

# Made in Japan



## Best of the Worst: A Trip into the World of Klassic Kusoge

A significant chunk of North American game collectors have no great interest in acquiring Japan-exclusive video games. After all, one of collecting's most compelling attributes is nostalgia and Americans who never saw these games to begin with are unlikely to develop a compulsion for imports. Fewer still seek out the most extraordinarily awful among these games that never made it to America, largely based on cultural differences or the fact that they quite simply weren't good enough.

For those fans who do develop an interest in collecting imports, they must eventually face a cruel reality: given their exotic nature, many collectors develop unrealistic expectations and are disappointed when the game finally arrives. The good news? This is not necessarily a bad thing.

In Japan, in fact, bad games actually have their own subculture and many infamous titles enjoy a loyal following. No matter which console you're interested in, you'll discover abundant amounts of Kusoge (literally "crap games") happily waiting to be sampled for their assorted quirks and so-bad-it's-fun design touches. Of course, while most of these games aren't intentionally bad, they generally lack enough gaming meat to make completing them a satisfying experience. Not enough protein.

Of course, developers don't decide to make awful games out of the blue. While time constraints, internal struggles and cash flow can be partly to blame, you can chalk many kusoge up to a dev team's ambition outstripping things like programming skills, strong QA (quality assurance) and capable art direction. In the case of intentional kusoge, it's more a case of Japanese standards of humor being a bit more appreciative of what would be considered odd content at best by Western audiences.

Let's start with Nintendo's Famicom. One of that system's most infamous kusoge is Hot-B's 1987 RPG, *Hoshi wo Miru Hito* (loosely translated as *Stargazer*), notorious for being inferior in nearly every aspect. How bad is this one? For starters, how about eye-searing maps with mismatched day-glo colors; invisible towns, random warps to unknown locations and the fact that you can actually lose key inventory items, forcing a restart from the very beginning. Even worse, the combat difficulty is skewed in favor of monsters and the lack of battery backup coupled with a password system that actually erases your progress (!) makes the game practically unplayable. While searching for some sort of walkthrough a few years back, I found out that some Japanese fans with too much time on their hands actually remade the game for Windows with 16-bit visuals, a much better inventory system and a more reliable save system. Talk about dedication!

Moving onto the Super Famicom, one of my favorite bad games on the SFC is *Bishin Densetsu Zoku* by Magifact, a unique mix of Mode-7 rac-

ing and 2D fighting. The game seamlessly rocks the "so bad it's good" vibe thanks to the overall outrageousness that derives from wrecking your car mid-race and flying out of the driver's seat directly into a fighting sequence. Sure, most developers of the era never seriously considered mixing driving and fighting games, this is great, mindlessly bad fun while it lasts.

While a ton of kusoge can be had on the cheap, many of these games can be a bit expensive due to low print runs and/or general demand from collectors. PC-Engine collectors might want to keep an eye out (or, perhaps, avoid entirely) *Ane-San*, a pricey fighting game featuring tough females that look like they came from a prison movie (and not the good kind!). Chunky sprites, bad animation and hand cramping controls await anyone who snaps up this one. *Baby Jo* is another one of those "what were they thinking?" games that's going to cost you a pretty penny just so you can play it once and put it up on a shelf where it belongs.

Although it's not as bad as some folks say, the arcade-style puzzle game *Circus Lido* has generally been too expensive for curious cheap-skates to check out. Nowhere near as costly, *Wonder Momo* has you play as a schoolgirl who transforms into a short skirt-wearing heroine that walks back and forth on a small stage kicking enemies and avoiding projectiles. Namco actually produced a couple of hit or miss PC-E games, but this one stands out as one of their least successful (yet quite collectable) efforts. Of course, no kusoge collection would be complete without a wallet-hurting copy of *Toilet Kids*, a simple-looking top-down shooter that features flying feces in all manner of ship shapes. Its actually more shocking to read about so if you've got a sense of humor and enough cash, definitely track this one down.

Over on the Mega Drive, all you need to say is *Zero Wing* and you'll get a chuckle out of folks that haven't even played the game yet thanks to the fact that it inspired the "All Your Base Are Belong to Us" craze that exploded over the Internet back in 2001. This Taoplan shooter isn't really a kusoge, but the botched translation for the UK version's cut scenes generated worldwide notoriety and sent the price soaring. People were even mistakenly paying outrageous sums for the Japanese version despite the obvious fact that it didn't have that badly translated text. Definitely go for the UK version, as unlike many UK MD games, it plays on a US Genesis without a converter cart. A tiny bit more expensive (and a genuinely lousy game) is *Divine Sealing*, an unlicensed arcade-style shooter that's notorious for flashes of anime gal nudity between stages. It's not at all sexy and the gameplay is so woeful you'll probably want to hit yourself in the head a few times with the game box. However, given that the box is made from cheap cardboard (think late Genesis releases) and not the usual hard plastic, you'll only be knocking down that resale value with each blow. While the Mega CD had a mostly decent lineup during its short lifespan, I'd have to rate *Cyborg 009* as a flat-out stinker. The intro and cut scenes have a nice retro look to them, but stiff controls, animation and bland visuals don't improve the overall sense of mediocrity.



For you 3DO collectors looking for old cheese of questionable quality, I'll recommend Autobahn Tokio, a 1995 driving game with four cars, three tracks, two game modes and no redeeming features. Like many mid-'90s polygon-based games, it seems as if the developer had little to no 3D experience. You can usually find this one cheap when it does show up, so it's not a total loss. For a more worthy buy, the low print run of Short WARP (only 10,000 were produced) makes it a lot more exciting to seek out. This collection of nine bizarre mini-games and demos is a great example of intentional kusoge as seen through WARP's small staff led up by Kenji Eno, one of the more intriguing game creators out there. WARP only made a handful of "serious" games (D, Enemy Zero, D2) along with a few odd puzzle, adventure or action games, but their wacky side definitely came through in the stuff they did in their spare time.

When the PlayStation and Saturn eras hit, finding kusoge became even easier, thanks to developers struggling to rush together 3D games on more powerful consoles with higher profiles. Sony launched window titles such as Twin Goddesses, Cosmic Race, Not Treasure Hunter, Metal Jacket and Exector which are all sufficiently terrible in their own ways to warrant a purchase. Interestingly enough, Metal Jacket, a "Real-Time Battle Simulator" featuring Gundam-like mechs was actually going to be released in the US at one point. Based on the facts that the game is fairly bad but its menus are entirely in English, I'm thinking this was more a decision to quickly get product on store shelves rather than release a quality game. Exector always cracks me up because it's from Arc System Works, the same folks that would come up with the excellent Guilty Gear series of 2D fighting games. This particular game is also a 3D mech shooter, but everything just goes "boom" from the moment you press Start. Music-savvy gamers might recognize level titles as variations on hard-rock or metal tunes, but the blend of overly colorful and too bland visuals, reappearing enemies and a strict time limit that will force slow gamers to replay the entire thing from the start can make for a hair-pulling experience.

Two of the best bad games on the PS One are Pepsiman and Bakusou Dekotora Densetsu: Art Truck Battle. Pepsiman is a Crash Bandicoot-style run 'n jump that's as flat out hysterically funny to watch as it is to play. Unlike the trio of Burger King games released here, Pepsiman rocks because it's not only a blast to play, it doesn't wear out its welcome; it sticks to one style of gameplay and nails it perfectly. Art Truck Battle is a wild mix of tractor-trailer racing, with both simulation and mini-game action as you play a tough Japanese trucker in his tricked out rig. The game spawned a few sequels, but I prefer the original because it was just that. One truly unique game, Asmik Ace's LSD, could be called a "false" kusoge since its quirky visual style tends to throw people off before they even play the game. The game, a "dream simulator" based on a journal kept by one of the dev team members, is an abstract masterpiece that's impossible to describe without playing or seeing it in action. Anyway, it's incredibly rare, extremely expensive and comes in two versions—the standard game or in a dual disc case with a limited edition music CD. Maybe if you're good, I'll whip up an entire column on this one in the future.

Kusoge abound on the Saturn as well, but I'll stick with four for space's sake. Jung Rhythm is a superbly annoying rhythm game that's a weak Parappa the Rapper knockoff following a yappy Japanese schoolgirl as she goes about her daily routine. Despite some comic moments here and there, the musical selection ranges from bad rapping to happy J-Pop to bad rocking to worse J-Rock. The controls are erratic at best. Even worse, the characters are all unappealing and at the end of the day it works better as a party game where everyone can get a laugh at the onscreen antics. Death Crimson, possibly the worst light gun game made for the system, was at one time among the hardest Saturn games to track down, commanding prices that sometimes rose over

\$100 for a sealed copy. These days you can probably pick a used one up for around twenty bucks or so, but be prepared for a slow moving, yucky-looking time in front of your TV. Besides, the game is controller throwing hard to the point that you think your gun or pad isn't working correctly.

Speaking of shooting stuff, Banpresto's JSWAT cements the case that Japanese programmers in the mid to late '90s should have stayed far away from the FPS genre. Like Expert on the PlayStation, the game takes familiar genre elements and mangles them with poor graphics, spotty hit detection and an amusingly over the top attempt to capture the feel of a US made game or Hollywood action flick. At least Expert had a mildly competent mix of 2D sprites in a 3D environment - JSWAT's digitized characters and too tiny visor viewpoint make it look like a handheld game blown up to full screen size. Finally, I'll give Welcome House a shove into the spotlight. Imagine an '80's sitcom complete with laugh track mixed with a cartoon filled with fairly easy to spot slapstick gags. The result is as unfunny as you can imagine, but there was actually a sequel made that's not a hell of a lot better—it just looks nicer and has more explosions. Good thing developer Gust was better at building RPGs.

As far as Dreamcast games go, Sengoku Turb and Undercover A.D. 2025 Kel are two distinct shades of bad that are both worth a peek. The former is an action/RPG with intentionally childish 3D visuals while the latter is a mind bogglingly lame action/adventure. Both games are memorable for exactly the same reason: Turb's offbeat look and semi-serious plotline and Undercover's sexy heroine and her detective work are both crippled by some of the most counter-intuitive controls you'll ever hate having to struggle with. Out of the two, you can actually finish Turb with a bit of work, but Undercover's overly fierce (yet dumb) enemy AI and some terrible camerawork will have you reaching for the power switch about four or so hours in.

As for PlayStation 2 games, well, a larger library means kusoge are rampant with a ton to choose from in just about every genre. Feel free to try inexpensive games such as Sky Surfer; either of the two Hresvelgr games (Gust again!); Project Minerva or the harder to find 2000 release Kensetsu Juuki Kenka Battle: Buchigire Kongou!! The latter is a fighting game with anime characters going at it using construction equipment instead of fists. At least UK gamers got this one as BCV: Battle Construction Vehicles back in 2003.

Perhaps the biggest cultural difference when it comes to kusoge is its overall acceptance by Japanese gamers. While publishers on both sides of the ocean trot out multimillion ad dollar campaigns for "A" releases, it's rare to see a low-quality or budget game get much play stateside. Meanwhile, smart Japanese publishers can produce and print kusoge in smaller amounts, turning a profit from cheap titles with shorter development schedules. D3 Publisher's Simple 1500 and 2000 series of games originally started out as a budget lineup of board, puzzle, racing or card games on the PlayStation and Game Boy Advance before branching out to nearly every format imaginable. To date, the company has published budget games and reprints for every major console in Japan (except the original Xbox) and a few of their ongoing series such as The Chikyuu Bouei Gun (Earth Defense Force) and The OneeChanbara (roughly translated as "Elder Sister Sword Fighting") have become cult hits amongst import fans. Since these games generally cost around \$25 - \$30 depending on which import shop you frequent (Play-Asia is a great source), you can beef up your collection without paying a premium. Granted, your collection will be packed with a chunk of "Grade B" gaming goodness (or badness, as the case may be), but as long as you're getting the most out of what you're buying, that's all that really matters.

VGC

