You fly around as a cute little spaceship, boomeranging orbs in every direction to collect musical notes that fill a music bar at the bottom of the screen. Watch out for enemies as you slip into a trance from the procedurally generated music.

Collecting power-ups changes the instrumentation of your orbs, from piano to clarinet to scratchy white noise, as well as weapon power-ups for your special attack. At the end of each stage, you fight a giant musical note that you have to blast while avoiding the enemies it spawns. Completing levels unlocks them in B.G.M. Mode, which gives you a safe way to experiment with the music to your heart's content.

Without the musical connection, Otocky would be a weird, "just ok" shooter, but the synaesthesia element makes it a wonderfully charming game.

Translation Optional

Don Doko Don 2
ドンドコドン2

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Taito	Platformer	Easy

Taito's arcade game Don Doko Don is a single-screen platformer similar to Bubble Bobble that received a solid Famicom conversion. The sequel, Don Doko Don 2, is a Famicom-exclusive platforming adventure that reinvents the original's core gameplay with creative level designs and surprise moments of pure delight.

Unlike the original, the sequel is a single-player adventure, but this limitation allows for much more expansive levels. Explore a forest, a mountain, a haunted town, under the ocean, and even skydive through the clouds with your trusty hammer by your side. This weapon can be used to bash enemies, which you can then throw into other enemies as a one-time ranged attack. Various power-ups increase the hammer's range, strength, and functionality or your life bar's length.

Don Doko Don 2 is the kind of high-quality platformer that kept Nintendo's 8-bit console alive for years into the 16-bit era. It's too bad we didn't see this one in the West, as it likely would have been a late-release sleeper hit.
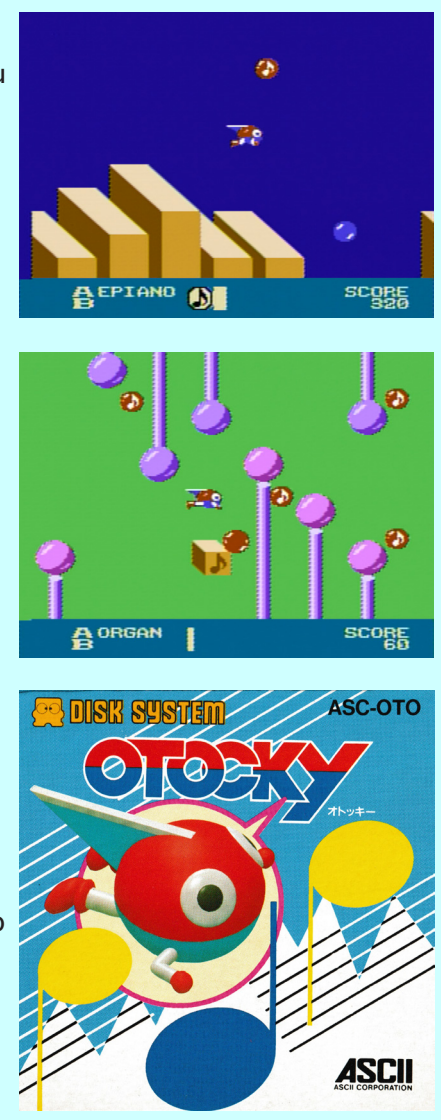
Getsu Fuuma Den
月風魔伝

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Konami	Action/Adventure	Moderate

From the era of Konami in which it developed so many megahits it had to start a second publishing arm just to release them all in the West, Getsu Fuuma Den is one of the most well-known Famicom games that never left Japan. It plays like a mashup of Zelda II and Castlevania, though it also clearly inspired Konami's first TMNT outing. Explore a top-down map filled with dangerous side-scrolling action levels, shops, and first-person dungeon crawls—all while searching for items that unlock new areas of the world. Your goal: get revenge on the Demon Lord Ryuukotsuki for defeating your brothers in battle.

The side-scrolling segments are excellent, with responsive controls and steady action. The dungeon crawls are much less exciting and drag down the pacing, so I recommend using maps to get through them faster. Overall, Getsu Fuuma Den is one of the better Konami games to never see a Western release.

Spelunker II
スペランカーII

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Irem	Action/Adventure	Hard

The first Spelunker is a highly technical platformer in which every move you make must be deliberate, and one wrong step leads to instant death. So, it makes perfect sense that the sequel is nothing like that at all!

Spelunker II is an adventure game that takes place in three sprawling, open-ended levels. You control three different characters, each with their own unique powers. While the gameplay is mainly side-scrolling, the exterior areas have paths that lead into the foreground and background to navigate a larger open world. Like other adventure games of the era, you hunt for items that allow access to new areas, allowing you to eventually fight three hidden bosses. You'll want to keep an eye on your toku (virtue) meter—killing animals decreases it, and if it drops to zero you will be damned to hell for eternity! Spelunker II is a good mid-tier action-adventure game, though you may want to use save states since there are no continues.

Bio Senshi Dan
バイオ戦士DAN

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Jaleco	Action/Adventure	Moderate

This time-traveling adventure developed by upstart studio Atlus may have been the most approachable open-world action platformer since Metroid burst onto the scene over a year earlier. Use swords, guns, bombs, and a laser boomerang to smash through aliens that have taken the planet while exploring large nonlinear levels filled with secret passages and deadly traps.

The graphics and sound are excellent, and you can see the influence of Atlus' Megami Tensei in the dark fantasy/horror designs. While the game is not overly difficult, be prepared to take some cheap hits from enemies due to Dan's stiff controls. Even so, I recommend Bio Senshi Dan to any platforming-adventure fan. An officially translated ROM has been distributed online under the name Bashi Bazook: Morphoid Masher, although no version of the game was ever released in the West. An unofficial fan translation is also available.

Youkai Douchuuki
妖怪道中記

よう かい どう ちゅう き
妖怪道中記

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Namcot	Platformer	Hard

Tarosuke, you naughty little mischief maker. Your foolish pranks have gone too far, and we now condemn you to judgment in hell. We will watch how you handle the torments of the afterlife, and with perseverance and piety, we may...just may...grant redemption.

Based on the Namco arcade hit, Youkai Douchuuki combines action platforming with adventure game elements to create something wholly original. The closest comparable may be Konami's Goemon series, but the two are still quite different.

Each of Youkai Douchuuki's five stages contains platforming, challenging enemies, and hidden NPCs with optional side quests, as well as shops, inns, and temples where you can restore health and increase your abilities. Expert players may also focus on filling their pious meter by donating to the temple and performing good deeds, which affects the ending. Getting the best ending requires near-perfect play, so I recommend practicing with a few complete playthroughs first. Who would have thought that going to hell could be so much fun?

Like the arcade original, the art is detailed and colorful, but the heads-up display takes up nearly half the screen! The map can be useful for late-game navigation.

Bosses are much easier if you summon your guardian spirit, Momotaro (press Select), but this will cost you a talisman (and you only start with one!)

At the shops, you can spend your money on weapon upgrades, items, talismans, and healing. Skip the level 2 weapon upgrade and go straight for level 3!
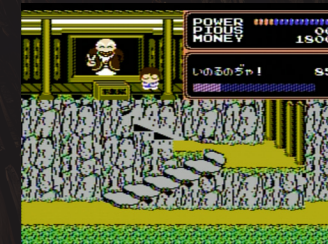
At temples, you can play a button-tapping minigame to increase your piety, charged attack, or jump. The more you donate, the longer you can play.
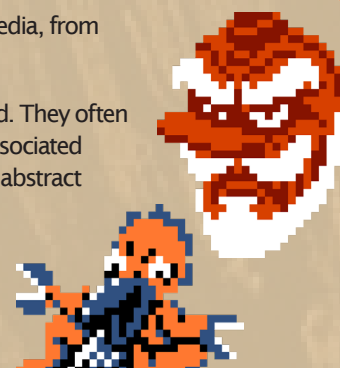
The word "Youkai" (or its abbreviated form "Yokai") appears often in Japanese media, from games to anime and film to television. But what does it mean?

Youkai are spirits and entities that personify various phenomena in the real world. They often haunt real-world objects, like umbrellas and fans, though they are sometimes associated with historical and mythological figures, religious symbols, or more abstract concepts like life and darkness.

Although Christian-influenced societies often translate the word to "Demon," they're closer to famous monsters like Dracula or Frankenstein. Now that you know what you're looking for, you will see Youkai all throughout the Famicom's library.

From left to right: Kasa-obake (Splatterhouse Wanpaku Graffiti), Yuki-onna (Ninja Jajamaru-kun), Kamikiri (GeGeGe no Kitarou 2), Tengu (Abarenbou Tengu)

# 天才バカボン

Heisei Tensai Bakabon
平成天才バカボン

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Namcot	Platformer	Hard

Namcot again shows its mastery of the Famicom hardware with this impressive cinematic platformer. It is based on a popular manga/anime about a young boy named Bakabon, but by the 90s, the father (Bakabon no Papa) had become the show's star.

You play as Papa, with a hugely varied move set, platforming through 16 complex levels. The movement is slow and precise, requiring mastery to make it very far. It's far from boring, though: every action is rewarded with a fun, over-the-top animation—even the failures! The learning curve is steep, and the first two levels may be the hardest part of the entire game. Keep at it because once you've mastered running, hopping, fighting, floating, and the dreaded bouncing, you will feel quite accomplished!

There's really nothing else like Heisei Tensai Bakabon on the Famicom. The wacky animations, precise controls, and intricate level designs make it something special, and it's clear that the development team at Namcot had a real love for the manga and the game they were building. The game is fully playable without a translation patch, but a patch exists if you prefer English. If you enjoy games like Prince of Persia and Tomb Raider, you'll feel right at home with Heisei Tensai Bakabon!
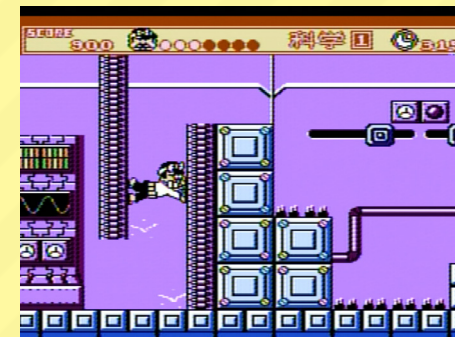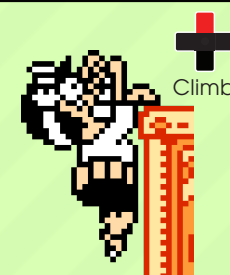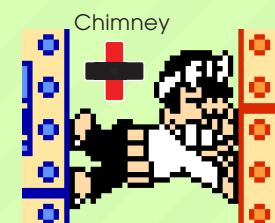
Basic Movement

Walk

B + Run

A Jump

Climb

Chimney

Umbrella

Papa never leaves home without his umbrella. This versatile tool is used for everything from platforming to fighting!

B Open

Helps Papa balance on tightropes

A On Ground

B In Air

Papa grabs hooks automatically

A Detach

Combat

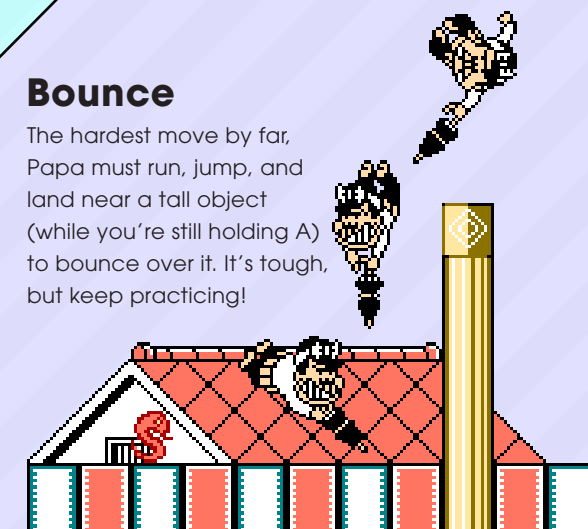While Papa must avoid most enemies, bosses won't give up without a fight.

B Attack

Bounce

The hardest move by far, Papa must run, jump, and land near a tall object (while you're still holding A) to bounce over it. It's tough, but keep practicing!

InsectorX
インセクターX

Are you the best or just a pest? Find out in the only 8-bit port of Hot-B's arcade shooter InsectorX! This version's colorful graphics and cartoonish feel match the original arcade version more closely than the Genesis/Mega Drive port we saw in the West.

Easy Bee-zy!

InsectorX is easier than the average 8-bit shooter. It's very approachable due to its many options, such as adjustable lives and an easy mode (with the sexist moniker "For Girls") that lets you start with rapid-fire and spread shot weapon upgrades..

Pretty Fly for a Bug Guy (or Girl)

Take control of Anny or Myu, two tiny but tough exterminators out to blast some bugs across five stages split into twelve areas.

The action is fast but straightforward and surprisingly forgiving. For an 8-bit title, it can handle a surprising number of moving objects on-screen without getting bogged down, and the character and enemy sprites can be quite large.

The super-cute designs and colorful graphics make this a fun and lighthearted shooter that may even attract players who don't typically enjoy the shooter genre. See what all the buzz is about with InsectorX!

Give Yourself the Ant-vantage!

On the Options screen, highlight Exit and tap Right, then Left, then press A to return to the title screen.

Now you can begin the game as usual but with access to cheats on the Character Select screen!

Press Up in Character Select to choose your level.
Press Down in Character Select to toggle No-Hit.
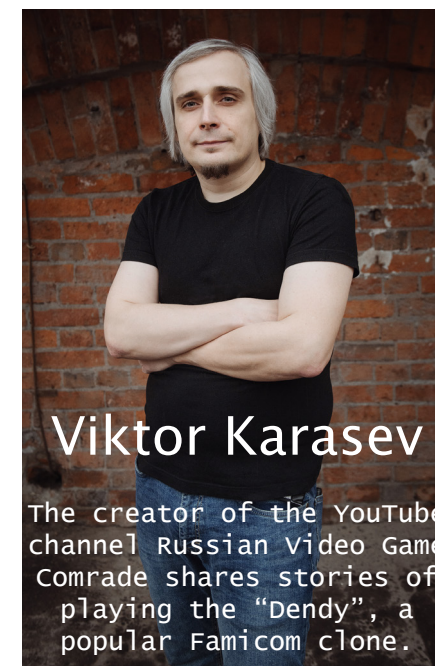
RUSSIAN VIDEO GAME COMRADE

In the 1980s and early 1990s, kids in America and most of Europe grew up with the Nintendo Entertainment System. In Japan, it was the Family Computer. In post-Soviet Russia, most gamers knew Nintendo's games through an unofficial Taiwanese console called Dendy. I reached out to Viktor Karasev, host of the YouTube channel Russian Video Game Comrade, to learn what 8-bit gaming was like in 1990s Russia.

Syncoplay: To me, one of the most interesting aspects of the Dendy is that, from an American point of view, it is considered an illegal bootleg gaming console. As a Russian kid in the 90's, did you even know the games were unlicensed? And if so, did you care?

Viktor: As the Soviet Union was a closed country, we didn't have a lot of Western stuff here, including video games, till the 90s, when the USSR transformed into the Russian Federation.

Consoles weren't a thing in the USSR at all, and computers were used mostly in big government companies and, of course, weren't intended to play on them. There is always an exception in any statement, and I'm sure some filthy rich kids of diplomats or sportsmen whose parents could leave the USSR from time to time could own an imported Atari or some European computer, such as C64, but this was rare. Yes, technically, there were Soviet clones of Nintendo's Game & Watch consoles called Electronica here or home consoles cloned from Japanese early Pong consoles with several simple games inside, but this also wasn't anything like the video games market outside the USSR in the 80s.

I'm telling all this so you can know that almost nobody knew anything about video games here till the 90s when computers and consoles started to be imported to newly formed Russia. And, as you can figure out, as there was no internet back then, we could find out about anything new only through TV, newspapers, and so on. And when Steepler started their business importing outdated Famiclones

Viktor Karasev

The creator of the YouTube channel Russian Video Game Comrade shares stories of playing the "Dendy", a popular Famicom clone.

from Taiwan, they just bought ads everywhere and told us—Dendy was a new type of entertainment sold exclusively by them. Original

video game console. Several years later, a lot of other companies started to import other types of cheap 8-bit console clones, and Steepler started an ad saying: all these are illegal and bad quality clones. The only original is Dendy. So, answering your question, everyone here, till the arrival of the internet, was sure Dendy was a legit console and knew nothing about the NES or Famicom. But even knowing that, a lot of people preferred buying other 8-bit clones, as they were much cheaper, and salaries of the people in Russia in the 90s were really low.

Given Russia's proximity to Japan, you often saw games on Dendy that never made it to the NES. What games were popular in Russia that I never got to play growing up in the United States of America?

Dendy had its own mixed games library that contained both Japanese and English games, a lot of Chinese bootlegs and hacks, and even some original Russian games. And your question could be a tricky one if you asked me in the 90s. As Dendy was a Taiwanese clone, all the game carts we got here came also from Taiwan and China. And most of them had Japanese roms on 'em.

Even "Disney Afternoon" games: Darkwing Duck, Chip 'n Dale, Duck Tales, and so on, were often played in Japanese here in Russia. So, back then, we couldn't know if there was an English version of it or not. Later, there also were English roms on our carts, but in the early 90s, most of the games were the Japanese versions.

Dendy cartridges usually had unofficial artwork to represent the romhack's theme.

Also, the Chinese tried to make their cartridges the most cheap they could, so a lot of great games like Metroid, Zelda, or Castlevania 3 were never released for Dendy. Anything that had a battery in it or some complicated mapper as MMC5—forget about it.

On the other hand, we had some really great Famicom exclusives that never officially left Japan. In the 90s, our TV aired a lot of American kids' TV shows from the 80s and 90s, and so we also fell in love with Disney Afternoon, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Spider-Man, and Ghostbusters. Maybe this was the reason someone in Steepler decided to ask Chinese guys to make some Ghostbusters game carts, and we got the Japanese New Ghostbusters 2. I even think that it was the most common Ghostbusters game you could get for Dendy here in Russia. And, of course, after playing it, other 8-bit Ghostbusters games were considered garbage here.

Mitsume ga Tooru was a smash hit here, despite nobody knowing what it was based on. It was such a solid and good-looking game; you just couldn't not fall in love with it. And it was a recent rom on a lot of multicart games we got here.

Another one is Samurai Pizza Cats. With this one, it was as simple as:

"Hey bro, what you've got there?"

"It's like a TMNT game but with cats instead of the turtles."

"Holy hell! Give me one! =)"

But the most famous Japanese 8-bit game in Russia is definitely Battle City. Here in Russia, we just called it "Tanks." If you guys in the USA got your NES bundled with a Super Mario Bros cart, we got Dendy with a 20- to 30-in-1 cart that contained a lot of simple, early Famicom games like Ice Climber, Excitebike, Balloon Fight, and so on. Sometimes, there also were light gun games there, sometimes Super Mario Bros.

But Battle City was almost on every bundle multicart. Its simple but interesting and challenging gameplay was adored both by kids and their parents, so almost everyone in Russia who knew about Dendy knew about Battle City.

In fact, there are a lot of newly made Famiclones sold in Russia even now, and a lot of them have a big sign on the box—"Tanks included."

Was it common to "unofficially" translate the games into Russian for release on Dendy? Or did you need to learn bits of English and Japanese in order to play them?

As I mentioned earlier, most of our games were in Japanese, and later, there were a lot of English ones, too. But a game in Russian was really a rare purchase. There were some. For example, Russian company Electronica made the Russian version of Prince of Persia for Dendy (Yes, the same guys who made Game & Watch clones in the 80s). But they released so small quantities of their carts that almost nobody had seen `em back then, and it's really a challenge to find one now.


Battle City (Namcot, 1985) was a massive hit with Dendy players and often came bundled with the hardware.

Most of the 8-bit games were quite simple (as I've said, complicated games like Zelda or RPGs weren't released in Russia at all), so you didn't even have to know a language to understand what to do. You could just figure it out on the go, so as I can recall, nobody cared even if the game was in Japanese. We just turned the console on, took the gamepad, and in 30 to 40 minutes could already know exactly what to do in the game, even if there was no understandable text there at all.

Since the games on Dendy were already unlicensed, did you see many ROM hacks or alternate versions of popular games make it into stores? Are there any hacked ROMs that became popular alternate versions of the game?

Super Contra 9, Super Mario 16, Chip `n Dale 3, Darkwing Duck 2. I can continue this list for, like, several pages. The most hilarious thing here is—our "Dendy TV show" aired on the main government channel number 1 was made by Steepler, so even these hacks were promoted like original ones with the show's host Maximum Severity.

For example, just imagine this. Chip `n Dale 3 is a Heavy Barrel hack. They just replaced soldiers' heads with something chipmunk-like and named it Chip `n Dale 3. How sane can be a person who decided placing the main characters of a kids' TV show in a war game be a good idea? I even can somehow understand placing Mario's head in the Joe & Mac game and naming it Super Mario 16, but this?
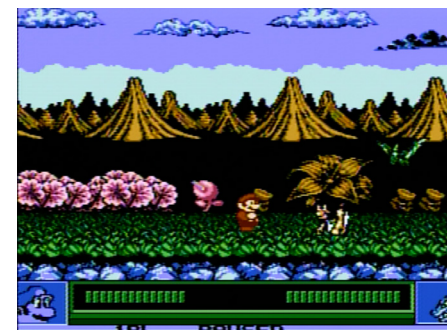
Fan-made rom hacks like Mario 16 (a hack of Data East's Joe and Mac) were common on bootleg multicarts.

And remember I told you Steepler promoted this in a Russian TV show? Our "Dendy TV show" host reviewed it and said something like: "Chip and Dale are rescue rangers, so they've decided to rescue people in Vietnam in their new game." What the F***, man?!

I think the only good and popular hack I can recall was also our most popular game hack, Battle City. It was a hack named Tank 1990,

and it included new levels and power-ups in the game, such as an upgraded gun that could cut the grass and a boat that helped your tank to swim.

All the other ones were absurd, like Chip `n Dale 3. I think these were just made to get more money from the kids. And apparently they did.

Recently, collecting retro games has caught on in many parts of the world. I have a large Famicom collection, which I display in my game room. Is collecting common amongst Dendy-nostalgic gamers as well?

I know some people here in Russia who collect Dendy carts from the 90s and are not interested in anything else, but most of our video game collectors collect the same things you guys do in the West: original and authentic carts and consoles, including 8-bit ones.

Dendy (Steepler) -Photo by Nzeemin (Creative Commons BY-SA 3.0)

Yes, sometimes our collectors also want to get a Steepler's Dendy or some Steeplers carts for their collection out of nostalgia, but most of the collectors prefer the stuff people all over the world consider valuable and not some Chinese ripoffs (If it's not a matter of nostalgia of course).

Some Dendy carts (I mean made by Steepler, not any Chinese bootlegs that flooded our market in the late 90s) were so rare that even now, a Dendy collector can pay $500–$900 for it, but that's more of an exception than the rule. And what do you think? If there were only a Chinese ripoff available in your country, could you consider it somehow legal and interesting to collect?

Tetris is often described as Russia's biggest impact on the video games industry. Did Tetris enjoy the same popularity on the Dendy as it did in America, Japan, and Europe?

Fun fact here, we DID love Tetris, but in another Chinese way. Despite Dendy being a cheap clone, it still was an expensive purchase for most of the ordinary poor Russian families in the 90s. And as you can understand, Russian kids, as long as they became aware of the video game industry, wanted to play video games no less than kids all over the rest of the world.

For those who couldn't afford a console for themselves, there were arcades and video game clubs (a place where you could come and play the games on their console on an hourly payment).

Brick Game (Handheld Tetris Clone)

China started to flood the Russian market with the "Brick Game" handheld. Basically, it had Tetris with some other Tetris-based simple games. This handheld was so cheap almost every kid who wanted it had it. And this is the way most of us played Tetris in the 90s.

Were there any games that were hugely popular in the U.S. that, for some reason or another, just never became popular on the Dendy?

Zelda, Metroid, Kirby.

Nothing of these were available for Dendy. But those who got SNES later fell in love with all three of these franchises.

You share even more about retro games in Russia on your YouTube channel. Tell us a bit about it!

If you're interested in the Russian side of video game history, you're more than welcome to watch episodes of my "Russian Video Game Comrade Show" on YouTube.

I'm trying to remember every part of the Dendy fun facts and stories around it from the 90s and make videos about it. I also cover Russian PC games and interesting Soviet tech—the stuff you don't see often on YouTube in English.

Thank you for this insight into a rarely discussed part of Famicom history. The Dendy, while not officially sanctioned by Nintendo, inspired lifelong gamers across the globe, and for that it should be celebrated.

Thank you for your interest in the dark side of video games, for your interest in the Russian video game market, and for inviting me here to tell some stories. I hope you and your readers liked 'em.

Learn even more at
YouTube.com/RussianVideoGameComrade

テトリス
TETRIS

PUBLISHER	GENRE	DIFFICULTY
Bullet-Proof Software	Puzzle	Moderate

The Other Tetris

The story of how Nintendo acquired exclusive rights to publish home console versions of Tetris in the 8-bit era is well documented. A series of confusing licensing agreements led Atari, under the moniker Tengen, to believe they had publishing rights for console versions of Tetris when they only had licensing for an arcade version. Tengen was required to destroy all remaining copies of its port, and Nintendo's version became the official Tetris on the NES.

Across the Pacific, Japan experienced a different (but no less confusing) comedy of errors regarding the classic puzzle game. Henk Rogers, founder of Bullet-Proof Software, sublicensed the rights for a console version of Tetris from European publisher Mirrorsoft. The only problem? Mirrorsoft didn't have the rights! Instead of shutting it down, Nintendo and the Russian government agency Elorg worked with Rogers to fix the agreement and release an amended version of the game.

This version of Tetris differs significantly from both Western releases. It retains the Tengen version's classic "Russian" art and music but without the simultaneous multiplayer. The controls are awkward at best. Pressing Down on the D-pad causes a piece to rotate, while the A button does a hard drop—exactly the opposite of every other version of Tetris. If you remap the controls, however, it's a decent port of the classic puzzler. In fact, I prefer Bullet-Proof Software's colorful presentation to the drab grays and browns of the Tengen version.

Bullet-Proof Software became the primary developer for Tetris until the mid-2000s, when Henk Rogers and Tetris creator Alexey Pajitnov purchased the remaining rights from Elorg as part of a joint effort called The Tetris Company.

As of 2025, Henk Rogers is still managing the Tetris brand from his office in Honolulu, Hawaii, alongside his company (renamed Blue Planet Software).

Tetris's history is so complex that feature-length documentaries and even a film have been made about it, often focusing on the legal drama between Tengen, Nintendo, and Elorg.

While the Western perspective often glosses over this version of Tetris due to its clunky control scheme and minimal feature set, it was the turning point that put Henk Rogers in the driver's seat for the brand's entire future and is worth checking out as an important historical piece.

Much like Tengen's offering, Bullet-Proof Software leaned hard into the iconic Russian-inspired art style.

ビートたけし作

たけし直伝

THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE FROM BEAT TAKESHI

たけしの挑戦状™

Takeshi no Chousenjou (Takeshi's Challenge)

PUBLISHER
Taito

GENRE
Adventure

DIFFICULTY
Extreme

A BRILLIANT SUBVERSION? OR A CRUEL JOKE?

If you are already familiar with the term kusoge, then you are probably at least aware of Takeshi no Chousenjou. Often anglicized into Takeshi's Challenge, this 1986 waking nightmare of a game elicits a strong reaction from anybody brave enough to try it.

Takeshi Kitano, often known as Beat Takeshi, is a comedian, actor, and celebrated filmmaker who is best known in the West for starring in Battle Royale (2000) and his wacky TV game show Takeshi's Castle (localized in the United States as MXC: Most Extreme Elimination Challenge). Known for combining satirical humor with dark themes, Takeshi's consistent subversion of Japanese entertainment norms has earned him universal praise from critics and audiences.

In the mid-1980s, he split from his touring comedy partner. He began exploring other mediums, which led him to an all-nighter with a developer at Taito, brainstorming game ideas at an izakaya (the Japanese equivalent of a pub). As Taito tells it, this session included a nontrivial amount of alcohol, a claim that isn't hard to believe after playing the aftermath. The developer returned to Taito HQ and built these drunken ramblings verbatim into a functional game.

The result is madness. Spoilers ahead!

In Takeshi's Challenge, you are a common working salaryman looking to make his big break. That opportunity comes one night at a karaoke bar when you get drunk enough to take the stage and sing—which the player does by singing into the microphone on the second controller. After your musical number, you can start a bar fight in which the Yakuza get involved, and if you beat them all up (and the hostess, for good measure), you can earn a treasure

map...sort of. The map is blank until you leave it in the sunlight for an hour. This means leaving the game running without touching your controller for a full hour of real-world time. After this agonizing wait, you are finally ready to train for your new life as a treasure hunter!

Takeshi's Challenge is a nonlinear adventure game with numerous paths and outcomes, most of which lead you to an unwinnable state. As you can see from the first scenario, completing the game without a detailed walkthrough is nearly impossible. In fact, one might argue it's nearly impossible *with* a walkthrough! Each new segment brings a new set of play mechanics that are often cryptic and occasionally broken entirely. Maybe Takeshi's real challenge was the controllers we broke along the way.

Once you've earned the treasure map, you must complete a number of other steps before you can begin your new life. To start, you should quit your job and spend your final salary gambling at the pachinko parlor. You need to divorce your wife, but you will lose most of your money in the process, so you should spend it all on hang gliding lessons first. Once you're ready to go, you can use your newly learned skills to fly across the ocean while avoiding birds and UFOs. Make sure you land on the correct island, or else you may end up in an authoritarian dictatorship without the proper paperwork.

After landing on the island, you have to find the treasure, which is easier said than done when the chief of the local cannibal tribe throws you into his boiling soup pot. Luckily, he can be brought to tears by beautiful music—you did learn to play the samisen before you left town, right?

If you find the treasure cave and discover the four unmarked secret points

that allow further access inside, you will finally get your treasure. The nameless salaryman finally got what he wanted, and you, the player, got what you deserve: an ending that makes fun of you for taking the game seriously enough to complete it.

Takeshi no Chousenjou is intentionally bad and designed to troll players into searching for something deeper in its shallow, poorly constructed nest of ideas. There is a sort of perverse enjoyment one can get out of playing a game that hates you this much, a game so bankrupt of joy that people try to complete it out of spite.
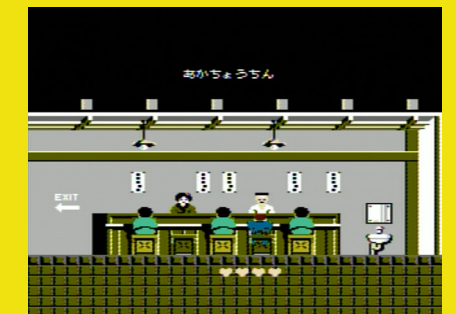
Takeshi Kitano did not continue his foray into game design. Two more Famicom games bear his name: a board game from Taito and a Family Trainer (Power Pad) game based on his show Takeshi's Castle. Neither was designed by Takeshi, who wouldn't be directly involved in another video game until a voice acting role in 2015's Yakuza 6.

Yet Takeshi's Challenge continues to baffle players today as seen through online streaming, rage reviews, and gamers who are curious about what is called one of the "worst games of all time." Beat Takeshi deliberately broke every rule of game design at a time when the rules had not yet even been established, and by doing so, he made a game so outlandish that it is still being talked about nearly forty years later in parts of the world where it was never even officially released.

Beat Takeshi is an esoteric madman and visionary creator, and whether you see Takeshi no Chousenjou as a brilliant subversion of gaming norms or as a cruel joke played at the expense of Taito's paying customers, it's hard not to respect the legacy left behind by what may be the 8-bit era's greatest troll.

わかりません？

Crossing the Language Barrier

There are over a hundred Japan-exclusive Famicom titles that have no Japanese text anywhere in the game. For the most part, playing these games feels no different than the NES games that many of us grew up playing. If you focus purely on these titles as an introduction to the Famicom, you will still enjoy an excellent library of 8-bit classics. But why stop there when there are still hundreds more incredible Famicom games to discover?

The Japanese language often acts as a barrier that prevents curious players from trying import games and being greeted with a screen filled with indecipherable writing can be intimidating, causing beginner Famicom collectors to quickly lose interest when they can't overcome the language barrier.

However, there are numerous ways to overcome the language barrier. Sometimes, it is as simple as just ignoring the parts you don't understand. Other times, you may require some light hints or a guide. For text-heavy games, fans often do what the original developers did not: translate the game into English, then offer free patches online that convert the game's ROM to English.

Learning a small amount of the Japanese language, even just a handful of keywords that commonly appear across many games, can go a long way toward experiencing a majority of the Famicom's library.

One of the first challenges in overcoming the language barrier is recognizing when it's OK to ignore the on-screen text and keep playing. Those who grew up playing Western 8-bit games will recognize that many games often have the same screen layouts: sometimes, you can guess what a menu option or instruction means. Don't be afraid to just click around and explore, either—most of these games don't have on-cartridge save anyway, so there's nothing you can do out of ignorance that a simple press of the reset button won't fix.

Once you've started a game, be careful not to make rash assumptions about language requirements based on the first minute or two of play. Famicom games of the late 1980s often blend elements of role-playing or adventure into otherwise action-focused titles, making them seem text-heavy when they aren't. Games like Higemaru Makaijima or Wai Wai World can seem impenetrable at first glance because of their introductions.

When you find a game you think you would enjoy, don't fret if you encounter a wall of Japanese text. You may, of course, find assistance in the pages of this book—check the index to see if the game is covered. You can also find help online. I have completed many Famicom games with the content found on websites such as GameFAQs, StrategyWiki, and Hardcore Gaming 101 (all active as of 2025). I prefer to avoid spoiler-heavy walkthroughs and get just enough info to continue past the section that stumps me. Your mileage may vary depending on your tastes.

In my experience, this advice allows you to play through most action and puzzle games on the Famicom without modifying them. You may not understand the intricacies of each game's story without further translation assistance, but 8-bit action games were never known for their enthralling stories anyway.

Don't be afraid of what you don't understand. Your first few Japanese game experiences might be intimidating, even overwhelming at times, but you will quickly become surprisingly comfortable with using interfaces written in a language you cannot read. You may even find yourself interested in learning a bit of Japanese yourself...

English Translation Patches

If you prefer to sidestep the language barrier altogether, consider playing ROM files that have been modified with a translation patch. These are fan-made hacks that update the graphics and data in the game to translate its content into other languages, most often English. Some emulation consoles, such as the Hyperkin RetroN 5, can patch the ROM during play. For other consoles, you will need to use a tool on your computer to patch the ROM file before copying it to your device. Patching is outside the scope of this book, but a quick web search will point you in the right direction.

Japanese Gaming 101

THE TITLE SCREEN

はじめ (ha-ji-me)
to start

つづき (tsu-zu-ki)
to continue

Starting a new Famicom game can be intimidating, especially when the first screen is covered in Japanese text. But just like English, you'll see a few words pop up repeatedly—learn these words, and you'll be navigating Famicom title screens like a pro in no time!

? HOW DO I START A NEW GAME? ?

Some form of the Japanese word for START can be found on the title screen for most Famicom games. Nearly all of them contain these three letters: はじめ (hajime).

Practice reading these characters on these screenshots. The low-res font might look blurry at first, but it won't take long before you get used to recognizing these three characters—they're everywhere!

The first option, はじめる *(hajimeru) contains the keyword* はじめ, *the Japanese word for START*

Look for はじめ *(hajime) in the first option. You can safely ignore the other two characters*

? HOW DO I CONTINUE MY GAME? ?

Continue has a slightly different meaning in each game. Sometimes, it means to continue where you last died. Other times, it's the option that lets you enter a password or load your saved game. No matter which definition of continue your game uses, there's a good chance it will use the Japanese keyword つづき (tsuzuki) in the menu.

The keywords つづき (tsuzuki) and はじめ (hajime) most often come in pairs - and knowing how to recognize both START and CONTINUE is enough to start many of Famicom's best games!
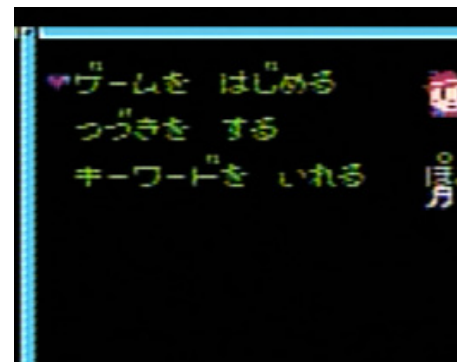
Practice reading both はじめ and つづき in the screenshots below, keeping in mind each word's meaning.
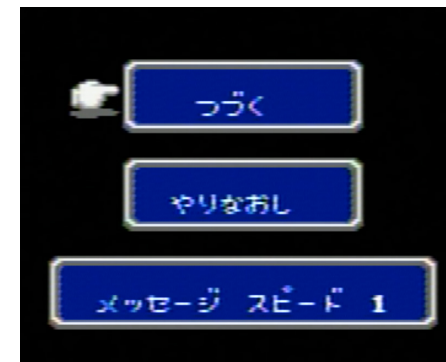
RPGs often make CONTINUE the first option. In the case of Final Fantasy, the alternate つづく *(tsuzuku) is used.*

Famicom typefaces are often blurry, pixelated, and hard to read. Looking closely, you can see these are the START and CONTINUE options.

Screens like these can be intimidating to Famicom newcomers, but hidden away in the menu are the keywords: はじめ *(hajime) and* つづき *(tsuzuki)*

Warning: The games and stories in this section contain **content of a sensitive nature**, including voyeurism, drug abuse, racism, homophobia and strong language.

TIME TRAVELER JAILED FOR MURDER!

Cut Content provided by The Cutting Room Floor (Creative Commons BY 3.0)

Famed Venetian explorer Marco Polo was killed when a squadron of World War II–era fighter planes traveled back in time to the 13th century and gunned him down. Recent graduate and time travel expert Touhouken Bunroku has been implicated as the cause of this tragedy and put into lockdown, although he claims it was a "mistake."

Bunroku is best known as the star of the eponymous Famicom game about his exploits. The game is known for its wild storyline, which includes a psychedelic drug trip, a man being drop-kicked by Jesus from the cross, and its tragic ending in which Bunroku's mistake causes Polo's untimely demise.

While the retail version shows the explorer blinking out of existence, cut content shows Polo being gunned down in a gory spectacle. Unsurprisingly, Touhouken Bunroku was never localized for release in the West. This game is esteemed Famicom developer Natsume's first game after they broke off from Konami, and starting with a title this bizarre and surreal was either very brave or very stupid. This surrealist adventure game deserves to get a modern HD remake!
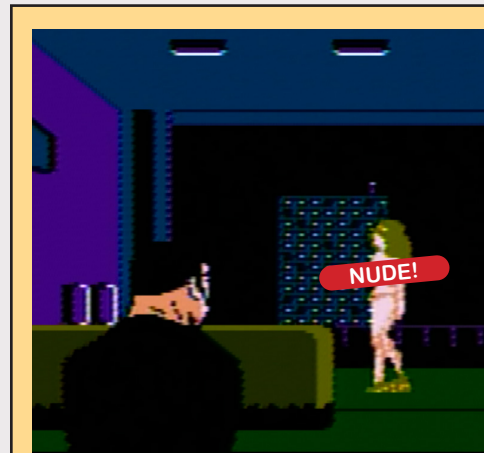
WILL KYONSHEES 2 TURN YOUR CHILDREN INTO VAMPIRES?

CAN PLAYING FAMICOM ACTUALLY MAKE YOU RICH?

Keiba Simulation Honmei encourages players to enter the statistics of real-world race horses, then pits them against each other in a simulated horse race. Was this intended to predict race outcomes to improve your odds when gambling? Our investigators reached out to Nichibutsu to ask if they marketed the game to race-betting fans—"No comment!"—but you can bet this was a lucrative market for this cart, even if it's doubtful an 8-bit console could simulate better than simple random chance.

GRACE BARES ALL!
IN JAPANESE VERSION OF TOP SECRET EPISODE: GOLGO 13

NUDE!

Key Agent Cherry Grace of the Fixer Group knows her way around behind the iron curtain, but our own informants have seen behind a different curtain. When she's not protecting the secret informant, Condor, she invites agents to her hotel for a bit of naughty play. We obtained exclusive photos linking Agent Grace to Duke Togo, a professional assassin who goes by the alias Golgo 13. We have reached out to Miss Grace to get her side of the story, but she has refused to return our calls. When asked about this scandal, Duke Togo responded by

PSYCHIC POWERS EMERGE IN TOKYO BOY

Gamers looking to hone their dormant psychic abilities would do well to seek out a copy of Namcot's Mindseeker on the Famicom. Then again, if you possess psychic abilities, you already know that. It is difficult to tell whether Mindseeker is an elaborate joke or an effective way to practice the art of precognition, but it is presented with such earnest certainty that you can't help but want to believe the latter is true.

Mindseeker presents the player with a battery of tests, such as guessing the symbol on a facedown card, that requires psychic powers (or lucky guesses) to complete. Surprising nobody, the average player will guess the correct answer at a rate equal to probability...but that just shows that not everybody has latent preternatural gifts. In Mindseeker, believing in your mental abilities is half the battle, and the other half... well, it's all in the mind!
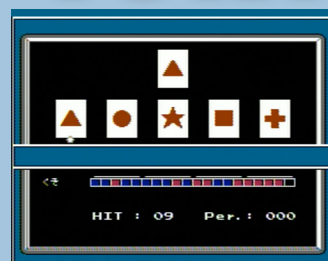
BOWSER REPLACED BY IMPOSTER!

Bowser is a villain the world loves to despise. His iconic design is familiar to gamers across the globe. But is the Koopa who calls himself "Bowser" just a fake?

Our investigators recently found this photograph of Bowser from the cover of Super Mario Bros. on the Famicom which looks nothing like he does now, as designer Shigeru Miyamoto envisioned him not as a turtle but as the "Ox King."

So, is this the same Koopa, or was he secretly replaced? And if so, why, and by who? Maybe Youichi Kotabe didn't like the blue/gray skin and yellow hair of Miyamoto's design, which did not match the in-game art for the boss.

A variant of this design shows up in the Disk System's Super Mario Bros. 2 as the blue-skinned mid-boss known as "Bowser's Brother."
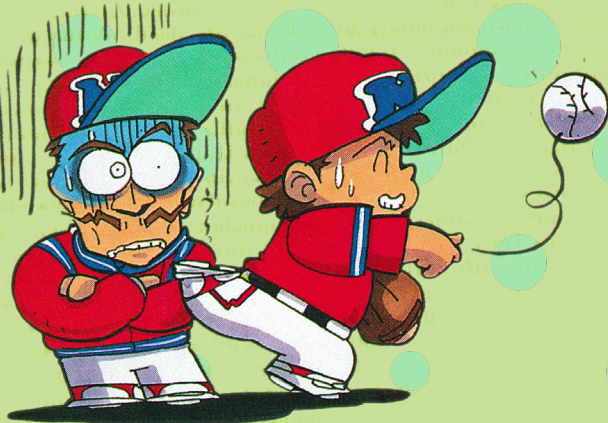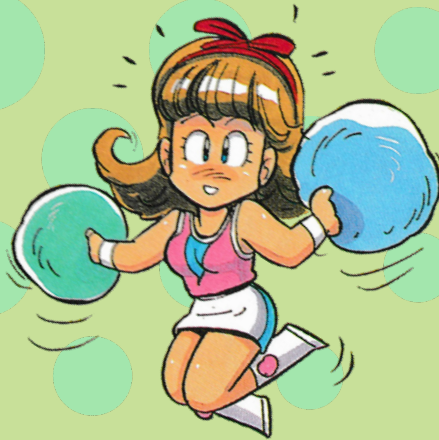
Yakyuu
Japanese Baseball Games

If you spend time with the Famicom, you will inevitably discover the console's wealth of baseball games. There are dozens of games depicting the sport and multiple yearly franchises from some bigger developers. Baseball was a huge deal in Japan in the 1980s, and the national excitement over the sport can be felt across the Famicom's library.

You can't talk about Famicom baseball without mentioning Namcot's Family Stadium series. Often referred to by the shorthand "Famista," the first game in the series was released in the West as R.B.I. Baseball. In Japan, it was a yearly franchise from 1986 through 1994, then continued through the 16-bit era. Even today, there are occasional releases in the Famista franchise, though none have left Japan since 1992.

Famista is the quintessential baseball series, establishing the genre's formula that developers follow even today. However, other companies still tried to break into the baseball market. ASCII's Best Play Pro Yakyuu series puts players in the role of a team manager, focusing on player stats and batting order over the action gameplay of other baseball series. Jaleco's Moero!! Pro Yakyuu series doubles down on realistically simulating the on-field action in the style of a televised event. In the West, we know these games as the Bases Loaded series. Taito's Harikiri Stadium series portrays the sport in a more abstract arcade style.

Several other publishers released one-off baseball titles in an attempt to cash in on the trend. These often added a thematic

twist or a unique play mode to make them stand out amongst the ever-growing crowd. Banpresto's Battle Baseball pits teams from Ultraman, Kamen Rider, Godzilla, and Gundam against each other in a cartoonish baseball sim. Tonkin House's Softball Tengoku uses anthropomorphic animals and bizarre monsters instead of human players. However, Broderbund changed them to human players when it localized the game in the US as Dusty Diamond's All-Star Softball. And, somehow, only Japan saw the licensed game based on the Charlie Sheen movie Major League.

Baseball even snuck its way into other genres. Sammy's Aa Yakyuu Jinsei Icchokusen is a

board game of the Jinsei (Game of Life) variety where you level up your baseball skills and then play rounds of baseball at the end of the game. Capcom's Pro Yakyuu? Satsujin Jiken! merges three hugely popular genres—baseball, RPGs, and murder mysteries—into a single comedy adventure with an over-the-top premise and satirical sense of humor.
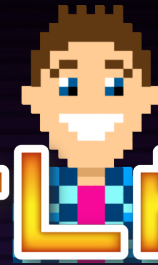
Most players won't find enough differences in the various Famicom baseball games to make them worth collecting. However, looking through the wealth of games in the genre provides an interesting glimpse into one of the Famicom's biggest trends.
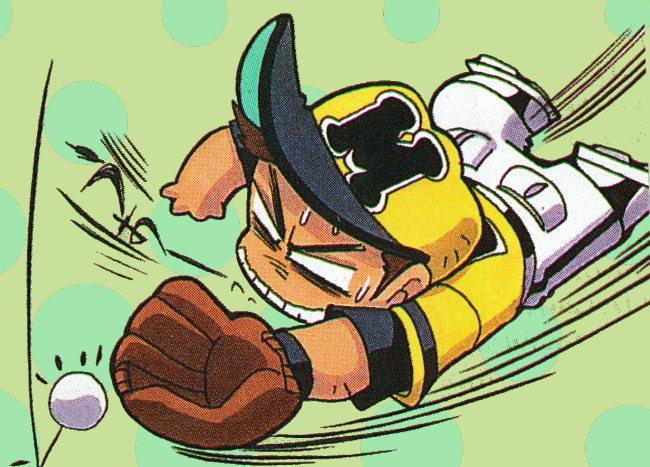
Famista '94, Namcot

Spring, 1989. Hermiston, Oregon, USA. A seven-year-old boy enters the locally owned video rental shop, View and Review, with his mom. Tonight is family movie night, and she is looking for a VHS to rent. He is more interested in the copy of Milon's Secret Castle in their small gaming section, a game that he had never seen before. As his mom goes to the clerk to rent their movie, he notices a display rack next to the front counter, filled with magazines, each with a picture of Mega Man on its bright white cover.

Electronic Gaming Monthly, Issue #1

That day, I became a gamer for life.

I had never seen a video game magazine before. I don't know how long I had to beg my mom before she bought it for me, but I know I would have begged for as long as I needed to. I pored over that magazine, cover to cover, so many times that today—34 years later—I still have most of it memorized. MagMax, Dr. Chaos, Robo Warrior, Hydlide, Star Force, Mappyland, Mystery Quest… these were not the games that most American kids were obsessing over at the time, but they showed me a world of games beyond Mario and Contra.

Throughout most of the 1990s, I took every opportunity possible to read every gaming magazine I could get my hands on: Nintendo Power, EGM, GamePro, Next Generation. When my mom went grocery shopping, I holed up in the magazine aisle, reading everything new for that month. I spent my birthday and Christmas money on subscriptions.

We were not a wealthy family, so these magazines were my window into a world of games I could not afford to buy. I would research the games that interested me, then track them down in the rental shops so I could try them. A local hobby shop, Wheels & Wings, would let you buy time to play their game collection in 15-minute chunks, so when I found a game on a console I didn't own, I'd go there and rent an hour on their TurboGrafx-16 or Sega Master System.

Then, emulation happened. In 1996, I purchased my first computer, and it didn't take me long to discover that I could now play whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. And so I did, diving deep and playing nearly every 8-bit and 16-bit game I had ever read about. And with save states, I could finally beat many of the games that had previously bested me on a rental.

As I went off to college, got married, and started my career, I continued playing new games whenever possible, but I found that my relationship with them had changed. The internet hype machine killed much of the mystery that once surrounded new releases. My career as a game designer left me "consuming" games to study them instead of getting lost in them as entertainment. Modern games didn't interest me as much as the games of my childhood, and the retro gaming community had become too negative for me, spurred on by the popularity of "angry" YouTube personalities who made it geek-chic to spread hate against the games I loved. These were the dark ages for me as a gamer: most gamers were clamoring for the next Halo or Assassin's Creed, but I ignored most games that didn't end with the word "Souls."

During this time, I knew of some games that had never been released in the West. I had heard about the special sound chip in Castlevania III that gave the Japanese version superior music. I had

even played the occasional Japanese ROM on an emulator using my homebrew-hacked Wii. I knew they existed, but I had no idea how deep the rabbit hole actually went until I was browsing eBay one day out of curiosity.

That was the day I learned that $1 Famicom games existed.

It started with a small order of carts that I picked purely based on their low price. My first order included Higemaru Makaijima, Wai Wai World, Challenger, Mappy, Saiyuuki World, The Maze of Galious, and King Kong 2—this incredible lineup immediately hooked me! These games felt just like those I obsessed over as a kid, but they were brand new to me and mostly unspoiled by the internet. Every new cart was a strange new world, and I had to see them all!

Nearly ten years later, I'm close to a complete collection of loose Famicom carts, but this isn't just a glass-case collection. I designed my game room around my Famicom collection, built custom display stands to show them off (which became the main product that launched my business, Syncoplay Retro Gaming), and am now writing a book in the hopes that others will be even a fraction as enthralled by the Famicom as I am.

This book is designed to take you down the rabbit hole that I have been lost in for the last ten years. One day, you're trying a few English-language games that never made it to the West due to licensing issues. The next day, you're deciphering words in low-resolution katakana to figure out the combat system in an RPG based on a forgotten manga. After reading this entire book, you may set it on the table and realize that, yes, even the cover art makes more sense than it once did.

These games were never meant to be studied by adults thirty years too late. They were a product of the 80s and early 90s and are best enjoyed within that context. We can't go back in time, but I have done my best to recreate the feeling of that time through layouts and articles reminiscent of the classic gaming magazines that would have promoted these games had they ever been released in the States. I never intended for this to be a history book—instead, my goal is to immerse you in an alternate version of the past where the West got the same games Japan did, one in which you could order Perman and Insector X from the back of the Sears catalog.

Whenever possible, I used scans from Famicom boxes, instruction manuals, and classic Japanese gaming magazines to populate the spreads in this book. The cartridges pictured are from my collection, and even the Japanese-to-English translations are my own (even though I don't read or speak fluent Japanese). I believe this attention to detail leads readers to an authentic experience— not the experience of a Japanese gamer, but instead the authentic experience of a Western gamer "discovering" the Famicom for the first time.

I could not have done this alone, though. The brilliant artist Dustin Hansen created the seek-and-find cover art, which references more than 50 classic Famicom games—some obvious and some obscure. Viktor Karasev, The Russian Video Game Comrade, was also instrumental in making this sample book happen. His stories are fascinating, and there are many other interviews in the final book that I can't wait to share with you all. Finally, I have to give respect to the editing talents of Scott MacDonald, who has organized my ADHD-fueled writing into something that sounds much smarter.

To every one of you who has read this far, thank you! This project has been a labor of love, and this sample book is just a small piece of it. If you have suggestions, ideas, or feedback on what you read, feel free to contact me using any of the methods on the next page. Join me, and we'll explore this amazing console's vast library of games together!

- Joe@Syncoplay
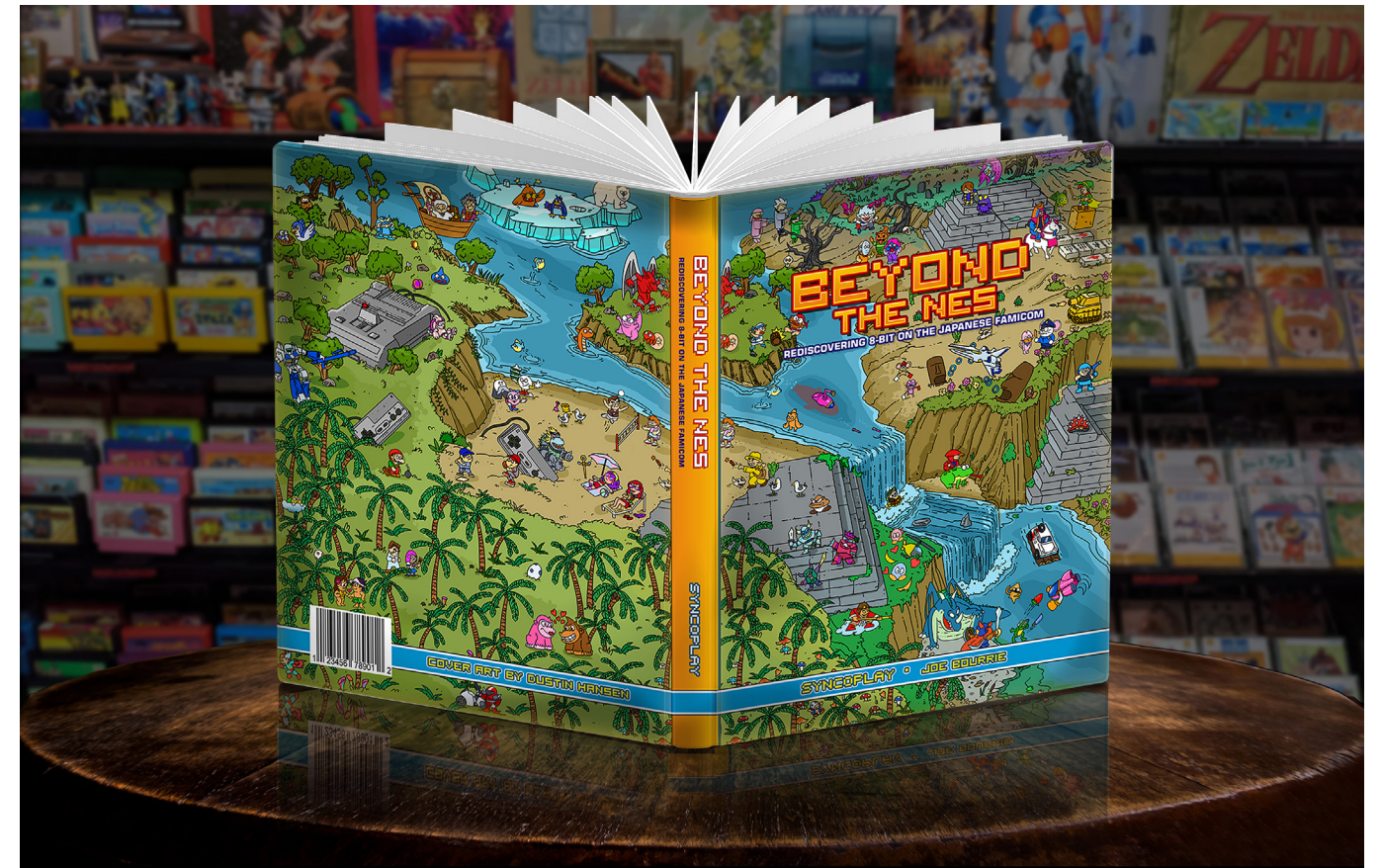
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Signing up will give you early access to additional content and ensure you won't miss any future announcements. Signing up will also ensure that you get notified for early bird access when the physical hardback copy of the book goes up for preorder later this year. Our current trajectory suggests that the final book will reach approximately 330 pages!

If you have any feedback or would like to help by sharing stories of your experience with Famicom, or for promotional partnerships, reach out at:

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Facebook: @syncoplay   Instagram/Threads: @syncoplaygames

BlueSky Social: @syncoplay

Beyond the NES is a fan project unaffiliated with Nintendo or any game publishers. All assets in this book are either scanned from original sources for archival purposes, used with permission, or created as fan art to celebrate the legacy of the Family Computer. Game screenshots are from original cartridges on A/V Famicom hardware upscaled with a Retrotink 2X.

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