

How to survive in a Japanese Arcade

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The best coin-op games begin life in Japan. So N64 Magazine's man in Tokyo, Max Everingha

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The best coin-op games begin life in Japan. So N64 Magazine's man in Tokyo, Max Everingham, was dispatched to the bustling arcades of Shinjuku and Akihabara to sample the machines we'll be playing in a few months' time – and possibly, eventually, with a favourable wind, on our N64s.

HOW TO...

Survive in a JAPANESE ARCADE

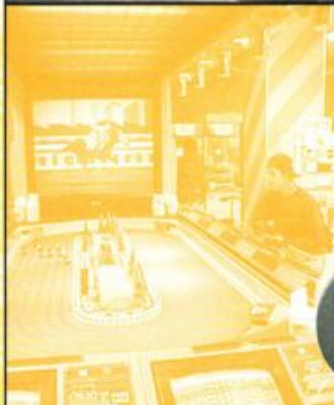
Japanese of every age, status and background convene on games arcades when the weekend finally rolls around. And they often don't wait till then, heading in after work (or school) with their way home to play both the familiar... and the bizarre.

The traditional-style racing and fighting games tend to enjoy a high profile in arcades all over Japan, but, thankfully, they're certainly not all that's contending for our 100¥ coins (100¥ being the average price of a single game over here). In fact, the number one game in terms of sales in Japan in recent months has been a curiously-titled quiz game – more of that later.

"What does this have to do with beautiful Nintendo 64?" you may

well be asking yourselves. Well, even the most inexperienced gamer will have realised that many of the most successful and durable video games drew their first electronic breath in a coin-operated arcade box. The advent of the super-powered consoles – amongst which our beloved Nintendo 64 reigns supreme, naturally – has led us to expect 'ports' of some of this arcade excellence into our homes.

So dive in and experience the latest delights that the games developers are hoping will coax us into parting with our hard-earned cash. Spend a little time reflecting on how far the games business has come, how fortunate we are now, and how far there could still be to go.



Price Guide



100¥ = 50p
200¥ = £1
300¥ = £1.50
500¥ = £2.50

GTi CLUB

Konami



My first thought when I saw this new racer from Konami was, "Well, here we are, yet another driving game." The cabinet is none too impressive and doesn't exactly scream 'innovation' at you as you plunk yourself down in the bucket seat and dig around for your 100¥ coin. Racing games are two-a-penny just now, and with the likes of *Scud Racer* tearing through the arcades, any new offering is going to have to be a bit special. Thankfully, 'special' is just what Konami's new racer is.

The first extra becomes apparent as you go through the set-up procedure. Pop the coin in the slot and you're treated to a spinning overview of the town you'll soon be hurtling around in. Given that the setting of the game is the Cote d'Azur, this is all very pretty indeed. All the races take place in the streets of a picturesque coastal town and you quickly realise that you're going to be

able to scare the living daylight out of a fair few tourists on your way to victory. An encouraging start.

Your options here are tag race (with up to four players), normal, shortcut race, and shortcut in mirror mode. Make your selection and you're presented with five vehicles to choose from, including a Mini Cooper, a VW Golf and a Lamborghini Countach. In an admirable attempt to instill a few early life lessons, Konami have arranged that, just as a supercar will cost more in real life, in *GTi Club* you have to double your stake and put 200¥ into the machine for the Lambo.

Here come the really interesting



features, though. If you've chosen the shortcut race, you can swing off the beaten track at various points and attempt to cut ahead of the pack. One minute you'll be

bumping through an olive grove, the next you're careering along a café terrace, scattering terrified tourists.

In tag mode with a friend, the course is cordoned off by means of metal fences and a bomb icon appears over one car, with smaller bomb icons circling the vehicle. You're 'it', and the aim of the game is to chase and tag your opponent. When you do, the bombs shift over to your car and then it's your turn to play chase.

The graphics are of a very high standard, particularly the pre-rendered backdrops of crumbly buildings and Mediterranean coastlines. There are other nice touches, such as mud splattering the car, oncoming traffic, and Sunday drivers pulling out in front of you. There's also a genuine thrill in being able to scream down a narrow alleyway or recreate the stair-descending trick straight out of *The Italian Job*.

Better than the inclusion of the shortcuts, though, is the hand brake. Not readily apparent when you first slide into the seat, this handle is your ticket to pulling off some quality U-turns. When you're steaming towards a particularly sharp corner, just yank this baby skywards and the car swings neatly around. It's not just a bit handy: to navigate some of the tighter bends, it's absolutely essential.

GTi Club provides an entertaining, sometimes exhilarating driving experience, aided immeasurably by the addition of the shortcut feature and the tag mode. It's already giving *Scud Racer* a run for its money in the arcades and places one spot higher than the Sega game in the 'money taken' polls this month.

OPERATION THUNDER HURRICANE

Konami

1 PLAY 1 COIN

I'm going to make this quick. This is a shooting game with a huge great gun for you to menace innocent passers-by with when you're not pointing it at the screen. Otherwise you just shoot everything you see.

The settings switch after each stage, beginning with a scene straight out of *Apocalypse Now*, moving on to a Gulf-like desert scenario, and so on. You either love blasting everything to kingdom come, or you don't. Oddly, this game, at 200¥ a shot (sorry), attracts as many young couples as it does wannabee Rambos.



RATINGS graphics 8 sound 5 gameplay 9 innovation 8

SCUD RACER

Sega



Ah, the long-awaited *Scud Racer*. Let's see. There's no faulting the graphical capabilities of the board in this machine, and AM2 have done a sterling job in creating some highly realistic, nay breathtaking graphics. Typical Sega options abound: four courses, from beginner to expert; four cars to choose from (Porsche 911, Ferrari F40, Dodge Viper and McLaren F1, each with different handling characteristics); four driving views; and a choice of day or night driving.

The lighting effects on the night-time Aztec temple course are wonderful, ranging from a light haze

as you pass the waterfall (now required by law in all Japanese driving games, I gather), through bright sunshine climbing the hills, to gorgeous earthy rich golden-brown hues and blazing fires as you rip through the temple.

The AI of the CPU-controlled cars is sharp, guaranteeing quite a battle as you strive for glory. And the sense of speed is tremendous. In the F1 (high-speed), you can easily reach a velocity of over 300 km/h. Smoking!

Undeniably, *Scud Racer* is smashing to look at. But where's the beef? You get a couple of minutes of driving, tops, for your 200¥, and there's really



nothing to do but steam along, avoiding the other cars. With the likes of *GTi Club* inhabiting the same buildings, *Scud Racer* seats are often left waiting for their next bum,

while the Japanese boy racers give the Minis a run for their money on Konami's baby.

RATINGS graphics 9 sound 6 gameplay 4 innovation 6

RATINGS
graphics 6 sound 7
gameplay 2
innovation 1





TOP SKATER

Sega

Surf's up! One look at the machine and you'll correctly surmise that it's another of those games based on a board with no wheels.

But what a game! See those ruddy great grab bars on around the cabinet? Well, grab them, because after coughing up your 200¥ and going through the usual run of options (course-type, length, choice of six characters with names like Ken-ta and Ash) the crashing surf music fires up to blast the cobwebs out of your lug-holes and you're hurled down the start ramp into the crazy world of extreme sports.

The board you stand on is made of hard moulded plastic. And a good job too because, apart from the swishy movements you use to steer, the primary method of control is to stamp on either end of it in order to

pull off the stunts which reward you with time bonuses and extra points. The average game time is about three minutes, or less if you keep eating dirt or missing the time-ups.

You navigate a concrete-wave-type skateboard course, but aren't confined to it. A few well-timed (or laughably miscalculated, in my case) jumps will allow you to get some serious air by leaving the pipe altogether and hanging with the birds. When this happens, the game camera tracks you, resulting in some mind-blowing angles guaranteed to throw off even the hardened riders.

The most fun, however, lies in pulling off the stunts. Loops, spins, tail and nose grabs, alley-oops and air walks are all available, and then there are the more oddly-named ones such as 'b/s mute', '4/s 540' and 'back loop to method'. I was just trying to stay upright and not look completely foolish in front of the surf dude kids who were gathered around watching me.

The position of the time-up rings usually entails leaving the safety of Mother Earth, if just for a second or two, which is a neat way of encouraging players to take a few risks, significantly increasing the thrill

of the ride. Sound effects are minimal, with the odd 'Oh man!' thrown in when you miss a jump, and the music is the kind of crashing surfer rock anthem you'd expect from a game like this.

Top Skater is a cracking game and, while it's too new for me to know if it will become top dog, it's far and away the most excitement I've had from an arcade game for some time. It blows the socks off the ski games and, like *GTi Club*, it aims to be fun rather than an ultra-realistic simulation. **N**



RATINGS graphics **8** sound **7**
gameplay **9** innovation **7**

ALPINE RACER 2

Namco

The sequel to this top ski game is in just about every arcade I've been in, joining the likes of *GTi*



Club, *Top Skater* and *Scud Racer*. Quite why, though, I have no idea. Improvements include a new course, a choice of skiing styles, and the ability to race against a pal on a neighbouring machine. Choose your skier, go for a slalom or high speed run, and get ready to hit the slopes.

I played the original machine in London's Trocadero quite a while back now, and the new one plays just the same. Same controls, same graphics, same tired old touches like a helicopter appearing right in front of you as you gain the ridge (*Ridge Racer*, anyone?). There's a good sense of speed, and some beautiful views, but, and I have to say this, it just isn't very interesting. You start at the top, and go down to the bottom. Hmm. The only thing of note is that there's a (documented) cheat* in this game which allows you to choose a bear, or two old men on one pair of skis, as your character. Doesn't save it from Yawn City, though. **N**

* Hold the L+R yellow buttons down when you put your money in, choose the style, and press R button twice. The bear is yours. For the old m press the L button twice at the second step.



RATINGS graphics **6** sound **3**
gameplay **4** innovation **1**

PRINT CLUB

Various developers

There are a few sights which strike you when you first arrive in Japan. But

none is more immediately impressive, one way or another, than the apparently endless hordes of tanned, short-skirted (with belts, often), mobile-phone-carrying high school girls.

These creatures can be seen walking and chatting together in large groups all over the city at all times of the day. Not only do they seem to be everywhere you look, but their uniforms, their hairstyles and their penchant for ostentatiously adjusting their make-up in public places raise

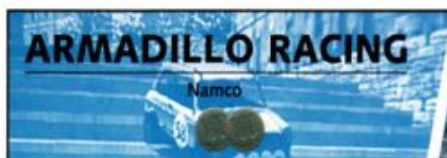
their profiles to a level that's impossible to ignore. (Well, that's my excuse.)

It's hard work getting to look this good, so what could be more natural than the desire to record the look for posterity in the form of tiny photo-stickers, and then distribute them among your friends? Enter *Print Club*! These little beauties (the machines) allow you to capture the



lovely vision that is you against the backdrop of your choice for the bargain price of 300¥. Selectable frames, applied afterwards, feature the likes of Snoopy, Felix the Cat, Mickey Mouse or even your favourite celebrity. After a few button pushes (see instructions to the right), the machine delivers a sheet of 16 sticky-backed photographs - called 'seals' in Japan -

which you can then display to the adoring world at large. Next to most machines there's a special notice-board where you can stick a sample for future visitors to goggle at.



ARMADILLO RACING

Namco

Brand new in the arcades is the fast-paced, endearingly wacky *Armadillo Racing* from Namco. Your objective is to complete two laps within 60 seconds.

Control could hardly be simpler. The trackball makes a welcome return to the arcades, operational over a 180 degree forward arc. All you do is frantically palm the ball forwards and the animal gallops off after his mates.



The two courses run over banked dirt tracks, down cobbled-stone paths, along wooden walkways and across bridges. Fall off a bridge and you tumble into the water, forcing your

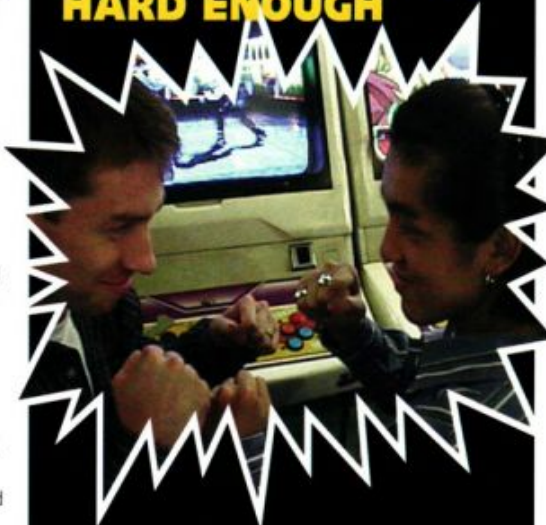
armadillo to paddle to the bank, drag himself out and shake his body free of water. Actually, 'he' could be a 'she' – it's so hard to tell with armadillos.

Hit one of the boulders which litter the obstacle course or run into a pig and you curl up and spin like a hedgehog. There's an odd, pink heart icon on the screen. If you get carried away with the trackball, the heart changes to red which basically means you're about to give your beastly a coronary. A blue bar underneath indicates your speed.

The graphics are of a very high standard, but that's not really what this game's about – it's more to do with good, light-hearted fun. This is reflected in the varied gamers attracted to the machine, from young nippers to street-wise high-school kids and sharp-suited businessmen. It's a great laugh, if nothing else. My only complaint is that 60 seconds is a bit too short for 200¥. **N**



COME ON THEN, IF YOU THINK YOU'RE HARD ENOUGH



Throwing caution to the wind and forgetting everything Sun Tzu ever said about knowing thy enemy, I cornered one of the Otaku in a downtown arcade and rashly challenged him to a *Tekken 3* best of three deathmatch. Considering that my last adventure of this kind resulted in a sound thrashing at the hands of a kid who couldn't have been more than seven years old, this was folly indeed. Still, too late now...

RATINGS graphics 7 sound 5
gameplay 8 innovation 9

Print Club is massively popular here, and at the weekend every machine in sight (they're dotted all over the place in shopping malls, train stations, cafés and video stores, as well as in arcades) boasts long, long lines of chirpy high schoolers eagerly awaiting their turn to produce this week's batch of seals. True devotees can even buy dedicated albums to store their collection in. No, really. **N**



TEN STEPS TO STARDOM

- Ichi step** Adjust hair. Check make-up. (Essential.)
- Ni step** Step behind curtain and jockey into position.
- San step** Insert 300¥.
- Shi step** Select seal style. Discuss choice. De-select seal style. Select another one...
- Go step** Select frame. Discuss choice. De-select...
- Roku step** Pose.
- Shichi step** Hit 'freeze' button to capture image.
- Hachi step** Laugh uproariously. Strike friend for closing eyes or looking in wrong direction. Hit button to unfreeze image. Pose. Hit freeze button. Laugh uproariously. Strike friend... (This step can be repeated for some time.)
- Kyu step** Wait for 2-3 minutes while machine does its stuff.
- Ju step** Collect stickers. Use scissors attached to side of machine. Distribute.



Heh! Heh! You and whose army?



Ah, right you are then.



Hey! I wasn't ready!



All right, don't rub it in...

N

GO! GO!

DENSHA DE, GO! (LET'S GO BY TRAIN)

Taito

Taito have granted the wish of the little boy inside each of us with their new game, *Densha de, Go!*, where the player finally gets to realise the dream of being a train driver.

And the excitement doesn't stop (*Start, surely?* – James) there. On the fascia is a set of controls which could easily be mistaken for the real thing, while up on the screen you're treated to as accurate a representation of Japan Railways (JR) as could ever want to imagine.

Odd that the Japanese, who nearly all suffer the assorted indignities of a long train-commute to work every morning packed in like cattle, should take this game to their hearts. The queues of thirtysomething men waiting patiently for their turn to play just go to show that the train occupies a very special place in many of our



minds. But then, with trains that are always on time (barring accidents), and the Shinkansen (that's Bullet Train to you, guv) capable of speeds in excess of 350 km/h in airline-like comfort, the Japanese are justifiably proud of their rail system.



PACHINKO

If you don't smoke, don't go into a Pachinko parlour – the first thing you'll notice is the billowing cloud of smoke hanging menacingly from the ceiling. If you are a smoker, on the other hand, leave your fags at home and inhale for free.

Pachinko parlours are an odd sight. Imagine row upon row of grim-faced individuals sitting on tiny plastic seats, staring fixedly at flashing, beeping panels that look like a fruit machine crossed with a pinball table, and you pretty much have the basics.

The machines themselves are entirely automated, and they work something like this: ball-bearings are introduced into the top where they

towards the bottom of the table. And the reward is more silver balls.

The only interaction on the part of the player is at the beginning. Through the manipulation of a, um, knob, you can affect the velocity and trajectory of each ball as it's released into play. That's it. Don't go thinking that this is easy – aficionados swear there's a considerable degree of skill involved in turning this knob.

Every parlour has more bouncers than your local Ritzy, and if you're not the kind who likes a drink, a smoke and to spend your day off in a noisy aircraft hangar in your shell suit and slippers

watching machines play with themselves, be prepared to be disappointed.



then make their way through a maze of projecting pins arranged in a pattern on the surface of the (upright) table. As the balls progress southwards, reels such as you find on fruit machines (but in LED or graphic format) spin to provide bonus options. The reward comes when you cause the silver balls to enter a 'goal' area located

RATINGS graphics **9** sound **6**
gameplay **4** innovation **7**

CHARACTER SELECT

If you fancy a multi-player game of *GTL Club*, *Alpine Racer 2* or *Operation Thunder Hurricane*, you'll need to choose an opponent from the crowd to challenge.



sex Female
height 1.53m
weight 51kg
blood type A
fighting style Giggly
stance Cute
habitat Coffee shops, shopping malls

Pocket Bell Girl



sex Male
height 1.66m
weight 64kg
blood type A/B
fighting style Aggressive
stance Laid back
habitat Video store steps, 7-11

Surf Bloke



sex Male
height 1.65m
weight 78kg
blood type O
fighting style Relaxed
stance Near Horizontal
habitat Pachinko parlours, race course

Betting Man



sex Male
height 1.79m
weight 85kg
blood type B
fighting style Limp wristed
stance Hunched
habitat Vicinity of Toki Meki machines

Getalife Geezer

MY ANGEL CHILD CARE QUIZ

Namco

Look, don't start. This deserves a mention because it's, incredibly, the number one arcade machine in Japan this month. (Rated by sales, that is – punters who've partaken.)

While you might expect the only people to play this one to be young mothers, there just aren't that many of them around. (Remember what I said about single women?) The name is misleading, though, because, despite the display showing a couple of anime babies frolicking around as you



play, it is in fact a straight-forward general knowledge quiz game. So I haven't gone soft.

N

RATINGS graphics **Er**, right sound **N/A**
gameplay **8** innovation **1**

HORSE RACING GAMES

Horse-racing games have found their way into arcades and while many of them inhabit the regular arcade cabinets, some of them aim a bit higher.

The game pictured here recreates the action in three ways: on the table-top, where plastic horses glide around a grooved replica of the race course; on a computer-graphic display of the same; and as 'real-life' video

footage synched with the game.

As there's a ban on betting, you use 'medals' to place your bets. You buy these in 100¥ units from the arcade staff, but can't later exchange them for money or anything else.



sex	Male
height	1.80m
weight	78kg
blood type	O
fighting style	None
stance	None
habitat	UFO catcher machines, home

Family Man



sex	Male
height	1m
weight	35kg
blood type	A/B
fighting style	Nippy
stance	Low
habitat	Everywhere

Sprog

TOKI MEKI MEMORIAL

Konami/Various



Judging by the number of people waiting for a go on this machine (or rather, machines, as everyone is getting in on this particular act), *Toki Meki Memorial* is one of the most popular game in Japanese arcades.

'Toki Meki' very roughly translates as 'heartfelt love', and the 'memorial' part is a kind of Japlish which should have been 'souvenir', since the sole purpose of playing the myriad machines that make up the TM collection is to walk away with a trinket emblazoned with the 'anime' (manga cartoon-style) girls' images (Actually, 'Toki Meki Memorial' is the name of the high school the girls attend in Konami's phenomenally successful date-sim video game of the same name – it was the best selling title on the PlayStation in 96! – Wil)

Some machines are pot-luck jobs and dole out badges, posters, stickers and plastic dolls, while others, including Konami's brand new *Toki Meki Memorial* machine, are slightly more elaborate affairs. And I mean only slightly. Here, you place your left hand on the sensor (pictured) and operate the buttons with your right, first selecting which girl you want to hit on and then responding to her on-screen questions. The sensor goes to work and helps decide whether the girl's heart and yours 'agree', in which

case your heartfelt love (Toki Meki) percentage increases. Leave a negative impression, however, and your life meter takes a knock. At the end of it all, you can opt to have a print out of your results and a picture of your new woman.

In a country where 70% of 20-30-year-old women remain single, you'd think the droves of young and middle-aged men who flock to these machines might make better use of their time.

Unfathomable as its appeal may seem to some of us, *Toki Meki Memorial* paraphernalia is everywhere you look. No game store is without a section given over entirely to displays of TM kit, as if what's in the machines wasn't enough. There's even one gentleman who recently made the news here after claiming to be so devoted to one *Toki Meki* character that he had his futon printed on one side with a full-length image of her so that he can lay down beside her to sleep. At least, I hope he sleeps...

N



CATCHINGER Z

Namco

100¥ in the slot, *Toki Meki* doll falls through the hole above the robot's head, and you hit the button to make the robot's arms clash together. If you catch the box, the doll is yours. The sole preserve of young and middle-aged men. Hmm.

TOKI MEKI DISC COLLECTION

Konami

This is one of the simpler ones. Stick 100¥ in the slot, hit the big red button to set the lights going, and hit it again to start the slowdown/stopping sequence. If the lights stop in one of the four spaces inside the heart, you win. A badge.

N64