

How to... get the latest N64 games before everyone else.

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N64 Magazine's guide to procuring games imported from America and Japan.

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HOW TO...

get the latest N64 games before everyone else

N64 Magazine's guide to
procuring games imported
from America and Japan.

by Zy Nicholson





our local Electronics Boutique has shelves of game carts, gleaming Nintendo consoles and peripherals, so why would anyone want to pass it all up and play import games? Or look at it the other way: why wouldn't you want a UK machine?

Basically, there's nothing amiss with the UK N64. For the wondrous £99 tag you get a machine that's equipped to work with any UK telly, including hand-me-down bedroom portables; it accepts the cheaper British cartridges that clueless aunts and coerced spouses can pick up from any high street store; and, most importantly, it can be returned to the shop if anything goes wrong.

A commonly perceived drawback of the UK hardware is that the games run at slower speeds than on Japanese machines, and are saddled with ugly black borders and a squished picture. Our national grid provides for appliances that run at 50Hz rather than the US/Japanese 60Hz, true, but decent conversions from the likes of Rare and Konami have demonstrated that UK games needn't suffer greatly in this respect if the software is properly optimised.

A bigger problem exists with the video output. Technically speaking, it's impossible to refute that the best possible set-up for experiencing the N64 will involve a US or Japanese console powered through a step-down transformer; a high-end NTSC-compatible TV that accepts S-Video or SCART; an original US/Jap cartridge in the slot; and a comfy old armchair, tea-stained and cigar-blighted, that has long forgone need of an antimacassar. What you'll get is a 60Hz machine running dedicated software and producing a full screen, full speed NTSC picture. If you could compare it, side by side, with a UK machine running the same game, the disparity in picture



△ As Will is forever pointing out, import games have nicer boxes too.

quality would be instantly detectable – though you have to question whether such cosmetic differences really warrant following the import path.

After all, import gaming is an expensive and elitist hobby. Increasingly, it is the preserve of the diehard gamefreak who either wishes to see obscure titles in their original form, or who simply must have the latest games before anyone else.

Here and now – Or else

Availability isn't the problem it once was. Cynically, the initial lack of N64 titles may have prompted the release of games that might otherwise never be seen over here. Titles like *Goemon* (or *Mystical Ninja* as it is now known) and *Mischief Makers* might not have made it to the UK if the climate remained the same as in the days of 16-bit, but with a captive market of N64 owners eager to expand their cartridge collections, it can prove financially viable to release less 'mainstream' titles and see them sell well. This has absolutely tremendous consequences for Brit gamers, who have traditionally suffered delays, denials and a restricted games library at the hands of Nintendo (and we've had it

good, historically, compared to our fellow Ninty fans in Spain and Australia).

A word of warning for the future, though: just because an NTSC game quickly appears in PAL format on the shelves of your local Woolies, don't assume it's up to the quality of Nintendo's in-house catalogue before checking N64's reviews. Likewise, there will still be games that we're never likely to see over here. Those of you set on enjoying *Puyo Puyo Sun 64*, *Wonder Project J2*, Sumo wrestling sims or obscure *J-League* footie won't be discouraged from considering the import option.

As for the matter of delays, that now boils down to the individual game. Having Rare on our side has enabled some speedy scheduling of their UK titles, but Nintendo themselves seem intent on making Europe wait months to fit some rather old-fashioned sales notions about the times of the year in which to release their own games.

Worth the effort?

Given the cost and the extraneous televisual requirements, import gaming is no longer as essential as it was in the early days of the Super NES, when Europe was either denied major triple-A titles or made to wait for achingly distant release dates. Even though Nintendo has made the same uncompromising mistakes with its PAL hardware as in previous years, the desire for more games has been met with a recent but welcome trend in clever PAL optimisation. This has established a benchmark for future conversions that should encourage all UK publishers to abide by the standard. Rest assured, our hands-on knowledge of the import scene means that those who fall short will be mercilessly indicted within the pages of N64 Magazine.

WHY ARE WE WAITING?

One of the biggest advantages of import gaming is being able to get your hands on the latest games weeks or even months before anyone else, thanks to the time it takes to convert games from the NTSC system the Japanese and Americans use to our PAL system. Here're just some of the delays you could have avoided over the last year:

Super Mario 64

Japan: June 1996
UK: Mar 1997

Mario Kart 64

Japan: Dec 1996
UK: June 1997

ISS64

Japan: Feb 1997
UK: June 1997

Blast Corps

Japan: Mar 1997
UK: Aug 1997

Lylat Wars

Japan: Apr 1997
UK: Oct 1997

GoldenEye

Japan/US: Aug 1997
UK: Nov 1997

Diddy Kong Racing

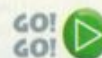
Japan/US: Nov 1997
UK: Dec 1997



△ Scenes like this could become a regular feature of your life.

△ Super games like Puyo Puyo 64 often just never make it to Britain.

▷ Look at all this great stuff you get inside the Japanese Yoshi box. Beats a floppy manual.



Getting the right stuff

Your import console

Believe it or not, the only structural difference between a US and a Japanese N64 is a lump of plastic next to the edge connector. Peer into the cart slot and you'll see a couple of tabs that physically prevent the insertion of differently-shaped foreign cartridges. You're likely to damage your machine if you try to chisel them away through the dustflaps, so the best option is to open the machine up and saw off the offending appendages. Naturally, this invasive act instantly voids your guarantee.

The N64 is held together with special 'tamper-proof' screws, but these happily succumb to a ZE1 tamper-proof-proof screwdriver. You'll need a decent electronics hardware store or a Maplin mail order catalogue to get hold of one of these.

Adaptors

There is another way to play imported games without buying an NTSC console/TV set-up, and that's to slot an adaptor into your PAL N64. Basically, this device sits between the N64 and the cartridge and fools your N64 into thinking that it's a local cartridge by countering or bypassing the built-in security measures.

You'll probably be using one of these with a PAL machine to play Japanese games, but adaptors that are described as 'universal' should also allow owners of NTSC machines to play PAL carts. (If it's suspiciously cheap, check you're not buying a bridge adaptor – this is really just an extension for an edge connector and not a true converter at all.)

The age-old problem of adaptors is that you can never guarantee today's latest model will work with tomorrow's new release, so you could quickly find that your new purchase is completely out of date within a matter of weeks.

The official line on adaptors is that they can cause harm to your N64, and using one thereby invalidates your warranty. However, there's really no technical evidence to support this claim. No adaptor draws enough power to risk blowing internal fuses, and there's no way for any engineer to tell that your



machine has been host to one. On the other hand, it is possible to damage your N64 and your games by inserting cartridges loosely or the wrong way round, or disconnecting them during operation, and using an adaptor can eliminate the console's physical prevention measures to make such errors more likely.

PAL and NTSC

Not all televisions are alike, as there are two dominant TV standards in use around the world. Televisions in Japan and the US conform to a standard called NTSC, which possesses a screen resolution of 525 lines. Britain, on the other hand, has opted for the higher-quality PAL system, which uses a 625-line screen for greater definition. PAL is also the standard for Australia, the Middle East, Africa, and much of Europe (a third SECAM standard found in France, Russia and parts of Eastern Europe is really very similar to PAL).

So, although our PAL tellies are actually superior, we're scuppered by the fact that video games have traditionally hailed from either the US or Japan and are designed to support a smaller picture with a faster frame rate. Over the years, UK versions of these game consoles have either stretched the image electronically (with accompanying loss of colour, contrast and definition) or settled for black borders to account for the difference in line resolution.

Step-down transformer

If you want to run an unmodified import machine, you'll need to simulate the 110-120 volt power supply found in both the US and Japan. Your local branch of Tandy will be able to sell you a step-down transformer for £30-35, allowing you to plug in the N64's AC adaptor. Be warned that (a) the foreign two-pin plugs lack an earth lead, and (b) that sinister humming you notice late at night is made by the transformer as it watches you, and waits.

The big screen

To enjoy the performance of an import console, you're also going to need a high-end, multi-standard compatible TV with SCART and, preferably, S-video. Individual models are constantly being upgraded, so you'll need to consult with the dealer, but if you investigate TVs made by Sony and Toshiba then you're more likely to find what you need. S-video has



a higher definition than SCART, and can give a slightly washed-out look as a consequence when superficially compared to SCART, but this is usually remedied by exploring your TV's colour options. The difference is noticeable when you can compare the two by swapping leads, but very fine (rather like arguing over whether a postcard of Waterhouse's Lady of Shalott truly captures the original painting's Pre-Raphaelite attention to detail. Um, quite).

S-video enjoyed some popularity on contemporary TVs when home video cameras first took off. Now that the novelty has expired, the assumption that cameras will be used in conjunction with video recorders (and plugged in via the VCR) means that the technology has become more integrated, so you'll find that many modern TVs – even expensive Japanese models released in Europe – only boast a single or dual SCART input over the standard UHF co-axial input.

Pads

The good news is that N64 pads are universally compatible. Even if you have an import console, you can safely pick up official or third-party UK pads – and vice versa. You can still spot the difference because EC regulations require European pads to carry a plastic-shielded 'nobble' that protects against accidental electric shock. The only problem you might encounter is that Japanese pads have very short leads, given the unhealthy habit of that nation's children of sitting right in front of the telly. Extender cables are available from the likes of Fire International (01302 325225) to suit your comfy armchair needs.

Playing the leads

This is a fraught business. Even when you possess an NTSC console and the expensively compatible TV needed to enjoy it, the bits of wire you rely on to interface the two can result in conspicuously good or puzzlingly dire consequences. In some instances, leads intended for the UK won't be appropriate for use with NTSC consoles. Our best advice here is that, where possible, try to obtain the type of leads you need at the same time as you acquire the N64 itself and quiz the dealer on their known compatibility.



S-video

The best picture you can get. Your TV should possess a socket for a 4-pin DIN plug and auxiliary phono inputs (usually found under the front panel, rather than at the back), although some recent TVs – notably those by Toshiba – have taken to accepting their S-video input via the second SCART socket.

AV Cable

This terminates in three phono leads. The red and white wires are stereo sound outputs,

while the third yellow plug chugs out all of the picture in what's known as a composite video format. Composite signals are great for driving computer monitors (we know from letters that the old Amstrad colour monitor still sees service in some households, though we're not entirely sure how), and should also be found on modern TVs from Sony and Toshiba. It's also possible to 'fudge' a SCART input with a special SCART plug connector that fits onto all three of your AV plugs.

The picture won't be true SCART, but will slip a composite picture via the SCART socket.



Tales of the CRT

The hike in picture quality enjoyed by owners of an import machine can be demonstrated by comparing these untampered and unmodified screenshots of popular UK releases and their Japanese counterparts. As you will see, the success of the conversion is just as vital to the aesthetic of the finished composition (ahem) as the cost of the system for which you've opted.



WAVE RACE 64 (JAPAN)

Note here that the Japanese version already includes a slight border, because limiting the size of the graphics window allows for a corresponding increase in the game's running speed.



WAVE RACE 64 (UK)

One of the laziest conversions to date, rightly raising the hackles of our ever-vigilant letter-writing readership. Horrendous borders don't prevent the ocean turning into a ripple of Golden Syrup.



MARIO 64 (JAPAN)

The finest video game of all time, remember, seen as the world's press first judged it.



MARIO 64 (UK)

An interesting pastel interpretation, but still the finest video game of all time.



BLAST CORPS (US)

Now it gets interesting. Take a gander at a full screen, full speed slice of demolition from Rare's superb explode-a-thon.



BLAST CORPS (UK)

What's this? A full screen, nearly full speed, full monty of a conversion. Maybe those brainy chaps at Rare could teach Nintendo a thing or two...



STARFOX (JAPAN)

... Although you'd imagine that maintaining the frame rate of something as busy as this, with seemingly hundreds of enemies and laser pulses bouncing around, would be impossible to convert.



LYLAT WARS (UK)

Well, look at that. We reckon the bods at Nintendo have been taught a thing or two by Rare. There's really very little excuse for poor conversions after all, then, eh?

The list goes on, but an interesting trend emerges. Early Nintendo efforts have all suffered from troubled conversions, including Pilotwings and Mario Kart 64, while UK-based Rare's own

GoldenEye and Diddy Kong Racing are exemplary efforts. We'd like to presume that the most effective re-coding techniques involved are being made available to all N64 developers, so it will be

interesting to see if future third-party conversions actually render redundant one of the main arguments for import gaming.

SCART

If you own an import N64 but don't have an S-Video socket, this is the next best option. The initial problems with the N64's inability to produce an RGB signal hasn't prevented determined hobbyists from coming up with dedicated SCART leads, but be warned that the old SNES versions of multi-out-to-SCART won't work with the N64.



RF

All UK N64s come with an RF Modulator that slips into the multi-out socket on the back. This allows you to connect it to the basic aerial socket of any TV with a standard co-axial cable.

Audio

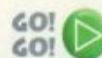
If using S-video and AV, you have the advantage of separate sound leads that can be used to drive a stereo directly through the auxiliary phono inputs. Unless your TV has excellent sound or is already wired up to separate speakers for the full Nicam digital stereo malarkey (not unusual, if you can afford expensive TVs in the first



place), it might be worth investing in a pair of cheap PC speakers to stick on either side of your armchair. Some SCART leads will also feature separate phono outputs (it's dead easy to wire this yourself if you're a dab hand with a soldering iron).

YOU'LL FIND IT ALL IN HERE

• If you're interested in joining the import set (and being able to boast to all your mates about the games you've got that they have to wait for) you can order adaptors, imported games and US and Japanese N64s and games through many of N64 Magazine's advertisers. Flick through the pages for more details!



Gentlemen of import

If you're going to become a regular import gamer, you'll want to acquaint yourself with the services of one or more traders in US and Japanese hardware. We like to know the types that buy up classified ad space in the back of **N64** Magazine, so we questioned a couple of popular gaming merchants – New Generation Consoles of Leeds, and Gamefreaks of Bristol – on the import scene as they perceived it.

Who are your customers, and why do they buy import games?

NGC: They're 20-35 years old, and most of them are buying games to run on their import machines.

GF: They're young, with lots of cash, and they know what they want – your typical early adopters. Basically, they can't wait to own the games. You buy on import and you get the games early.

Do your customers generally have import machines, or do they use adaptors? Are there any drawbacks to using adaptors?

GF: Generally, they have an NTSC machine – which they've had from day one. We find, in the shop, that the earliest converters can still manage to run some of the latest third party titles, but Nintendo's own carts cause the problems by constantly changing their lock-outs. It's probably to do with cost: Nintendo themselves can afford to keep upgrading their security, but it's not as important for third parties when they've got other expenses to consider first.

NGC: We've sold something like 3,000 import machines and 7,000-8,000 converters. We were first to produce an adaptor for the N64. It's unavoidable but you find, in time, that a converter doesn't always work with every new game. *Yoshi's Story* probably won't.

What's the advantage of import gaming when compared to official releases? Any disadvantages you acknowledge?

GF: Apart from getting the games early, you've got the advantage of NTSC – it's full screen and full speed. Disadvantages? Not with the American side, but the Japanese stuff, yeah, the text can definitely present a problem.

NGC: The Japanese text is a disadvantage, but there are plenty of hardcore gamers out there who want the games as soon as they appear – regardless.

What's the oddest thing you've ever been asked to sell, order or procure?

GF: Nothing odd, really. Though we do get asked for comics and figures, sometimes manga – merchandise that ties in with video games, quite often.

NGC: Er, a pink joystick, once. Mmm.



△ The import games scene has just about managed to shed its reputation for being a bit 'dodgy'.

Is there a future in import gaming?

GF: Definitely. It's down to the manufacturers – unless they could do worldwide releases on the same day, there's always going to be an import scene. What was the difference between the Japanese and UK appearance of *Mario 64*? A year, almost?

NGC: It's thriving. We were still doing good business on SNES and Mega Drive imports, although that's tailed off a bit now. As long as there's that gap between releases in different countries, you'll always have importers providing for the hardcore gamer.

What were your highlights and lowlights of 1997? Any recommendations for 1998?

GF: *Yoshi's Story* and *Zelda* for 1998. Highlights of 1997? Ooh, *GoldenEye*, *ISS64*. There weren't many lowlights, but *MK Trilogy*, definitely. And *Cruis'n USA*. In both those cases, we took one look and didn't even bother getting them in for the shop shelves...

NGC: *Starfox*, *GoldenEye* and *DK Racing* were our best-sellers of '97. We were quite disappointed by *Lamborghini* and *Dual Heroes*, and *Cruis'n USA* was another low. But for '98, we've already had so many inquiries about *Banjo-Kazooie* that it's looking quite big.

Gentlemen, thank you.



△ An industrial unit of the type often probably occupied by games importing companies. This is where it all happens!

* NGC is Next Generation Consoles, of 3 The Parade, Stonegate Road, Leeds LS6 4HZ. They can be reached on 0113 230 6007 (fax: 0113 230 6305) from 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, 12pm-6pm Sun.

* GF is Gamefreaks, who have an emporium at 20 North Street, Bedminster, Bristol BS3 1HW, tel. 01179 533935 and a 'presence' at www.Gamefreaks.co.uk.