

How To... successfully visit a Japanese newsagent

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HOW TO... successfully visit a Japanese newsagent

N64 Magazine is the only magazine you'll ever need, of course. But what if you were in Japan, and couldn't get hold of it? What would you read then? Our man in Tokyo gives Wil some advice for his Japanese holiday.

by Max Everingham



As someone who works full-time in the publishing industry in Japan, I can tell you that there are few bases the Japanese have as comprehensively covered as the production of printed reading matter. Much as in the UK, every day thousands of trees give their lives so that every conceivable subject is given its own print run. Only here, they do it in spades.

A quick browse through one of the major bookstores here turns up such beauties as 'Goods Press', often with a whole issue entirely given over to plugging fashionable watches or trainers, and rank upon rank of 'youth' magazines, advising on those items of clothing no self-respecting otaku should face their friends without. Japan is teeming with paper, and one happy result of such profusion is the wealth of material carrying information on Nintendo and its wunderkonsole, our beloved N64.

Now, Japanese games magazines vary as much in quality as those in the UK. Not all of them are printed on the best quality paper, and they almost always include a black-and-white (non-glossy) paper section featuring readers' contributions. Famimaga 64, for example, calls this section 'Ranking Box', and it's a brief, fairly dry listings and sketches affair. The comparable section in Dengeki Nintendo 64, on the other hand, runs to a substantial 36 pages this month, and includes interviews with industry leaders, readers' polls, the essential Q&A bit, an example of the ubiquitous cartoon strip featuring an N64

hero called 'Shio Man 64', and a mind-boggling guide to how to get the full complement of 150 different Game Boy Pocket Monsters. Ah yes, and there are also a couple of pages dedicated to drawings of semi-naked Anime girls. They say that, in the event of a nuclear holocaust, cockroaches will most likely be the sole survivors. I take issue with this, and am certain that both Tamagotchi and the Toki Meki Memorial babes will be around to keep the roaches company.

Apart from a couple of the magazines opening backwards (to us, that is), what first strikes you is the size of the things. The leanest example here weighs in at 118 pages, and 'The 64 Dream' tips the scales at an Arnie-challenging 164 pages. How Japanese publishers are able to provide this apparent value for money (with the previously-stated proviso concerning overall quality) is not immediately apparent. None of the mags here are subsidised, paper and printing costs in Japan are extortionate, and, perhaps more surprisingly, in-publication advertising is minimal.

Speaking with the editors of the Japanese mags, it's clear there's a good deal of regular communication with Nintendo in the course of a working week. It would be wrong to infer from this, however, that their independence is sacrificed - there's a sense of propriety and, dare I say, decency in a good portion of Japanese business (um, I speak not for the financial industry), and the Nintendo magazines genuinely believe, at least, that they are entirely independent (and therefore objective) in their

analyses.

On this point, it's worth noting that the practice of 'rating' games, so common as to be expected in the West, is less in evidence here. A game is far more likely to be treated to an in-depth report of its features, along with tactics for best exploiting them, than the more subjective opinion pieces UK gamers are accustomed to. Both have great value, of course, and, for what it's worth, I think a combination of the two is the path to gaming enlightenment.

Experience suggests that Japanese employees are notoriously reluctant to divulge information about their companies (or are admirably loyal, perhaps). Staff in the editorial departments of the various N64 magazines I contacted did nothing to disabuse me of this notion. In fact, one of my contacts took paranoia to new heights, informing me that he could not possibly divulge sensitive, nay secret information, such as who reads the magazine or the name of his favourite game. But happily, after only the briefest of interrogation procedures, during which I threatened them with the unspeakable horror that is being locked in a bus full of elementary school kids playing with Tamagotchi, they spilled their guts.

Since these magazines are all independent, and not obliged, at least officially, to be loyal to Nintendo, it is perhaps testimony to that company's unsurpassed prowess that the editors all quote a Nintendo release as the game that most frequently prevents them getting on with their work.



How to identify the Nintendo magazines

Be careful: there lots of magazines in the Japanese newsagent, and they all want you! The challenge is to narrow the field down to those about the one-and-only, and, happily, there are some pointers to assist you. If you've all been reading my Englishman in Tokyo column each month (don't let me down here), you should recognise some of the following:

If the title contains...	It's a...
任天堂 (Nintendo)	Nintendo magazine
ファミ (Fami...)	Nintendo-related magazine
ゲーム (Gemu...)	Multi-platform magazine
セガ (Sega...)	Sega magazine
プレイステーション (Puresuteishon...)	PlayStation magazine



The review system

No prizes for innovation here. The format for reviews in Japanese magazines is highly formulaic, nearly all of them (when you can find them) boiling down to something like this:

- Four reviewers
- Four or five games ('hot' releases only)
- Cursory comments
- Marks out of ten
- Heavily-hyped games all scoring highly

Sadly, reviews are very uninspiring in Japanese games magazines and offer little or no advice to the reader. (Do I need to eat this month? Or

should I be sensible and buy the game?) Predictably, therefore, most energetic buying centres around the titles with the best marketing. Say it well, sell it well.



◀ Lots of reviewers, lots of little reviews of each game. That's the way they do it.



Famimaga 64

590¥ (about £2.95) monthly

The editorial staff of this magazine immediately earned the distinction of being the most cautious of the people I spoke to (not counting those from The 64 Dream, who were so cautious that they absented themselves entirely from their offices and legged it off on holiday, en masse). Questions concerning readership and, gasp, circulation numbers were met with a stony silence until I promised not to sell their secrets to any international spy rings.

Famimaga 64 contains the usual round-up of news and reviews, but distinguishes itself on a couple of fronts. For one, there are no 'graded' reviews in evidence anywhere: they are not so much reviews as analyses, in that rarely is an opinion expressed. And for another, the magazine has extensive Game Boy coverage – far more than its

competitors, in this issue going so far as to include a four-page feature on Game Boy Tamagotchi, full of tips on how best to care for brat's best friend. Add to that repeated coverage of Pocket Love, another exhilarating variation on the date-a-cartoon-character arcade games, and loads of pictures of small, cute kids winning prizes from the magazine, and the publication identifies itself as one for the younger audience.



TV Gamer

350¥ (about £1.75) monthly

This magazine differs from the other three in that it's not dedicated solely to N64. Far from it. Inside this one, you're as likely to find information on movies, music, fashion, and media stars as on console games. There's even a full week's TV listings, placing this magazine squarely in the general entertainment division.

The magazine's



spokesman, Mr Matsumoto, admits that their most successful inclusion (remember, the audience is mostly young and male) is the 'idol' section. Naturally, being a happily-married man, I have absolutely no interest whatever in such shenanigans, and display the relevant pictures purely out of the interests of informing our readers as comprehensively as possible.

Such disarming modesty on the part of Mr Matsumoto is commendable, however, and perhaps obscures the fact that TV Gamer manages to squeeze a good bit of interesting Nintendo-related news in between its covers. A good third of the content is games-oriented, and in the edition shown, for example, there's news of the latest Pocket Monsters cart for the Game Boy, information



Dengeki Nintendo 64

590¥ (about £2.95) monthly

A relative newcomer, Dengeki Nintendo 64 represents one of the more weighty games magazines on the market and is the host of that big 34-page black and white readers' section I mentioned earlier. As with most of the others, the magazine launches straight into articles about the hottest games. Our own great N64 Magazine does too, of course, but you may have noticed that several other British and American mags prefer a hefty preamble involving gossip and news before they reveal the big ones. The reviews are extensive and always give extremely detailed tips on how to get the most out of the game – strategy guides abound.

In deference, I suppose, to the obsession the Japanese appear to have with all things manga, there are several cartoon strips in every issue. In this

month's offering, Bottom Up's impending *Sumo 64* is rather imaginatively covered by way of a cartoon strip, the protagonist being Dengeki Yama (Dengeki Mountain), one of the Sumo wrestler characters from the game.

One of the most striking aspects of DN64 is that with games in development there's often a box-out containing comments from, or an interview with, one of the developer's staff. The effect is twofold: it not only gives the reader a sense of being more involved in the process, but possibly staves off impatience. Now you can see what's going on. Like it, like it.

The rest of Dengeki is split up into sections entitled 'Dengeki Shangri-La', 'N64 Next Stage', including info on what the various developers are up to, and lastly, 'News 64 Clip!'. It's only in this last

The collage features several Japanese magazine covers from the 1980s, primarily focused on anime and manga. The most prominent cover at the top is for 'N64' (Newtype 64), which includes the text '最新ロボット' (Latest Robot) and 'スーパーロボットスピリッツ' (Super Robot Spirits). Below this, there's a cover for 'ハンブレスト' (Humblest) and another for 'U.F.O. 超ロボット生命体' (U.F.O. Super Robot Lifeforms). The covers are arranged in a grid-like fashion, with some overlapping. The background of the collage is dark with a subtle grid pattern.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF THE N64?
With *Zelda*, *Mother 3* and *Ganbare Goemon*, the N64 will be the best in the world.

This is not the place to come for buying advice. The reviews are completely opinion-

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF THE N64?
It's floundering at the moment in Japan, but we'll soon see it gather strength.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF THE N64?
The best games in the world are on the N64. And then there's *Zelda* and *Mother 3* on the way!



The 64 Dream

¥490 (about £1.95) monthly

Although (or perhaps because) The 64 Dream is the heavyweight contender for the N64 magazine crown, its staff were all resting their weary bones at time of writing, and so sadly unavailable for interview. To be fair, most holidays in Japan are national ones, meaning we all have time off at exactly the same time – the travel agent's dream and car-driver's nightmare.

Weighing in at 164 pages, 148 of those in full colour, The 64 Dream is a bruiser. Perhaps the most clearly organised, this magazine kicks off with a full page of colour stickers featuring characters from N64 games. This month, for example, Goemon looms large, and there are garage shots of four of the vehicles from MRC. Another fine inclusion is the letter-box stickers which are destined for the top edge of your cartridges. Basically, they allow you to see which game is which when the carts are viewed top-down or from the side, and I don't mind admitting that I have employed previous sticker sheets in just this capacity. Natty.

The 64 Dream brings you no fewer than five separate games charts, ranging from the more conventional most-eagerly-anticipated-games, to most popular third-party developers (topped this month by Square). Reader involvement is clearly a priority for the staff of this magazine, with the thing chock-full of developer news,

strategy guides, reader contributions. The monochrome section even carries what can only be described as 'modification instructions', and this month recommends the adding of Batman-style wings (nicked off the licensed toys, presumably) to your N64 controller. Interestingly, this month's edition also gives advice on playing imported (US) games, and ingeniously illustrates the difference between the US and Japanese cart slots.

Its sheer size means that The 64 Dream can hold a wealth of gaming news, previews and interviews. It is this last that most captures the attention, as every month there are in-depth interviews with the huffers and puffers in the industry. As well as the straight journo-asks-developer format, there are extended Q&A sessions with the game makers, where they're faced with answering the best reader queries.

At the risk of being boring here, let me just note that The 64 Dream shares the same lack of game ratings as the other mags. It does, however, contain just about everything else game-related imaginable. I say 'game-related' as a kind of cover-all. It is debatable, I suppose, how vitally important the inclusion of such marvels as 'Bistro de 64' (er, guess) is to the dedicated games fan, for example, but it is undeniably games-related. Just.

Most distinctive feature:
Top cart stickers and ratings charts

