

# Preserving Japanese Indie Games at BitSummit Drift 2024

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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No country has contributed more to the global development of videogames than Japan. The nation has inexorably shaped the landscape through innovations in the arcade, at home, and on mobile platforms.

However, the unavoidable truth is that videogames are disappearing (Newman, 2013; Pennington, 2022). Future generations are at risk of losing access to vital histories of Japanese videogames. Where English-language game preservation or history does exist, narratives privilege American or Eurocentric perspectives with little understanding of game development practice and culture in Japan (Pennington, 2022). As a consequence, in tandem with the fast-approaching unplayability of digital games, creative knowledge from Japanese indie developers is becoming lost forever.

To address these challenges, Michael Pennington and James Newman – with co-funding from the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation – undertook research in July 2024 to document a range of Japanese indie game creators. The work explores how these overlooked developers consider preserving their legacies and materials from game production (Sotamaa and Svelch, 2021) and game exhibition. This talk represents an invaluable opportunity to disseminate this research, expand upon the conclusions of the project, and dissect the myriad challenges faced in producing documentary preservation.

Based on methodological underpinnings within unique cultural heritage projects such as the Animal Crossing Diaries (National Videogame Museum, 2022), a core output was the production of oral history interviews with members of the Japanese indie game development community. These interviews took place in Kyoto during BitSummit Drift 2024, the largest gathering of indie game developers in Japan. Adding to this comprehensive work, the project also documented audio and video gameplay

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of grassroots indie games made by Japanese developers. These documentary materials are to be curated to an open access audio and video archive in partnership with the Videogame Heritage Society and National Videogame Museum, UK.

The project focused its attention on Japanese indie developers within the often overlooked non-commercial alternative-controller game space. Despite a range of interested parties trying to preserve aspects of videogame history, crucial parts of that past are slipping through the cracks. Due to their uncommercial nature, alternative-controller indie videogames made in Japan are highly vulnerable to this slippage, particularly with English-language audiences who would be unfamiliar with this work. This research project makes significant strides in archiving how these experimental and experiential grassroots videogames can still be remembered through audio visual documentation as its own act of preservation and collection (Kavanagh et al., 2024).

The project's interviews explored attitudes, approaches and challenges to the long-term preservation of alternative-controller videogames made in Japan. Within many of the main case studies conducted, Japanese indie developers expressed concern that their games would soon become unplayable, either due to breakage or being unable to continue working on the game due to financial constraints (Pennington and Newman, 2025). Creating audio-visual documentary evidence of these games being played is, therefore, a crucial aspect of how these potentially unplayable games can be potentially preserved and remembered.

When taken together in their grouping at BitSummit Drift 2024, the alternative-controller space at the event feels akin to a carnival or fairground. When documenting these games, the festival space fosters an impermanent feeling of joy pervading across audiences through the act of simply playing or watching/hearing others play (ibid). In its audio and visual materials, the project captures these games in their highly specific and culturally distinct context as a unique moment in time in Kyoto in July 2024.

That these experiences are so fleeting, and almost instantly disappear once the festival is over, only adds to the urgency of considering how we can preserve or collect these experimental and experiential experiences (ibid). By documenting gameplay through open access documentary materials, and centring Japanese perspectives on the challenges of preservation from an indie perspective, the project hopes to offer a potent approach to preserving grassroots play and spectating in a distinct way.

Ultimately, this is a multifaceted documentary preservation project. The research records the creative and innovative games made by Japanese indie developers, and places their perspectives and experiences at its centre. However, the project also captures how these games were spectated and played with by audiences at BitSummit Drift 2024. By engaging in discussion with developers and demonstrating the environment in which these games were played with and spectated, the research addresses the significant everyday challenges of preservation at a grassroots level, creating an audio and visual archive as its own act of preservation when these games can no longer be accessed. Lastly, as its documentary materials of a unique event, the project archives and commemorates BitSummit's storied history as a unique festival that celebrates the very best of Japanese-made indie games.

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