

SCROLL



SUMMER



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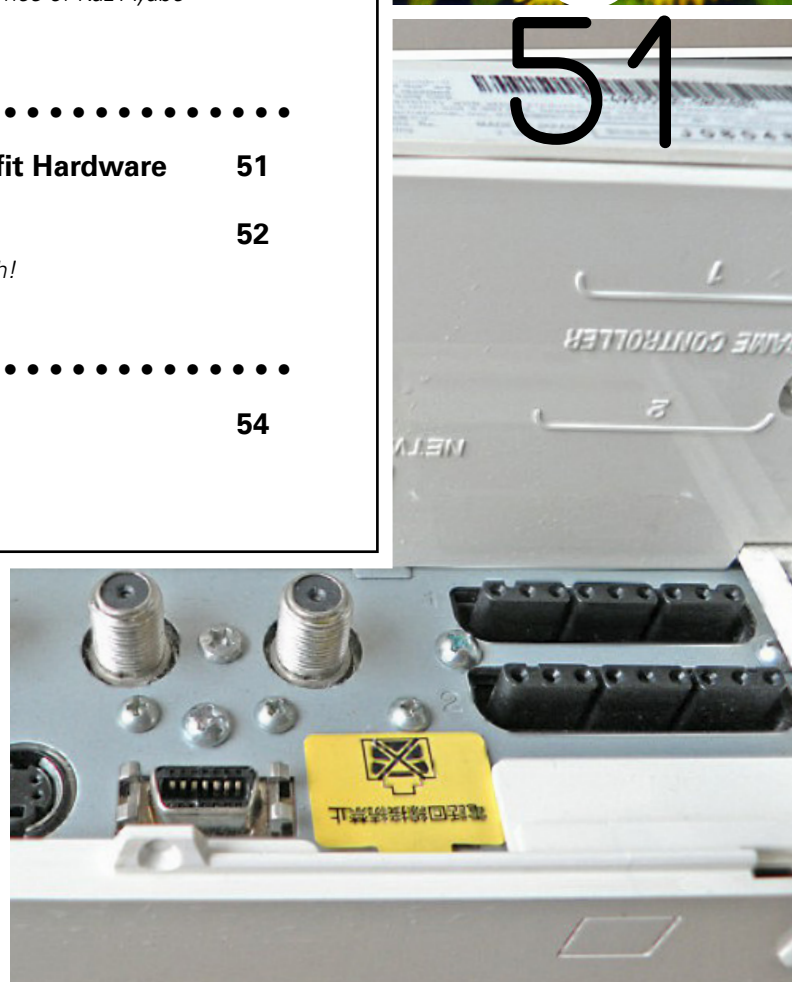
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SCROLL

SMALL WORLD

Two of the world's most beloved Disney games are re-entering canon around the same time. But should the vault stay open?

It's well known by now that Disney magic can extend to video games. Well, maybe not so much today, but certainly back in the 8- and 16-bit heyday. It was companies like Capcom, Sega, and Virgin who more often than not gave a damn when it came to making games based on Disney properties. Recently, Sega and Capcom both reclaimed Disney licenses for two games that previously proved themselves worthy to have the licenses in the first place. Because of that, people remember them well, and the revived Disney classic on Sega's side is *Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse*.

Regarded as one of Sega's best Disney games for Genesis, *Castle of Illusion* made itself known with its detailed and colorful stages, and was one of the system's most enjoyable all-ages action games before *Sonic the Hedgehog* came along. Mickey's quest through the eponymous castle to rescue Minnie starts out gloomy, but inside the castle is a variety of themed stages that lend a certain Disney-like levity to the action.

Sega's remake, set to be released digitally later in 2013, transforms the game into a full 3D spectacle, while maintaining the 2D platforming gameplay. Sega's Australian studio is handling development (the original version was an internal Japanese project, natch), with redone music by Grant Kirkhope, formerly of Rare and no stranger to making music for games starring saucer-eyed animal characters.

But while the 3D treatment looks spectacular, it's never too easy to translate 2D action mechanics to a 3D space, even if it's kept on the same plane. As a result, the new *Castle of Illusion* looks exactly like one would imagine a 3D remake of that universe, but whether it will really play as tightly by release is still a big question mark. It's one thing to be faithful to a game's world after nostalgia has already made it better in people's minds, but it's another to make sure it feels identical, if not darn close, because nostalgia doesn't forgive slippery controls. (Then again, good or bad, people will just beg for *Quackshot* next.)





Meanwhile, Capcom and developer WayForward are working on *DuckTales Remastered*, a remake of the *DuckTales* NES game that has since been placed in the upper echelon of licensed games by anyone who was alive in 1989, so imagine their reaction to a revival once thought impossible. WayForward already addresses the concern with Sega's *Castle of Illusion* by making the characters 2D sprites while the stage environments are 3D, lessening the challenge of replicating the original version's physics; a crucial consideration when Scrooge McDuck's pogo jumping in the original game was so sublime to use.

But the developers have also taken it upon themselves to modify much of the rest of the game: extending stage designs, adding boss fights, and piling on context via story sequences. A little set-up of Scrooge's quest isn't bad—it's not like everyone has a clear memory of what the *DuckTales* was exactly about—and the original voice actors from the TV show have been brought on to bring their characters (back) to life, but incidental dialogue floods *Remastered*, overexplaining every little event in the game, whereas in the original, it was pretty obvious what treasure you picked up, and

so you were on your way. Part of this was because of younger kids in focus tests not being used to games that don't hold their hand a little—understandable, but the question remains: is it all really worth it when the people that get excited for these titles are the nerds in their 20s and 30s hollering at the top of their lungs when they first hear the *DuckTales* theme song play in a reveal trailer?

In the case of *DuckTales*, it doesn't seem to be much of a "remaster" as it is a repurposing of its content for today's generation of video games, and all of the expectations that come with that. Aiming high to satisfy all ages of players is noble, but the people already intimately familiar with the original versions of these games will more than likely know what they're getting into.

In the big picture, though, there's little point in decrying remakes, good or bad, because the worst attempts boost the value of the original so much more. It is however interesting to wonder if the effect of a merely okay remake can be measured the same way—fans could get angry, but would they rush back to the originals? Here, it may depend on the strength of that Disney magic.





13 YEARS AGO, AN UNASSUMING JAPANESE PLAYSTATION GAME MADE CHILDHOOD MEMORIES



INTO DIGITIZED NOSTALGIA—AND BECAME ONE OF THE MEDIUM'S MOST BEAUTIFUL FRANCHISES.



IT'S CALLED **BOKU NO NATSUYASUMI**; OR, IN ENGLISH, **MY SUMMER VACATION**. AND IT'S QUITE A TRIP.

SUNFLOWER CHILD

MY SUMMER VACATION

PS1 • 2000



MY SUMMER VACATION PORTABLE: THE INSECT PROFESSOR AND THE SECRET OF MT. TEPPEN!!

PSP • 2006



What was the best summer vacation you ever had? For some, it was a trip to a theme park, or going camping, or jetting away to another country. "Summer vacation" is usually romanticized one way or another—even the most mundane of family road trips become canonized in our memories. Summer vacation has its representations in film, but games rarely touched on realistic cultural subjects. That is until Sony published a curious little PlayStation adventure game called *Boku no Natsuyasumi*; *My Summer Vacation*, or "*Bokunatsu*" for short.

Set in 1975, *My Summer Vacation* re-opens a window on the nostalgia of a generation that grew up, but it does it with respect and generosity—there is no symbolic blowing of dust off of an old photo album, and there is no message about how great things "used to be;" this is very much a singular story about a little boy's vacation from home, and though it is presented as a recollection, it's still from within the worldview of the boy at the time. The boy is Boku, nine years of age, whose name is also a boyish word for "I" in Japanese. The name makes him somewhat of an avatar, seeing as the game's target audience was men in their 30s, for whom this kind of story and setting would make sense, and tells them that this could have been them; that it might be "me." Certain parts of the story are interjected with narrations from the adult Boku, who looks back on the observations he made at the time.

When we first meet Boku, he's snoozing in his dad's car during the long trip into the countryside to his aunt and uncle's house. Boku's a city boy, so he doesn't know quite what to expect. His mother is pregnant with a new child—Boku's first sibling—and so the parents decide that the best thing for Boku would be to meet and have fun with the extended family, at their house in the country. The opening credits show the small family car puttering through the countryside as Boku opens his eyes



SUMMER MEMORIES

SCROLL readers and backers share their favorite summer-related gaming moments throughout most of this feature.

Kurt Adam: I finally got the most out of my copy of Boktai when I went to the beach. I sat on the porch killing vampires with





BOKU HAS ALL
OF AUGUST TO
MAKE THE BEST OF
HIS TIME IN THE
COUNTRYSIDE

and marvels at the wide open fields and the mountains in the distance.

Once Boku and Dad arrive, everyone is introduced to one another. The uncle, Yusaku Sorano, works as a potter, and his wife Kaoru (Boku's dad's younger sister) is the archetypal housewife, though in the past she worked as a photographer's assistant. They have two girls, as well: Moe, 15, and Shirabe, a year younger than Boku. Boku acts incredibly shy during this first meeting, though he knows to be polite, and will later open up and become quite inquisitive. But the nervousness of staying the whole summer with strangers—relatives, yes, but practically strangers at this point—keeps Boku restrained. There's no teary goodbye once Dad leaves, either.

Soon enough, Boku is shown the bedroom where he'll be staying, curiously already decorated with "boy stuff," plus a desk and a picture diary where he can recount the events of his summer with words and drawings. Japanese summer vacations typically hover around one full month, and happen within the school year, so Boku has all of August to make the best of his time in the countryside.

In terms of the gameplay, this means padding the diary with notable story events. If Shirabe takes Boku out on a tour of the area for the day, that ends up being the subject of his diary entry later that night—or the first time he catches a beetle, or goes fishing, or meets a new friend, and so on. Beyond that is a slate of extra-special events that dictate the game's ultimate ending, which give you a handful of different outcomes of Boku's adulthood, depending. If nothing particularly interesting happens to Boku and the player ends up exploring the area normally, then the diary entry is sparse and boring, not affecting progress in any way. Sometimes that's

unavoidable, but as long as the player hits enough special events throughout the game, then they can ensure the best post-credits ending scene. (For what it's worth, successive games in the series basically stuck to one standard ending.) Those scenes are all different, from showing the office where Boku will end up stuck as an adult, to a lovely scene of a sunflower, illustrating Boku's love for nature, inspired by that fateful summer.

After settling in to his home away from home, it's not long before Boku is put to work, in a manner of speaking. After a day or two, Yusaku asks Boku if he likes flowers. Uh, yes? Why not, right? The player can choose "yes" or "no," but if Boku says yes, he's then inducted as the family's new flower waterer, complete with a round of applause. On the side of the house is a lattice with a few vines of morning glories not yet bloomed. Boku can do a favor for his aunt and uncle by watering the flowers every day, using the nearby water spout and hose to haphazardly spray water onto the lattice (the classic little-boy approach to any household chore). If he's consistent, within a couple of weeks the flowers will bloom, and in return Boku will receive from his aunt a few snapshots of the flowers to take home.

Two other routines are put upon Boku as the days go on: a big beehive not far from the corn patch spooks him and keeps him from proceeding. However, Boku builds the courage to poke at it with his bug net, which upsets the bees, but nonetheless sets things in motion. Jostling the hive three times (once daily) finally knocks it down, delighting Boku and letting him go deeper into the woods (the bees immediately begin rebuilding, but the new hive never gets big enough to be scary again). Then, another impediment: a stream that blocks another area and no bridge in sight, though a

large, apparently dead tree nearby would make a good log bridge. Unfortunately, Boku has no way to cut it down—that is until he sees his uncle chopping wood one afternoon, and the following evening he hangs up the hatchet in the family shed. Boku's told not to use the tool, but he can still sneak into the shed and grab it. Cutting the tree takes a while, though, as Boku can only put in a few good whacks before tiring out. More daily dedication is required before the tree is weak enough to fall over and become the log bridge Boku wanted all along.

Boku continues exploring the surrounding area, eventually taking a closer look at the underside of the nearby highway overpass. Boxes and old cushions are set up as furniture, suggesting that someone makes this their private little hideout. The next day, he returns to the spot to find three other boys around his age. Their names, not unlike Boku's, are descriptive: There's the strong leader, Guts; jovial and rotund Fat, and the nerdy Megane (Glasses). They make fast friends with Boku, and invite him to join in on their beetle sumo matches, held on top of a tambourine in the middle of their hideout.

In Japan, collecting the country's large beetles and pitting them against each other is a favorite pastime among adolescent kids, and in *My Summer Vacation*, it's taken to the next logical level. Throughout the game, Boku can catch butterflies and other insects, but can also acquire various kinds of beetles by checking certain trees dotted around the game map. Then, by taking them to the hideout, Boku can pit his beetles against the others', fighting for dominance in three ranking ladders. The beetles can't be directly controlled, so each match is part luck, as you never exactly know which opponent is going to pull out which bug. Tapping them to make them more aggressive may turn the tide in your favor, but

it also takes away some of your beetle's precious stamina meter. The entire tournament serves little purpose to the rest of the game, except in uncovering a secret area (to be covered here later), but is nonetheless a clever way to lighten up and extend the roster of activities in the game. Beyond the beetles, Boku can catch fish in the nearby creeks and ponds, as well as fly kites on a nearby cliff, with uncle Yusaku offering to make new designs out of a book of kites as needed.

One day during vacation, a priest makes his regular visit to the Sorano house, and gathers the family around their shrine for a prayer session. Boku, again a bit out of touch with rural life, is visibly a bit nervous, but after the priest leaves, we learn why Boku's room was custom-made for a boy's sensibilities: the aunt and uncle previously had a boy who had passed away, leaving their two girls as their only children. For Yusaku and Kaoru, Boku temporarily fills a void for them, and it's evident in the way he's accepted into their home.

A couple of weeks later at breakfast, Boku hears about someone who's set up a tent out by the waterfall. Though he's been there already, he hasn't been able to get across the creek that lies near the waterfall pond. But on that day, he can head back out and meet Saori, a young woman in university who's spending *her* summer vacation studying the paranormal. Saori is sure she's seen the spirit of a wolf around these parts, and has set up a booby-trapped camera in hopes of capturing it on film. She could be hard to take seriously, but in fact, Boku had encountered the ghost himself just a few days before. In time, Boku decides to help Saori by adding to her camera trap by making sugar water as bait. The encounters with the wolf are as close to fantasy the *My Summer Vacation* series would ever get, as successive sequels would stay firmly



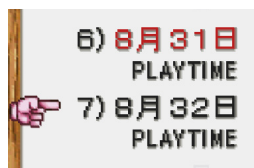
planted in reality. The ghost makes for a nice story purpose to keep Saori around, but Boku rarely sees her anywhere but sitting at her camping spot, enduring her teasing, but also endearing himself to her—when she leaves just before the end of vacation, Boku finds a touching goodbye note where her tent once stood.

And as for that creek, with a plank laid across the water, Boku can visit Saori whenever, and explore the additional paths ahead, including one that leads into a small cave that for some reason has an old English dictionary inside it. The gradual opening of blockades in *My Summer Vacation* is in the service of both story and gameplay: While the game clock moves automatically, Boku's access to the woods stays limited without the player seeking and activating story events, or performing the daily routines mentioned before. It's all required in order to see more of the surrounding area. Had the game been completely open, chances are good that you could get bored of the whole thing before reaching any important story events. Likewise, if Boku tries to head out too far past the boundaries of the house at night, his uncle runs after him and sends him back to the house without fail. Boku can only break the rules once, when the family leaves him home alone for the evening, letting him head to the creek and watch the fireflies.

At the beginning of the game, the places Boku can go are certainly nice and pretty, but the additional areas opened later in the game have one or two "special" screens that seem as if they've been engineered to look more impressive than the immediate area around the house. For example, when the big tree finally falls and creates a log bridge, Boku wanders into a giant field of sunflowers, and just a couple of screens later happens upon a small secluded beach, which leads to a cliff with a striking view of the horizon. None of that is viewable without making the effort to open the

MY SUMMER VACATION HANDBOOK

AUGUST 32: THE ENDLESS SUMMER

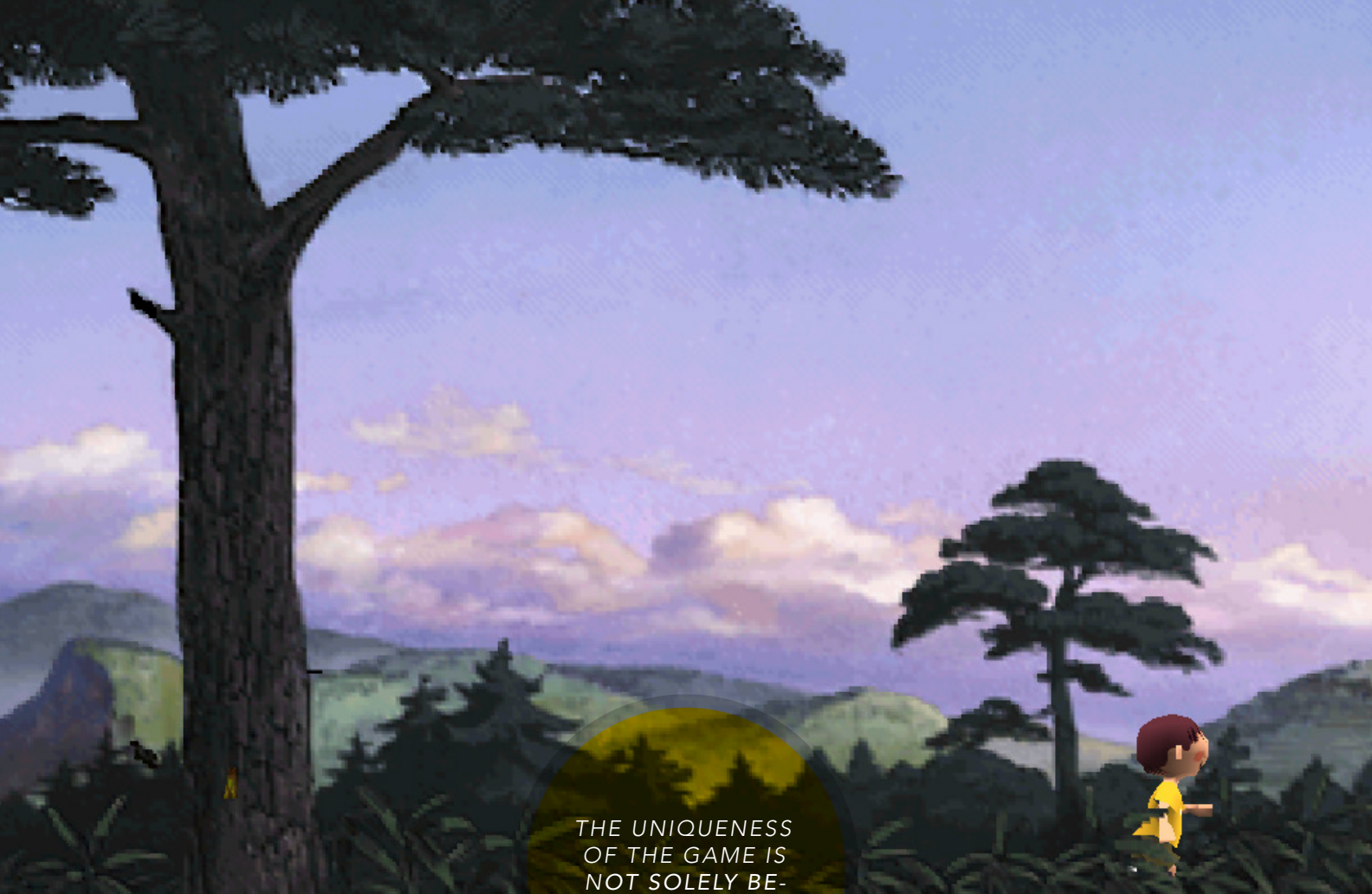


The original *My Summer Vacation* is a simple enough game, and is put together quite well. But even the tightest games hold potential bugs in their programs, and one (if not the only) known bug in the first version of *My Summer Vacation* is rather infamous. After loading a

"clear data" save file, players can back out from a menu they're not supposed to, which confuses the game enough to load the final day as a "normal" day, allowing the player to go to bed and save as usual.

Logically speaking, the game shouldn't work at that point, but instead it carries itself forward into "August 32nd," which begins as if Boku is still on vacation. However, as no story events were made for a day that doesn't exist, the logic of the game world becomes frayed, with Boku barely able to leave the house, and an uncle who darts around the screen when you talk to him. Amazingly, you can keep going into "August 33rd," where the character models appear with distorted textures, missing limbs, and other kinds of glitches that turn the previously pleasant game into a creepshow. The startling corruptions led to Japanese fans making light of the bug on the internet, most notably in a Niconico video that adds horror-movie editing and effects to footage of the glitches.





THE UNIQUENESS
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paths, but it makes it all the more rewarding, as if you truly are a child discovering private nooks and crannies in and around the woods, and wondering what, if anything, else is beyond the trees. It's not just about scenery, it's about how to compose it, which is a crucial in making each new discovery more impactful.

That feeling is a hallmark of the *My Summer Vacation* series, and within the games, it's punctuated by a secret "mountain" area positioned as a white whale of sorts. In this game, it's Mt. Teppen, a moderately sized hill that requires a bit of a climb, but is blocked by a wooden gate just ahead of Saori's tent, keeping stray observers like little boys away from potential danger. To gain access to the mountain, the player must defeat the grand champion of beetle sumo—in this case Guts, who then shows Boku a secret enclave that will help him get to the mountain—the real secret is to make a beeline back there the next day, then hop down the nearby well that leads to the cave near Saori; an early-bird shortcut that lets you get to the mountain path before the gate is closed. The path to the mountain is steep, but progressively more gorgeous up through the time Boku reaches the peak, which in a way symbolizes the peak of his vacation.

But scenery is still mere backdrops for the characters, who have their own wrinkles. Older cousin Moe faces trouble with her high school entrance exams, and Boku can sometimes talk to her as she plays her clarinet on the back porch, but for half the game she's stowed away in her bedroom, often lying on the bed depressed. Uncle Yusaku is friendly but spends the day working on his pottery. And Kaoru generally sticks to the housewife role; disappointing when you know about her past job in photography,

moreso when you learn about the son who passed on. Yet for young and naive Boku, it's a beautiful, enlightening month of adventure. In the last days of August, Dad calls with news that Mom gave birth, and now little Boku won't be the little one anymore.

On August 30th, Boku wakes up to find that Shirabe has gone missing. He finds one of her hair ribbons, and sets out to track her down. Eventually, he finds her at the big sunflower field. Ever since Boku arrived, she acted distant and prickly towards him, but while she may outwardly not care about him, she's glad he's around, and doesn't really want him to leave. With that, Saori leaving, and the new sibling, it's one more bittersweet event leading to August 31st, when Dad comes back to take Boku home. As the car drives away, Boku looks back to see the Soranos waving goodbye, and adult Boku's narration ends with the thought that his summer in the country was one he'd never forget.

The magic of *My Summer Vacation* is not solely because of the time period. It's easy to think Boku would enjoy the outside more, considering the limited consumer technology of 1975, but even with today's widespread distractions, kids can have meaningful summer experiences like Boku's—all they need is the chance.



AYABE'S COMMENT

The first My Summer Vacation is the most sentimental My Summer Vacation. I originally wanted to create a more energetic game, however, since I'm from Hokkaido, which has a very short summer, it turned out to be very sentimental instead. Nevertheless, this is my favorite My Summer Vacation game. There are parts of the game that I feel are incomplete, but those incomplete elements are part of what I like about it.

TURNING TIDES

MY SUMMER VACATION 2: THE SEA ADVENTURE CHAPTER PS2 • 2002



MY SUMMER VACATION PORTABLE 2: THE RIDDLING SISTERS AND THE SECRET OF THE SUNKEN SHIP! PSP • 2010



After such a magical game like *My Summer Vacation*, where do you go next? Make it a year or two later, where Boku has *another* transformative summer? Jump forward 30 years and make it about Boku Jr. and *his* transformative summer? Those seem like the obvious choices for a sequel, at least in the traditional sense. But in the game business, nothing is ever really written in stone, especially when it comes to follow-ups—this is a world where we have 15 *Final Fantasy* games with new heroes and settings every time.

My Summer Vacation 2 uses a *Final Fantasy*-like approach the series would stick with: it's a new setting (a village on the shores of the Izu peninsula), with new supporting characters, but it is again August 1975, and Boku returns, again as a nine year-old boy staying with his aunt and uncle for summer vacation. The only difference is the color of his shirt. "Bold" may not be the word to describe it, but this was certainly an unexpected way to go for a sequel to a game that emphasized story and characters. And yet it makes perfect sense: the original Boku ended his first summer vacation as somewhat of a changed person, and the endings make that clear—to revisit the character at a later time and expect the same result is destroying the message of the original. Furthermore, if Boku can be considered an avatar, then he should be able to be placed in any situation, even in the same time period. Of course, as a result, we now have a superhero comic book-style series of parallel universes with multiple Bokus. Though as the games quickly established, it's not all about the boy, anyway.

When we first see Boku this time, he's without a father by his side, instead taking a ferry by himself to the village of Fumi, along with a teenage girl named Yasuko, who lives there with her grandpa and little sister Hikari. When Boku and his new friend arrive, they're immediately greeted by their respective





families. Boku's aunt, uncle and cousins are the Arase family: wife Mitsuko, husband Genta, and their two boys Takeshi and Shigeru—Boku is right in between those two agewise, so there's no danger of them not getting along. Genta is a bit of a loud and brash sort, though quite friendly, and those traits were definitely carried on to his sons. Even Mitsuko is more expressive than her counterpart from the last game, though she would have to be in order to keep up with the men of the house.

The Arases run the Akane House, an inn just off to the side of the Fumi dock. The three-floor establishment houses the family on the second floor, with the main kitchen and dinner table below, and guest rooms and bathroom on the top floor. The layout of the house is almost haphazard, and a huge change from the modest house of the first game. Not only is it bigger, but it allows guests to come in and out regularly. It also increases the number of bathrooms, which greatly helps you experience one of the more delightfully realistic features of the first two games: after Boku takes a whiz, the controller briefly vibrates.

The guests who join Boku at the inn during summer vacation include Simon, a tall, blond Australian photographer (though clearly voiced by an American); Yoshika, a free-spirited young woman who also plays the guitar; Yasuko and Hikari's mother Shizue, with whom they have a strained relationship; and a couple others who don't stay around that long. The cast really ballooned in *My Summer Vacation 2*—all told, the number of characters who aren't Boku tops out at 18; over 20 if you count the new characters added to the PSP version. That means players can have much more to see and do in an average day, though luckily, checking off certain story events is not nearly as important to the ending in this sequel.

After Boku is acquainted with the family, he continues to talk

to Yasuko, who progressively opens up about her life to the little boy. Not that she becomes dependent on him, exactly, but to her, Boku is a fortunate rock to lean on every day or so, when he comes to visit her in the sunlit back room of her house. She goes to school in Tokyo, making the commute to and from Fumi a little hard to deal with, along with her frequently absent mother, who visits the town (and stays at Akane House) mainly to visit the grave of her dead husband.

Yasuko keeps a brave face, though, and tries to hard to make it stick when around Yoh, a teenage boy a ways down the road who's obsessed with model rockets, to the point where he's constructed a launching pad in his yard. Yoh is short on luck, however, because he'd like nothing more than to have a rocket that stays in the air for more than a couple of minutes—if one could at least exit the atmosphere, that would be killer. His latest launch ended with pieces scattered all over the place, and he starts a desperate search to reclaim the lost valves that he could use for the next rocket.

Yasuko and Yoh were old friends from grade school, but for Yasuko, at least, her feelings run a little deeper than that. She's bashful when Yoh shows up at her house, but Boku only sees what's on the surface at first, and he just figures they should hang out more if they're friends. But soon, he catches on, and pretty soon, summer vacation turns into a love connection, as Yoh gets closer to building his next rocket while Yasuko simply gets closer to Yoh. Relationships of all kinds are peppered throughout the story of *My Summer Vacation 2*. Shigeru likes Hikari, but she's a little too stuck-up to notice; Simon eventually gets engaged to Nagisa the nurse; and Yasuda, a guy who camps out on the dock, has a past with Yoshika. These are but fleeting bits of news, though, as Boku is only ever in the middle of the teenagers' story. The story





RELATION-
SHIPS OF ALL
KINDS ARE PEP-
PERED THROUGH-
OUT THE STORY
OF MY SUMMER
VACATION 2

injects drama of other kinds, such as when Boku meets a mysterious girl in the clinic who seems to be suffering from a serious illness, and later, after Takeshi and Shigeru explore a recently-opened cave, the elder brother falls down a shaft and needs to be rescued. Eventually, everything and everybody comes together for a final evening gathering out at the dock, where Yoshika plays a song by the light of a campfire. Then, Boku and Yasuko end their respective summer vacations, with Yoh launching his latest rocket as the ferry sails away.

What's extra interesting about *My Summer Vacation 2*'s revisiting of the 1975 setting is that some of the characters are like reincarnations of past ones. Boku's cousins in the first game were two girls, whereas two girls of the same ages are in the sequel, but as neighbors. Yoshika acts a little like Saori, filling the role of the older woman who often pokes fun at Boku. Plus, the new male cousins act and sound like alternate versions of Guts and Megane, two of the overpass hideout boys from the first game. All that, and the aunt has the same voice actress. While their characterizations are not all entirely the same (it is mostly a case of returning voices), the similarities are noticeable to anyone familiar with the first game in particular.

What isn't similar, thankfully, are the areas Boku explores. The seaside location of Fumi may have one expecting beaches on every corner, but this is not a resort town. In fact, there are more trees than sand patches, and because of the proximity of the dock, there's more concrete, too. With that in mind, every screen of *My Summer Vacation 2* strives to be different from the first games', as the camera angles often offer some glimpse out to the sea or towards the sky, and the aforementioned layout of the inn

is different enough on its own. Yet with the addition of so many characters, it's not just the natural scenery that makes the area different. The clinic run by Yasuko's grandfather, the doctor there for many years, has a back door that acts as a shortcut to the creek, though Boku can stick around the clinic and make some money giving the doctor a light back massage. (Really.)

But just because there's no big beaches doesn't mean you can't go swimming. This was the biggest addition to the sequel: the ability to jump into nearly any large body of water in the game and swim freely, in fully realtime 3D graphics. It's jarring at first, as the game more or less switches engines, and for a series with so many detailed 2D backgrounds, it wouldn't have made sense to make the whole game 3D—so when underwater, exquisite detail is not a big expectation. While swimming was a big addition for *My Summer Vacation* as a whole, it's largely uneventful—you can look at a sunken ship, find one of Yoh's rocket valves, and perhaps find a little cove, but you won't be feeling the same sense of great discovery as you would on land (unless you play the PSP version, which extends the sea area a bit). Furthermore, Boku can't stay underwater very long unless he collects up to a couple dozen bottle caps. It's pure video game logic, but by buying Jet Cider from the inn or just finding caps around the area, they will gradually increase Boku's maximum oxygen level when swimming, letting him go down deeper and stay there longer. And what if he runs out of air; does Boku drown and the game tragically end? Not quite—he blacks out, but wakes up back in the inn beside a worried aunt. After that, it's business as usual.

Though the formula went unchanged in *My Summer Vacation 2*, the transition to PlayStation 2 meant higher resolution graphics,



MY SUMMER VACATION HANDBOOK

MINEKO UEDA: FULL OF CHARACTER



My Summer Vacation may have a realistic premise with realistic backdrops, but it wouldn't have any real distinction without the character designs of Mineko Ueda, whose simply-rendered, dot-eyed people heighten the level of charm in every installment of the series—and now it's impossible to think of a *Bokunatsu* game without her. A professional illustrator for nearly 30 years, Ueda's work has been seen in a wide variety of places—besides *Bokunatsu*, it's best recognized on bottles of "Kirei Kirei" hand soap, showing happy bacteria-free mothers and children who may as well be *Bokunatsu* characters. In recent years, much of Ueda's non-commercial work depicts fashionable young women looking comfortable in all sorts of stylish outfits.

making for much prettier backgrounds, and characters with added detail (the paddle-shaped hands of characters in the first game were maybe a little too interpretive). And many relatively minor parts of the gameplay were streamlined: the beetle sumo minigame is now faster and easier to understand, partly due to the stamina meters depleting in realtime to show that your agitating of the beetles isn't too detrimental, and notifications of when a beetle's maximum stamina increases. Related to that, examining trees for beetles is shortened, and important tasks that open up blocked areas are much faster—for example, whereas cutting down the tree in the first game took a few days, in *Bokunatsu 2*, Boku only needs to chop at a similar tree once to see it immediately fall down.

Yet even with so much more to see and do, and with so much that's improved, *My Summer Vacation 2* isn't without a few cracks. In some ways, the characterization of Boku takes a few steps back, and by creator/writer Kaz Ayabe's own admission (pg. 45), Boku is not as much of an active participant in the other characters' stories. While he's crucial in bringing together Yasuko and Yoh, he mostly hangs back and listens, often being his most talkative at the kitchen table. Ayabe would address this in the following sequels, making those Bokus more chatty and inquisitive on average.

Still, *My Summer Vacation 2* is far more than the sum of its parts, and these flaws aside, it's easily the best of the series for those looking for the "complete package:" an unfamiliar area with abnormal buildings, a healthy mix of greenery and water, and a wide variety of friends to make. With the additions in the PSP version, from extra characters and story to gameplay improvements (like interim saving), a great game gets much closer to being perfect, even with those few aforementioned cracks. And the best news is that there was more to come.



AYABE'S COMMENT

Since *Bokunatsu 1* turned out to be a little sentimental, I wanted to make *Bokunatsu 2* be more energetic. So I decided to make a game located at the sea at the summertime. However, this one didn't turn out as energetic as I intended, either. But through this game, you can strongly feel the refreshing feeling of diving into the sea, and the feeling of the sun on your skin.

SIMILAR SUMMERS

My Summer Vacation was not the world's first game about Japanese summer vacation. Here are just a few games with strikingly similar themes—and varying degrees of innocence.

SUMMER DAYS MAC • 1999

A one-man production by a prolific developer named Takeshi Sakai, *Summer Days* was a freeware game made for MacOS just a year before the release of *My Summer Vacation*. A flare-up in the media led to speculation that Sakai (or *someone*) was calling *Bokunatsu* plagiarism, but that was hardly true, and the whole thing was blown way out of proportion. No one was accused or sued, and though *Summer Days* may have some parts that look eerily similar to Millennium Kitchen's game, it's basically a hollow adventure game with a few clichéd elements of summer, devoid of the sentimentality of *My Summer Vacation*.



INAKA KURASHI: A SOUTHERN ISLAND STORY PS2 • 2002

Released mere months after *My Summer Vacation 2*, *Inaka Kurashi* ("Country Living") has more than one obvious similarity to *Bokunatsu 2*, but it's really a victim of coincidence than anything. You do play a kid on vacation, only it's a teenage girl, and it takes place in March in the present day. Set in Okinawa (or a reasonable facsimile), young Tomoko explores the island village she stays at, meeting new people and biking down paths, soaking in the tropical scenery before dinnertime. *Inaka Kurashi* sets itself apart from *Bokunatsu* with realtime 3D graphics, but by now, those are pretty dated. Annoying, almost buggy controls don't help it these days, either.



HOUKAGO SHOUNEN DS • 2008



The opposite page may have games with some big similarities to *My Summer Vacation*, and they may be more coincidental than anything, but Konami's *Houkago Shounen* (After-School Boys") is perhaps the most blatant copying of the setting and formula of Sony's series. Consider the evidence: it takes place in summer 1975, and stars Osamu, a grade school boy in a yellow shirt who hangs around his idyllic town with his friends, exploring the area and engaging in a myriad of activities, including period-specific toys and games

(ones made by Konami, even).

That said, *Houkago Shounen* isn't that bad of a game on its own, with decent art (not *too* similar to Mineko Ueda, thankfully) and production values expected of a huge company like Konami, and a delightful cast of characters, some who are actually different than the characters of *Bokunatsu* games! Its emphasis is more on leisure and fun than nostalgic reflection, though, which makes sense as a portable game, yet because it takes place during the active school year, Osamu runs into some trouble regarding his studies, and faces some discipline from his young dad. At least the story is fairly original, but, y'know, they could've went with a different shirt color.



FEELS LIKE HOME

**MY SUMMER
VACATION 3:
THE NORTHERN
CHAPTER—
LITTLE BOKU'S
BIG PRAIRIE**
PS3 • 2007



If *My Summer Vacation* is meant to tug at strings of nostalgia, it's curious, then, that the first game was not the most nostalgic for the author. Creator Kaz Ayabe was born and raised in Hokkaido, Japan's northern island known for its sparse population, dense forests and snow-covered winters; enough inspiration for several *My Summer Vacation* games. But it took until the third installment to get a story based in Hokkaido as a tribute to Ayabe's homeland, and to simultaneously introduce the rest of Japan to Hokkaido through the magic of Boku's journey.

Once more we meet Boku (that is to say, "a" Boku) in August 1975. This time, he's on a train bound for Hanauta, a small town in Hokkaido in the shadow of the towering peak of Mt. Utei. Boku had been here before when he was much younger and couldn't remember it well, but now, with his mother carrying her second child, he has a chance to make the most out of his latest trip to Hokkaido. This Boku's aunt and uncle are Kaede and Takeru Yoshimoto, who run the very modest Uncle Farm. They're also the youngest aunt and uncle of the series (Takeru is 32 and Kaede is 29). They have two daughters: Hina, a newborn baby, and Midori, who is the same age as Boku, but a little bit taller, as some girls are around that age. Hina is understandably preoccupied most of the day, leaving Midori as the only cousin Boku can talk to—and seeing as she's the same age, she becomes somewhat more relatable than the cousins in the other games. Grandpa Yoshimoto also lives with the family, and all of them are crammed into a pretty small farmhouse. This is no Akane House inn: the parents sleep together on the living room floor, and Boku and Midori are forced to sleep next to each other in her room, along with the baby. The *My Summer Vacation* games may be quaint, but with things like this, none of them exemplify it more than the third game.







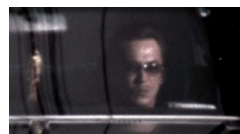
As soon as the second day, Boku is shown around the farm, and can interact with the family's stable of cows and their comparatively tiny chicken coop. It's a neat change of pace from the other games' homes, but the consequence of being on a farm is that Boku still has a routine he's given, and it's "enhanced" in this sequel: Not only are there flowers to be watered like before, but now he's urged to feed the newborn calf daily, and along with that, keep tabs on a family of swallows behind the barn, because one of their young may fall and become easy prey.

Elsewhere, Boku can walk around the immediate area and explore as much as possible. Eventually he runs into Midori and her friends Michiko, Hayato and Rei. Michiko, the only other girl, is best friends with Midori, while the boys Hayato (a headstrong Guts/Takeshi type) and Rei (the oldest, a sixth-grader) hang around and kill time on their own. The kids are usually found out by the stream, and have with them a variety of different toys to play with. For once in a *Bokunatsu* game, you can play with the other kids beyond fighting their beetles. There's gomutobi, a Japanese counterpart to jump rope using an elastic band, and a rudimentary patty-cake rhythm game as the kids sing Yankee Doodle (known as a different name and lyrics in Japan, of course). Other activities include a swimming race, skipping stones on the water, and the return of beetle sumo, further polished over the previous game. One more activity is a little bit off the beaten path: Boku can talk to a mysterious man, a delivery truck driver, sitting under a tree. The man is a connoisseur of haiku, thinking up his own poems on the fly and asking Boku to rate them on a point scale up to 100—conversely, Boku can also construct his own poems by selecting from lists of words and phrases, then be rated by the haiku man. The rewards are minimal, and it wasn't long before players figured

MY SUMMER VACATION HANDBOOK MY OVERLY DRAMATIC SUMMER VACATION



どこまでも行けると思ってた。



Sony's approach in promoting the *My Summer Vacation* games usually stayed on the track of using summer-themed imagery to drive home the games' inherent nostalgia. This didn't change for *My Summer Vacation 3*, but in addition to the standard commercials, Sony commissioned an artsy two-and-a-half-minute short called "During That Summer," wherein a gangster-looking fellow with a sword (famed actor Susumu Terajima) impales a delinquent who moments ago forcibly stole money from a young woman. In between scenes are voice-over thoughts from each character, and poetic lines of text as well. Though set during summer, the short is a complete 180 in tone from the game it was meant to tie-in with, making for an interesting—if warped—attempt to sell the game to adults.

out multiple 90-to-100-point verse combinations.

As is typical, other side characters are gradually introduced to Boku, and players can follow their stories through the rest of summer. This includes the glassblower Megumi, a friend of the family who owns the glassware shop just down the hill from Uncle Farm, and runs the business with her younger sister Harumi, an apprentice of sorts. Boku can continue to visit Megumi as she works on various glassware pieces, and through hitting certain story events, Boku can start to learn how to blow glass himself, and "unlock" the unveiling of new glasswork when he visits the shop afterward. And when Boku gains access to the paths by the big lake, he happens upon the house of a lonely old lady who receives infrequent visits from her son who lives in Sapporo.

But if there's a "main" storyline aside from Boku's overall summer vacation adventure, it's one that's focused more on all the kids this time, as opposed to just Boku, or the young adults he hangs around. Once he is accepted into Midori's circle of friends, Boku gets the chance to hang out with them more often, including their first big outing, an excursion at night on occasion of the Tanabata festival, a traditional Japanese holiday that usually features a typical town festival, but for kids, it's also an excuse to head out on a Halloween-like exploration of the night. And for Boku, who came to the farm a bit dumbfounded, he quickly learns that the countryside isn't as flat and boring as it looks. Events and plot points like that make the story of *My Summer Vacation 3* one of the sweeter ones in the series.

Whereas swimming was introduced in *Bokunatsu 2* and used realtime graphics, *Bokunatsu 3* adds a new activity in that vein: sliding down the hill

next to the house on a piece of cardboard. It's definitely for fun, as it doesn't offer anything to the game other than providing a shortcut down to the bottom of the hill. Meanwhile, swimming is still a good part of the game, and Boku will again need to collect Jet Cider bottle caps to extend his oxygen meter.

In *My Summer Vacation 2*, you could have Boku take his shirt off and enjoy summer as a happy half-naked boy. In the third game, you can do the same, but Boku also has a greatly expanded wardrobe, and can wear not only his original green shirt but the other color shirts worn by the previous Bokus. And in a true harnessing of the PlayStation 3's potential, additional shirts were offered as downloadable content; many original, some promotional, like one stamped with the Amazon.co.jp logo. In addition, a downloadable companion app, the *Bokunatsu 3 T-Shirt Factory* was released, allowing players to customize their own shirts and even use JPEGs for designs. Turning Boku into a walking billboard may sound antithetical to the whole series, but it adds a bit of levity to the game in between breaks in the story.

Though the power of the PS3 didn't exactly upgrade *My Summer Vacation 3* with fully realtime graphics, the boosted resolution and graphics capabilities nonetheless brought a fidelity to the series that makes this sequel the most naturally beautiful of them all. That's just partly thanks to the HD resolution as much as it is the teeming greenery of the game's fictional Hokkaido. And there is a palpable sense of its makers trying to be a little more cinematic through increased animation, less overacted dialogue, and more places where music is dropped in (the *Bokunatsu* series is notable for its purposeful lack of musical scores). As the only "high-end" sequel of the series,

THE
BOOSTED
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MOST NATURALLY
BEAUTIFUL



it does its job pretty well in that regard, literally and figuratively painting a wonderful picture of Hokkaido, and Kaz Ayabe's attempt at re-creating his birthplace.

However, unfortunate timing kept the third game from reaching the level of success of its predecessors. It was originally released in summer 2007, less than a year after the PlayStation 3 launch, and at a time when the new console was barely selling as well as it could have. Sony received plenty of criticism for the poor performance, and though *My Summer Vacation 3* should have been a marquee release for the company, it would come short of selling even 100,000 copies, a number that the previous two games reached in no time. Without being able to travel back in time, there's no way of knowing if *Bokunatsu 3* would still have a chance to be a relative blockbuster if the PS3 situation was a little better, and all we can really do now is shrug. However, once Sony righted the PS3 ship, it no doubt put *Bokunatsu 3* back in the spotlight when successive summers rolled around. For one thing, Sony still reprinted the game under their "Best" budget line, so it inevitably kept a presence at retail.

And yet, despite all of its beauty and without even considering retail success, there's something about *Bokunatsu 3* that just doesn't feel as exciting as the others. That same beautiful area feels somewhat restricted, with narrow paths and rock walls in abundance—sure, you can run by a field, but you can't really go across. The laid-back tone and muted colors compound things; if it weren't for familiar summer sounds, this could just as easily have taken place in the spring or fall. The realistic touches are nice—from the aforementioned cinematic bent to minor graphic details like ripples in the water and the way Boku leans into turns when he runs—but

it may be just a tiny bit *too* realistic in contrast with Mineko Ueda's character designs. Topping it off is the feeling that the third iteration of a 1975 summer with the same kind of Boku character as the other two comes off long in the tooth. Basically, the series needed a shot in the arm, and fortunately, it got another sequel that provided just that.



UNFORTUNATE
TIMING KEPT THE
THIRD GAME FROM
DUPLICATING PAST
SUCCESS





AYABE'S COMMENT

My Summer Vacation 3 is located in Hokkaido, which is where I'm from. With this title, I kind of gave up concentrating on making an energetic summer vacation game, so instead what I tried to express was the very pleasant summer of Hokkaido, and the pure innocence of people's feelings during that time. You could experience a rather chilled summer, which is not that usual in the rest of Japan, but as it's Hokkaido, you could feel more comfortable, and that makes this title a little different from the others. I also like the scenario for Bokunatsu 3 a lot.

ISLAND 10P

**MY SUMMER
VACATION 4:
THE SETOUCHI
BOYS' DETECTIVE
CLUB—
BOKU AND THE
SECRET MAP**
PSP • 2009



My Summer Vacation was released in 2000, when a nostalgic story set in 1975 made sense—a gulf of time where the memories are still somewhat there, and one where the “strength” of the nostalgia is at its zenith. But *Bokunatsu* sequels were continuing to be made for the rest of the decade, and soon, the appeal of the ’70s would begin to fade away as the next generation—those who grew up in the ’80s—would begin to go through the same nostalgic cycle. Millennium Kitchen’s games had done a great job of capturing that feeling for the original intended audience, but after seven years, it would have to adapt. *My Summer Vacation 4* was released in 2009, taking the series forward with changes and improvements that would attempt to set it on a new course, and inevitably join the second game as one of the best of the lot.

And it certainly does take the series forward. 10 years, to be exact. Yes, the clock finally moves, all the way to August 1985, and features a new Boku—born in 1975, naturally—who spends his summer vacation at Japan’s Seto Inland Sea, in a town based on Setouchi, where five small adjacent islands make up the whole of the village. His aunt and uncle’s family is the Shimanami clan, with uncle Yukio, aunt Mako, their teenage daughter Noa (nicknamed “Manga-nee-chan” for her nerdy pursuits) and son Taiyo, a year older than Boku. Oh, and the family dog, Ultra. Their house is modest and traditional; more reminiscent of the Sorano house from the first game, though a bit “trashy” in style sometimes—they have to break out the folding table to accommodate all the kids at mealtime.

The fourth Boku is much different than the shy, acceptant boys typified in the previous games, and is more than just a kid with a different haircut. He is delighted to be on vacation, practically leaping from the bus as he meets his aunt to take him to the house. He’s boisterous, quick, and goofy, yet loses none of the





MAKING THE MOST OF VACATION



If you wish to play a *My Summer Vacation* game but don't have the knowledge of Japanese to enjoy the story, you're not completely helpless. In every game, Boku has a whole day to run around and do whatever, from talking to people and checking off story events to wrestling beetles all day. Because of the pre-rendered 2D backgrounds, the in-game clock jumps forward a little bit after every screen change, and eventually daytime backgrounds will switch to their evening versions, and then to dusk. In the first game, it was hard to tell what time it was, but in subsequent sequels, Boku could grab a clock or wristwatch and check the time on the fly, and players could also go into the options menu and choose from different clock speed settings. Essentially, the game moves forward as long as you do, and though you may not be able to appreciate every line of dialogue, it's possible to have an enjoyable virtual vacation.

curiosity of the past Bokus. He's also a much better artist—in one of the big gameplay tweaks, Boku always has his sketchbook with him, and can immediately make diary entries after notable story events, filling the pages with more than one cute drawing and insightful text entry (in fact, you can also choose to make your text simple and vague, detailed, or poetic). This also remedies one of the classic problems with the other games, in that some special events would "overwrite" story events in the diary, making it difficult to properly fill out the diary with a wide variety of memories. As a result, there's now a humongous number of different pictures and events to uncover during the game, but at least you can all keep a running log of them without having to go to bed in the game first.

The *My Summer Vacation* games always have small elements that give slight nods to the popular culture of the time, even if Boku is "stuck" in a remote location without the excitement of city life—Simon's issue of *National Geographic* in *Bokunatsu 2*, for instance, or the fictional radio and TV programs that have the flavor of '70s shows. Seeing as *My Summer Vacation 4* is set in 1985, there's one big piece of Japanese pop culture of that time that couldn't go unrecognized: Video games. But in the spirit of the series, the game doesn't exactly give Boku a console and a stack of games to waste time with. In Japan, it was (and still is) common for small shops to have games outside, and so, at the general store next to the Shimanami house lies a tabletop arcade machine housing *Qix*, the 1981 Taito classic. Boku can freely walk up to it and, if he has 50 yen, the player can enjoy an emulated version of the original *Qix*, for little reason other than the fact that it's there—and that it's still a fun game, of course.

Perhaps the most dramatic gameplay change in *Bokunatsu 4* is its conscious awareness of Boku's hunger, represented as a





PROBABLY THE
MOST INTEREST-
ING STORY AND
CAST OF
CHARACTERS IN
THE SERIES

colorful energy meter that stays on the left side of the screen. Like the in-game clock, Boku's energy goes down slightly after every screen change, and he runs the risk of fainting and losing time if the meter runs out (about three days' worth of screen changes if it goes unchecked). Should that happen, Boku wakes up at home and chows down on a huge onigiri (rice ball) which refills the meter, but that's less convenient the further away from the house you are. Plus, the standard breakfasts and dinners don't fix anything; Boku's energy stays where it is unless he buys or otherwise acquires something to eat, most often an onigiri from the store.

So while the energy meter is more realistic, in a sense, it also adds undue pressure on the player who is just looking to enjoy Boku's summer vacation like always, and pulls the game slightly away from the adventure genre towards the realm of RPGs—specifically roguelikes, if one were to draw a parallel to the "hunger" aspect. Because of this, *Qix*, and the various collectibles in the game, money becomes an important factor compared to the other games. The easiest way to earn yen is by selling empty bottles, which can be found around the area (usually underwater) or by buying and drinking Jet Cider, though that's obviously a loss leader.

During the first half of vacation, Boku is encouraged to get excited for the upcoming Obon festival, a regular August event in Japan where music and dance are the focus of the nighttime festivities. Boku is enlisted to help play the taiko drums at the festival, and once the 13th rolls around, he's expected to practice once every day until the night of the 15th, when the festival begins. Though made to be a big deal within the game's story, the

execution of the Obon scene leaves something to be desired. The drumming is a simple rhythm game, and with the *My Summer Vacation* series' reliance on static backgrounds, it's a little difficult to capture the excitement of the festival while also trying to implement minigames. The result is flat, but it's a midpoint marker of both the vacation and the game itself that indicates things can only get better from here.

And that's because, aside from gameplay changes, *My Summer Vacation 4* features what's probably the most interesting story and cast of characters in the series. The aunt and uncle Boku stays with are not the only ones in the family. Grandma Tomo lives with her eldest son Yukio, but also has her other sons Tadao, and Boku's dad, the youngest son. The days before the Obon festival become an opportunity for a family reunion of sorts, and it's then we meet Boku's dad and, in a series first, his mom and little sister, too. Grandpa Shimanami passed away some time ago, and so it's through his memory, Tomo, the children, and summer vacation that the family reconnects for one eventful month.

And though Boku makes friends with all the local kids outside the Shimanami house, his partner in crime is his cousin Kimiko, a girl the same age as him, and the only child of his other uncle Tadao and wife Kayoko. Kimiko shows up just a few days into August to spend her vacation at Uncle Yukio's house too, and though she's shy, she eventually ingratiates herself into the kids' circle of friends, not to mention Boku's world. Sleeping in Manga-nee-chan's room next door, she and Boku sometimes have nighttime conversations as they poke their heads out their windows. And as sometimes happens with young cousins, their summer adventures lead to Boku and Kimiko growing quite fond of each other.



BOKUNATSU
4 IS LITERALLY
AND FIGURATIVELY
THE BRIGHTEST
GAME OF THE
FRANCHISE

The previous games' treehouses and "secret bases" where Boku convenes with the other kids to play beetle sumo is once again present in *Bokunatsu 4*, but with an added twist: no one can get in unless they tell Junior, the smallest of the neighborhood kids, correct answers to trivia questions. This serves as the hideout's password, and Junior's questions can range from three categories of general knowledge (which can be set in the options menu, funnily enough). From there, everyone gathers for beetle sumo, or a Monkeshi battle. Monkeshi are a new category of collectibles added to *My Summer Vacation 4*; a roster of colorful and cartoonish rubber monster toys based on *Kinnikuman*/*M.U.S.C.L.E.* figurines and the like that were ridiculously popular in '80s Japan. Boku can buy and collect the figures, then fight them with the other kids, though because they're inanimate, the mechanics are different than beetle sumo. Rather than watch them fight, the players can repeatedly tap on the box that the figures rest on, steadily moving the figures into one another, and whichever one topples first is the one that loses.

The series' approach to opening up areas as summer progresses is given new importance in *My Summer Vacation 4*. The five islands (including three large, main ones) that make up the area are not immediately accessible, but Boku's summer can be extremely limited without taking the effort to explore and make them accessible. This is done in a variety of ways, such as finding a key to open a big gate that leads to a connecting path, or needing to acquire a hammer and nails to repair a bridge. New areas also give new opportunities for Boku finding pieces of the "secret map" mentioned in the game's subtitle, which leads to the discovery of a mazelike "dungeon" found on one of the smaller islands.

Bokunatsu 4 also brings back one of the better elements of the first game: multiple endings. Here, you can get one of a whopping 12 different post-credits ending scenes, some depending on the story events you hit, but more depending on how devoted you are to the game's side activities. For example, collecting all of the Monkeshi figures will lead to Boku's adult life running a little toy shop with an emphasis on gachapon figures.

This sequel was a PSP exclusive, which on the surface seems like an odd move after the upgrade to PS3 with the last game, its failure on the charts notwithstanding. However, the PSP version of the original game did well, and even though it seems counter-intuitive to be able to go outdoors playing a game that's about the outdoors, PSP still seemed like the best place for the franchise to go after a disappointing (and probably stressful) attempt to bring it to the PS3. For one thing, it was still much more popular in Japan thanks to the Monster Hunter boom. And with a larger emphasis on collecting bugs, trinkets, and spending time with other activities, the nature of portable games just seems more suited to this game. However, with the PSP format's limited disc size, that means many parts of *Bokunatsu 4* aren't voiced, compared to the other games where nearly every line of dialogue was spoken.

My Summer Vacation 4 is literally and figuratively the brightest sequel in the series. Every frame of the game is vibrant to the point of approaching neon—the green grass, blue skies, and the intense fluorescent light of the Shimanami living room pop on the screen, communicating the Seto summer through bold splashes of color. Along with that, Boku's chipper attitude is infectious, and having it met with Kimiko's agreeable stance is part of what

makes their story so fun. Not to mention that it seems like almost every character is happy to be there—the coming together of the Shimanami family represents a celebration of summer, nostalgia, growing up, and staying young all at once. In some ways, the game is also a celebration of the *My Summer Vacation* series, with a myriad of elements picked from the previous three games that best shows where the franchise ended up and (as mentioned at the beginning) that it could take it somewhere new. The only question is when, or if, it will continue to do so.



AYABE'S COMMENT

Bokunatsu 3 felt a little foreign from Japan, so with Bokunatsu 4, I decided to create a game that's a real "Japan summer," which is really hot and bright. And so I picked the Seto Sea for creating this game. Bokunatsu 4 has the most insects to collect in the game, and you're able to play the eraser wrestling game. And when you head to the secret base, you have to say the password's first, so you can enjoy those little details of summer. Bokunatsu 4 features three islands of the same size. You start out at the island where your uncle's house is, but soon you can go into the ocean and swim to the next island. I feel I was able to create a seamless experience, as you don't warp to the other islands. That's something I'm glad I could express in Bokunatsu 4. I feel that this title is the most recommendable to people who want to experience the fun of summer vacation.

GIANTS AMONG US

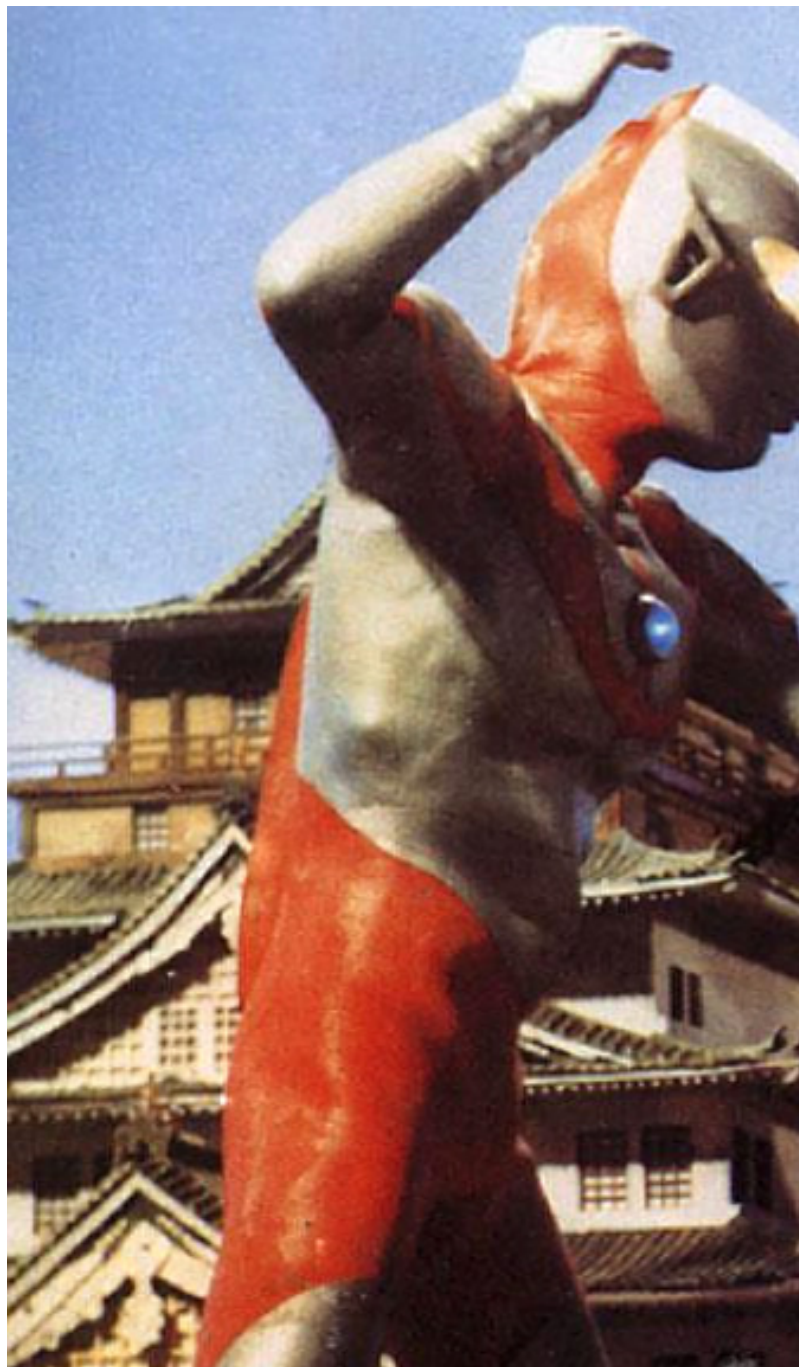
ATTACK OF THE FRIDAY MONSTERS! A TOKYO TALE 3DS • 2013



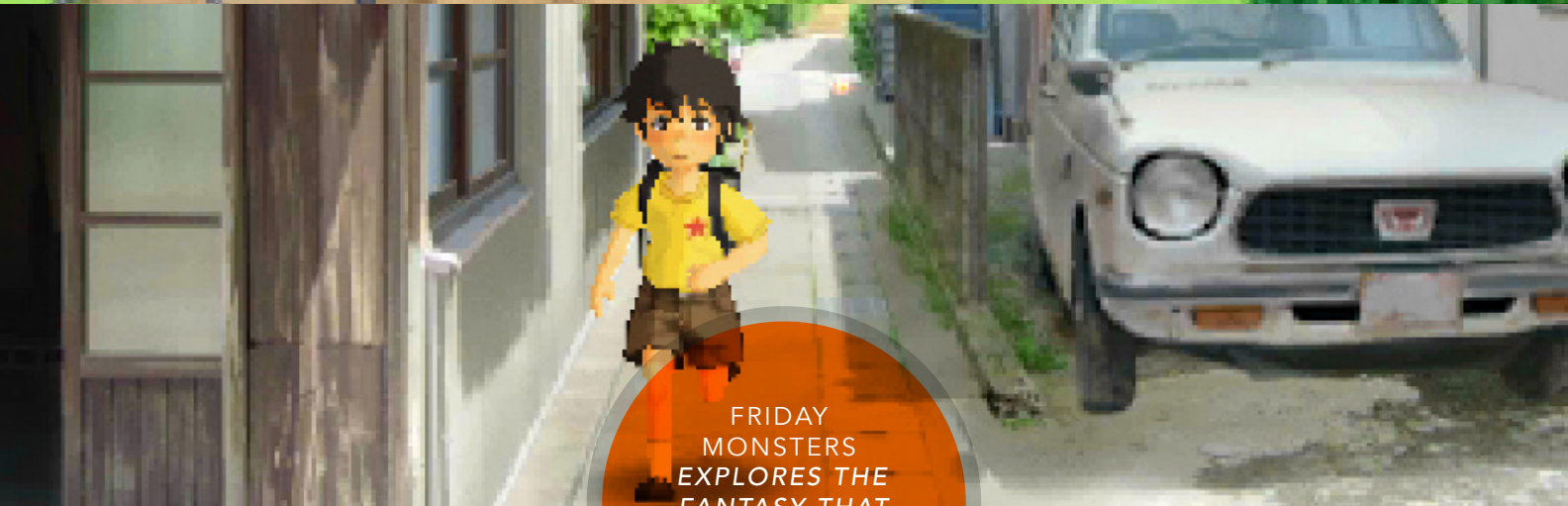
It may be too early to determine a *My Summer Vacation* postscript for Millennium Kitchen and Kaz Ayabe, but this may be the closest thing so far. After years on Sony platforms, Ayabe was invited to be part of publisher-developer Level-5's *Guild* series on Nintendo 3DS. The *Guild* games are an initiative to bring together Japan's known and innovative creators to make games they might not be able to make elsewhere. For the second series of *Guild* games, Ayabe is one of three creators bringing a new idea to life, with his game bearing a title that was also the one-line concept he had in mind: *Kaiju ga Deru Kinyoubi*; "The Monsters That Appear on Friday," or its official English title, *Attack of the Friday Monsters*.

Turning the clock further back than even the first *My Summer Vacation*, *Friday Monsters* takes place in Tokyo in 1971, a time when the city was just barely as developed of a metropolis as it would become in the '80s. The land is a little greener, a little flatter, but burgeoning nonetheless. The story focuses on Sota, a young boy living in a suburb called Fujinohana with his mother and father, who run a laundry business off the front of their home. In this particular fantasy, the region is overrun with giant monsters every Friday, who trample the land as they fight for however long they need to, then disappear, and at the start of the game, Sota's mom warns him that today is the day the monsters come out. The entire set-up is a thinly veiled reference to Japanese tokusatsu (superhero) shows that rose to prominence in the late 1960s; specifically *Ultraman* and its ilk, which would air every week and feature our hero growing to immense size to fight the latest enemy monster than threatens Japan.

Only in this game, it's a real occurrence, meant to put you in the shoes of one of the kids who would cheer on the heroes from below. However, *Attack of the Friday Monsters* is







FRIDAY
MONSTERS
EXPLORES THE
FANTASY THAT
THE BOKUNATSU
GAMES HARDLY
TOUCHED

not an action-packed game; similar to *My Summer Vacation*, its focus is on a small cast of characters, including the boy protagonist, and their explorations, questions and revelations about this weird monster-rich world they're living in. Sota finds many different people to talk to around Fujinohana, including the local kids and a girl named S-Ko, who is somewhat of a romantic interest. There's also Megami, a woman who works at the local TV station and becomes a trusted ally to Sota when he starts to discover more about the monsters' origins, and Frank, a weird, loud old man who seems to know more about the situation with the monsters than he's letting on.

As Sota runs around the town, additional plot points and cut-scenes will pop up pretty consistently, amounting to 26 "episodes" throughout the course of the game. Most of the episodes don't need to be completed in any certain order (unless they're explicitly tied to one another), as progressing through them usually requires nothing more than heading to the next point on the map that's labeled with the episode number. Nevertheless, if you continue to follow the path, then the story progresses, and the monster mystery unfolds.

The only other substantial part of *Friday Monsters* is an optional card game, where Sota can face off against certain characters in town using monster cards collected throughout the game. Tons of little color-coded pieces can be found on the ground, either in plain sight, slightly hidden in bushes, or given to you in abundance after clearing an episode. And by collecting six of the same color, Sota earns a new monster card. The card game itself is not very complex: you simply select a few cards from your deck, and



each one has a power rating as well as a mark based on "rock paper scissors" hands. If the combination of those ratings is stronger than your opponent's card on the opposite side, then you get a win, and if you get the most wins, the match is yours.

You definitely wouldn't be wrong for thinking *Attack of the Friday Monsters* looks like another *My Summer Vacation* game. It uses pre-rendered backgrounds, controls the same, and it even stars a little Japanese boy in shorts and a yellow shirt. The layout of the village closely resembles *Bokunatsu 4*, as well. The only big visual differences are the absence of Mineko Ueda and her character designs, and of course, the fact that the game is on Nintendo 3DS. However, there's also a greater emphasis on music, and the game features a wonderful score by accomplished game music composer Hideki Sakamoto, known for work on the *Echochrome* series and *Aquanaut's Holiday: Hidden Memories*, making him a natural fit for the worlds of the creator of *My Summer Vacation*.

As with the other *Guild* series games, *Attack of the Friday Monsters* is short-form, even moreso than the *My Summer Vacation* games—they averaged at around 12-15 hours; *Friday Monsters* barely touches that. And because story points appear on the map one after the other, the game can seem like it's running on autopilot sometimes. Of course, one could argue that *My Summer Vacation* works the same way, and in both games, you can still freely explore off the story path—only here, there's a map that tells you where everything is. Funny what a little change can do to perception.

While not a massive step out of Millennium Kitchen's comfort zone, *Attack of the Friday Monsters* is nonetheless a fun experiment for the developer to have tried, thanks in no small part

to Level-5's assistance. The first *My Summer Vacation* had a light fantasy element to it, but obviously *Friday Monsters* explores the fantasy that the *Bokunatsu* games hardly touched. Yet it maintains the bright, happy feel of those games, and though it's set in a time more than 40 years ago, it can appeal to all ages, which is to be expected from Ayabe and Millennium Kitchen. They don't fix what isn't broken, but they will change the pieces around to create something that still comes off fresh and unforgettable. Five key games dedicated to everything summer—here's to five more.



AYABE'S COMMENT

In my childhood, I'd watch TV shows with the big monsters and the heroes who fight them. In those shows, there would be kids standing by, and I always wanted to be one of those kids, so that was the inspiration behind *Attack of the Friday Monsters*. The concept of the game is like a version of *My Summer Vacation* where every Friday, a monster will show up. Since this is part of the *Guild* series, the volume of the game isn't that big, but I feel I was able to express what I wanted to do in a very direct way. So, I would love it if people could check it out and enjoy it. The setting is not the countryside, but the suburbs of Tokyo, in 1971. During that time, there was more nature around the city, so this is kind of like a "lost world" that doesn't exist anymore. I'm interested to see how people feel when they see this lost world.



BOY *of* SUMMER

YOU MAY NOT KNOW KAZ AYABE, BUT BY ALL MEANS, YOU SHOULD. THE MODEST CREATOR TALKS ABOUT EARLY INSPIRATIONS, THE CREATIVE PROCESS, AND A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME GUIDED JOURNEY THROUGH THE MY SUMMER VACATION SERIES

It shouldn't be a surprise that the makers of the fairly quaint *My Summer Vacation* games have a fairly quaint office space. Millennium Kitchen sits on the second floor of a brown, aging building, but once you step inside, you understand that they couldn't belong anywhere else: the conference room is fairly nondescript, but over on the other side of the floor, the office is made of handcrafted wooden cubicle partitions that resemble the inside of a cabana, as if everyone is encouraged to be in the vacation mindset.

It's been the second home for Kaz Ayabe, creator of *My Summer Vacation*, ever since founding the company in 1997. The evidence is certainly there—a few old game consoles sit on a TV off to the rear of the conference room; a plastic sheet tied to a ceiling light is a makeshift defense against leaks—but it simultaneously suggests what kind of person Ayabe is and the kind of games he's made: imperfect but content, different yet special. And for nearly 15 years, it's been the nexus of the games that have come to define him.

And yet, in the beginning, he was defined by different things entirely. Born in 1965, the youngest of three children, Kazuhiro Ayabe grew up in Japan's northern island of Hokkaido, relatively sparse with people, but blanketed in greenery. To that end, Ayabe was around nature quite often, sometimes more often than expected. "My father, because of his job, got moved a lot within Hokkaido," Ayabe says, "So I moved three times during my childhood." That kind of mobility can usually take a toll on children, but Ayabe nevertheless developed his imagination and creative spirit, planting little mental seeds along the way.

"I did go outside and play," explained Ayabe, "But I did enjoy playing inside the house. And what I would do is, with a white piece of paper, start drawing a map of an imaginary town. So first I would draw the border line for the beach, and then a street, and then a port—almost like it was *SimCity*." A few weeks at a time, Ayabe would continue adding to the drawings, turning a tiny village into a metropolis. "After I grew up and started creating games," he adds, "I was like, 'This is very similar to what I used to do during my childhood.' So even today, when I start creating a game, I start by drawing a map." The reference to *SimCity* is apt, as once Ayabe knew of Will Wright's game, he wished he had been the one to come up with it. Towards the end of elementary school, Ayabe's cities would start becoming three-dimensional, as he went from drawing to creating models out of paper and plastic.

One might think this would have led to a career in architecture or city planning, but Ayabe's habitual drawing evolved from designing towns as a young boy to an affinity for animation as a teenager. "After I grew up, I moved to Tokyo and went to an animation school. So during that time I forgot I was even into [drawing cities]." At Tokyo Designer Gakuin College, Ayabe pursued his passion for animation, and after graduating,



naturally went looking for a job at local animation companies, including one "now pretty well-known," but not finding much promise in their work conditions.

At that time, one of Ayabe's friends got a job at an arcade game development company not far from their college. The company was NMK, responsible for many different console and arcade games, often under contract for Jaleco. Soon enough, Ayabe followed his friend and got in, as well. "That gave me the idea that maybe I don't have to be stuck with animation companies," Ayabe says. "As long as I could draw stuff, then I wouldn't mind what kind of company it was."

Ayabe was originally hired as a graphic artist, but eventually, he was asked to try programming to help with a project. Though he did have a moderate interest in electronics—in high school he built his own synthesizer—in Ayabe's own words, he "hardly ever touched a keyboard" until then; his biggest exposure to computers being when he would play with a friend's as a child. But he took on the task given to him, and within a month, Ayabe was able to get a grasp of assembly programming, creating relatively simple things like a game's credits roll, with his skill gradually increasing as time went on.

The first game Ayabe worked on at NMK was the arcade title *Psychic 5*, released by Jaleco in 1987, and later the Famicom spin-off *Esper Boukentai*. He stayed with NMK up through the early '90s, contributing to several other games, including programming and sound work for Sammy's *Velious II (Rolan's Curse II)* for Game Boy. *Velious II* was the last game Ayabe worked on at NMK, resigning around the time of the game's release, then working freelance for about six months. After that, he joined K-Idea, a company dedicated to game design planning founded by Hajime Kimura, previously a well-known video game columnist in *Shonen Jump*. K-Idea's most prominent games were the *Jungle Wars* series of RPGs, the second of

which was on Super Famicom, where Ayabe is credited with "system assistance."

After being with K-Idea for five years, Ayabe decided to break out on his own and start his own game design company, Millennium Kitchen, in 1997. The impetus was his desire to create a game that had been in his mind for awhile; the game that would eventually become *Boku no Natsuyasumi*, or *My Summer Vacation*. "When I was at NMK, I was mainly programming, and when I was at K-Idea, I was doing game design and in charge of project management," says Ayabe, "So I was thinking if I established my own studio, my own role would increase, so I'd probably have to do a lot, but I was thinking I really wanted to create the game."



Ayabe's inspiration behind *My Summer Vacation* was twofold. "I was thinking that I wanted to create a game that simulates the real world, so I was trying to find a good subject for that," he says, and the subject that came to him was by way of nostalgic recollections when he was putting nose to grindstone at work. "I would remember this hill that was at my relatives' house that I visited during my childhood summer vacations," Ayabe says. "I kept coming back to that scene, and wondering why I kept thinking about it, and then thought, OK, maybe I could make a game that replicates your summer vacation."

The second inspiration bordered on the spiritual. "I was thinking about the design for this game around summer 1997, and during that time I was really into techno and house music," Ayabe explains. "And I would love going to rave parties, almost every week, and bring a tent to the mountains and spend time in nature." He describes the experience as feeling like going back to Neanderthal times, adding, "You don't have all that artificial stuff near you, so you kind of become like your pure self." Ayabe is a longtime fan of electronic music, idolizing groups like Japan's Yellow Magic Orchestra, and collecting CDs that now sit in bins behind the Millennium Kitchen conference room.

That "pure self" combined with the simplicity of childhood began solidifying the foundation for the summer vacation game, and once Millennium Kitchen was established, Ayabe needed to find a publisher who would bring the project to reality. "We had been thinking of who would be the best company to bring the concept to, but Sony was the first publisher we went and talked to with a real concept document," Ayabe says.

A big part of the charm of *My Summer Vacation* is through Mineko Ueda's character designs, and Ayabe had always wanted Ueda to be onboard with the project. Ueda made a name for herself by illustrating the characters found on the products of consumer goods company Lion, particularly the "Kirei Kirei" hand soap line. There was just one problem: Millennium



"I WAS THE THIRD PERSON TO BRING A GAME CONCEPT ABOUT SUMMER VACATION TO SONY"

Kitchen, by comparison, was a bunch of unknowns. Furthermore, Ayabe wasn't waiting for a publisher to help with securing Ueda. "I brought the concept to Sony and said 'Mineko Ueda is really wanting to do this,' Ayabe explains. "Then on the same day, I contacted Ueda's office and said 'Sony is really wanting to do this with you,'" he adds with a laugh. Ayabe had simply called the Lion public relations department asking for the number to Ueda's office, and they easily obliged. Luckily for Ayabe, both parties said yes

to the project. The producer at Sony was especially receptive, greenlighting the project minutes after Ayabe began presenting the concept.

Once again, fortune smiled. "I didn't know this until 10 years after the fact," says Ayabe, "But I was the third person to bring a game concept about summer vacation to this Sony producer. So he was like, 'If this many people are thinking about this kind of concept, then it should be good, so let's do it.' Of course, the concept was good enough, but I also had that luck of being the third person to present." Ayabe later found out who one of the other presenters was: Shoji Masuda, an accomplished game designer and writer, who at the time created another hit Japanese Sony game, the PlayStation RPG *Ore no Shikabane o Koete Yuke*.

In no time, development began on *My Summer Vacation*. Millennium Kitchen was responsible for everything but programming and sound, meaning that Ayabe and his modestly-sized staff were tasked with writing, sketching and planning the game from day one. Contrail, at the time a Sony imprint, served as the producers on the game, though their feedback was sparse, for better or worse. "As a matter of fact, maybe they could have given us a few more notes," Ayabe says, "But the only one they had was 'maybe you don't want to make it too much in the countryside. You might want to have highways in the game, too.' And that's the reason we had a highway in the game." Adding, with a laugh, "Since then, all of our games have highways in them."

The hard work continued, with the goal to have *My Summer Vacation* released in the summer of 1999. But the staff wasn't able to meet that deadline, partly due to implementing the ability to fish, which had been part of the original design plan, but wasn't included in the game's first prototype. The Sony producer insisted the fishing be included in the final game. "Well, because it's a summer vacation game, that doesn't mean it has to come out in summer, so don't worry about it," Ayabe says, paraphrasing the producer. "Then we started making the fishing portion, and halfway through the producer came back and said, 'actually, you guys have to meet the summer deadline.' So we tried to meet the deadline, but were kind of late, so it was announced with a fall release date. But then Sony PR was like, 'No, you're not going to release a summer vacation game in the fall.' (Laughs)"

Through that, the team was granted another several months of development, while Sony set the new release date for the summer of 2000. It was ultimately a blessing, as Ayabe used the time to further polish the game from every angle. In the end, "There's probably no files in the game that I haven't touched," he says. "It's a pretty unique title—there weren't games like this



during that time, so it was a game that really needed careful tuning." *My Summer Vacation* was released on June 22, 2000, one day after the start of summer.

When asked what part of Japan the first game was based on, Ayabe responds by getting up out of his chair and procuring one of the two dozen arm-thick photo albums from the bottom of the conference room's bookshelf. Inside is page after page of photographs of a region called Tsukiyono in the Yamanashi prefecture, about 80 miles west of Tokyo. The pictures, largely of forests, directly and indirectly evoke scenes from the video game—a rich, barely-touched green land with creeks and blue cloud-filled skies. Tsukiyono is also the name of a region in the Gunma prefecture, which is somewhat better known, but Ayabe is quick to clarify. "To prove that it was the Yamanashi Tsukiyono, there's a photo of a bus stop there in the back of the manual," he says.

As Ayabe flips through more photos, he happens upon a section dedicated to pictures of clouds. The ones in this album are but a fraction of several hundred cloud pictures kept by Millennium Kitchen. "Some people from other companies will get in touch with me and ask if we have any good cloud pictures, because they know we have a lot of that material," Ayabe says. He points out that Sony took the cloud on the cover of *My Summer Vacation* and repurposed it on the cover art for *Minna no Golf 3 (Hot Shots Golf 3)*.

"During my summer vacations, I would go home to Hokkaido and take pictures of home," Ayabe says. "And during the work day I'll take pictures, and that all becomes my library of reference material. So it's kind of an interesting job, because the line between 'on' and 'off' time is kind of blurred." On that note, it seems like a strange experience for Millennium Kitchen to constantly make summer-themed games for at least two years at a time, but Ayabe doesn't appear affected—he simply loves summer. "Usually when you're debugging, you kind of get sick of [the sound] because you're playing it over and over again, but with our games, I don't really feel like that. Around May or June, sometimes I can't tell if the cicada noise is coming from outside or if it's from the game."

After the release of *My Summer Vacation*, an interesting oversight in the game's code started to become known amongst players. The "August 32nd" bug allows players to bypass a menu item when loading a cleared game file, pushing the game forward another day past its ending, and creating a somewhat lifeless game world that quickly compounds with graphics glitches. It's surprising and funny, and though Ayabe has explained it publicly on Twitter and lightly joked about it, it's a slight sore spot for the man who reviewed every file in the game. "To be honest, this is something I don't want to talk too much about, but I don't want people to misunderstand what it is, so that's the reason I talk about it," he says. Ayabe establishes upfront that "August 32nd" was never made on purpose, and that thankfully it doesn't damage the main game or the player's save file. "I was

super surprised when I heard about it," Ayabe says, "but I was also at the same time kind of impressed. 'Wow, it's not breaking the game even though it's a bug.' ... It may not be allowed for me to think like this, but I did feel a tiny bit of pride—it's not a 'good' bug, but a cool bug." In other words, a whoopsie-daisy kind of occurrence that for all intents and purposes is worth looking back on and laughing. "Millennium Kitchen as a company really cares about the quality of its games," explains Ayabe, "So we do our bug checking really thoroughly. You could probably tell that the *Bokunatsu* series is one with very few bugs compared to other games that are out there, but maybe it was a trick from the gods to have this bug." Nevertheless, the game's legacy is bigger than a goofy bug, and the backing of Sony led to great success critically and financially. While not quite a massive blockbuster, it was more than enough to start brainstorming what was next.

THE KITCHEN'S COOKBOOKS



The Millennium Kitchen conference room is two parts discussion space and one part archive. What first catches the eye is a wall with neatly arranged bookshelves dedicated to displaying *Bokunatsu* games and memorabilia, as well as several dozen notebooks and binders full of the games' source material, from dialogue scripts to background art, as well as bulky photo albums packed full of snapshots taken of the real-world locations that inspired the games. The wall is a testament to Ayabe and his staff's work, clearly communicating the pride in what they've made.



At first we didn't have any plans of making a sequel," Ayabe says. "As a matter of fact, I was thinking we weren't supposed to make a sequel. But, while I was making *Bokunatsu 1*, I had feelings like 'I want to do this, I want to do that,' and because of that, we decided to create a sequel. And that's how I felt after every game, so that's how we kept going with sequels."

Released in 2002, *My Summer Vacation 2* would change settings from the forest to the seaside, with a new area based on the Izu Peninsula, specifically a small harbor village called Futo. But the sequel retained its 1975 setting, and the second Boku was identical to the first. While not quite a retcon, *My Summer Vacation 2* felt like Millennium Kitchen was creating parallel universes. According to Ayabe, the real reasons had more to do with sticking with the most appropriate timeframe. Using the whole series as an example, he explains, "When we were looking for materials to create the sequels, we always ended up landing on the '70s as the best time frame. But for *Bokunatsu 4*, we moved the time to the '80s, because the '70s no longer became the nostalgic era for people, as it was too far away now, and people don't have as many memories from then." People like Ayabe, as his generation was essentially the target audience for the first three games.

Shifting the setting to Izu was a more personal connection for Ayabe than Tsukiyono, as he had more familiarity with the region at the time. "I went to the east side of Izu a lot to go fishing. I don't drive, so I was looking for a good place to go where I could get back home by train the same day, so the east of Izu happened to be that place." A train ride from Tokyo to Izu is around two hours, so it made perfect sense. "Futo has a fishing port, with a lot of kids swimming in the port, which is a very unusual scene, because the port is where the ships come in," Ayabe says. "And when a ship arrived, there's a very rough announcement telling the kids to get the hell out of the port so the ship can come in. That was very interesting to me, and I wanted to capture that kind of scene, so that's why we went with Izu."

Though Boku doesn't get in the way of any ships in *My Summer Vacation 2*, the setting of the sequel is a marked change from the first game, where forests don't border so much of the area, and opportunities to go swimming are nearly constant. Still, the game's area is relatively compact compared to the real Futo, a realization that didn't hit Ayabe until later. "I went and took these pictures," he says, showing more source photos of Izu, "Then came back and started making the game with them in mind, then when I finished the game, I went to this location again, and the scale felt totally different—it was like three times bigger than I remembered it. That was an interesting experience for me."

In terms of the game's story, *My Summer Vacation 2* has a lot more going on in it, with almost double the number of characters for Boku to meet compared to the first game. It's natural,

considering that Boku's relatives run an inn in the town, which was Ayabe's plan all along. "I wanted a location where a lot of people would gather, so that's how I came up with the inn as the idea." But as a consequence, Boku himself doesn't learn or develop much as a character, something Ayabe readily admits. "Compared to *Bokunatsu 1*, I feel like Boku got dragged along into other people's stories, so as a game, I feel that the attraction of the atmosphere of the game increased, but the freedom of Boku's character was kind of restrained."

The increased number of characters led to an interesting pattern where it seemed that archetypes were being re-used in new characters. In the first game, Boku's cousins were two girls. In the sequel, it's two boys, yet there are two similarly-aged girls as the next-door neighbors, and arguably, the boys retain the characterization of the friends Boku meets in the first game. "It was intended," says Ayabe, "And I do think about how the characters are laid out, and by changing those 'layouts,' I think about how the game can change or be more fun in 'this' way. However, while I intended to change the girls into boys in the sequel, somehow the girls who became the neighbors ended up more of a focus in the scenario, which was not the original intention." Perhaps girls are easier to write for Ayabe? Probably, he says, but he consciously tries to write more "energetic" characters. "Yet somehow, when I'm writing the scenario, I end up writing more of the quiet characters or the character that has a hidden side of them. And so, in *Bokunatsu 2*, the neighbor girls had their shaded side, so their stories showed more. I can't get it to work in the way I intend. (Laughs)"

The first *My Summer Vacation* was released for the original PlayStation months after Sony released the PlayStation 2, so it was inevitable that the sequel would be made for the new system. As a result, the aforementioned swimming portions of the game were rendered in fully realtime graphics, sitting alongside the two-dimensional painted backgrounds with the 3D characters on top.

By 2002, underwater sequences in 3D games were old hat, but for a small team like Millennium Kitchen that relied on outsourced programming, and with a game inherently dependent on beautiful details like *My Summer Vacation*, something as seemingly inconsequential was a big hurdle. "We had to first think about how you show underwater in 3D, and that's already a huge challenge," says Ayabe. "There were days where the graphics team would be painting a dawn scene, and they would think they screwed up the colors, but I actually liked it, so three days later they would come back with a scene with

"I WAS
THINKING
WE
WEREN'T
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A SEQUEL"



new colors and I would say 'No no no, bring it back to the old color!' It was a huge challenge, and we were going back and forth to complete it. But I feel we were able to create some great scenes, and I like the swimming in [*Bokunatsu*] 2 the best compared to 3 and 4."



Following *My Summer Vacation* 2, Ayabe and Millennium Kitchen went on to try something new. *Bokura no Kazoku* ("Our Family") was released in 2005, and though it may have resembled their past games visually—Mineko Ueda characters on pre-rendered backgrounds—its setting and gameplay were entirely different. Rather than the '70s countryside, *Bokura no Kazoku* was focused on modern-day Tokyo, with the goal of raising three children by cultivating their personalities, seeing them grow up and have children of their own.

Ayabe doesn't consider it a large departure from the *My Summer Vacation* series, though, mostly because his spark of inspiration was similar. "Right as I was finishing up [*Bokunatsu* 1], I had my first child. That's when I started experiencing how to bring up a kid, so *Bokura no Kazoku* is actually like a story of my wife and I raising our child, and I was thinking of how interesting it is."

"Also, when I was 40, I looked back at my life and I realized that I came to where I was so quickly. I had my childhood, grew up, and the next thing I knew I was 40. I was feeling that life is so short, and I wanted to express that with this game—living your life in fast-forward." The pacing of the game is certainly swift, though with an eventual three children to keep track of, it's natural to skip over all but the most notable events of their lives. "People would play it and ask me why it was so short," Ayabe says, "And I was kind of frustrated that they didn't get what I was trying to express."

Despite healthy promotion from Sony, *Bokura no Kazoku* couldn't replicate the success of *My Summer Vacation*. Reviews were mixed, and sales were below targets. Regardless, Ayabe says he's proud of it, though when asked if he thinks it should have been more of an adventure game formula like *My Summer Vacation*, Ayabe just chuckles and says "Yes, I do." One year later, Sony was set to release the PlayStation 3, and the first *My Summer Vacation* made it to PSP as an enhanced port called *My Summer Vacation Portable*. That game also included a bonus within; a teaser trailer showing the first glimpse of the next *Bokunatsu* game, in development for PS3. The following summer, in 2007, Sony released *My Summer Vacation* 3 for the young and struggling PS3. Once again the game took place in 1975, though this time it was set in Hokkaido, Ayabe's birthplace. If the Izu setting in *My Summer Vacation* 2 had a personal connection, *My Summer Vacation* 3 had an even tighter one. "At first, I wasn't planning to do 3," Ayabe says,

"But then I thought, oh, wait a minute, I never made one based on my hometown. At the same time, I was very curious about PlayStation 3, and I wanted to create something for it. So I accepted the offer to make a sequel."

The sequel also had the distinction of being one of the earliest PS3 games, released less than a year after the system's launch. At the time, many developers experienced the growing pains of trying to make

"I HAVE THOUGHT OF A SCENARIO [FOR A WINTER VACATION GAME] WITH THE COUSIN FROM BOKUNATSU 3"

games for the high-powered system, and for a small, one-game-at-a-time studio like Millennium Kitchen, it was a necessary evil. Ayabe explains, "We started development when the development kits weren't even ready, so it was pretty challenging. Just to be able to show something on the screen was a huge challenge, and we also had to create some assets on our own, so that was very difficult." But the PS3's inherent support of high-definition widescreen

resolutions was a driving factor for Ayabe, who wanted to bring the beauty of Hokkaido to the world of *My Summer Vacation* in the highest quality possible. (The PSP ports of the earlier games merely bordered the original versions' backgrounds.)

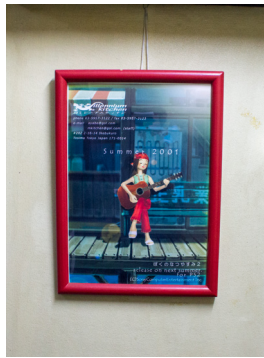
Of course, Hokkaido is teeming with natural beauty, and makes an obvious choice of setting, but it nevertheless raises the question of why it took until the third *My Summer Vacation* for Ayabe to finally decide to feature his homeland. The answer leads to an interesting revelation. "It wasn't that I didn't think about it at all," Ayabe says, "But I was thinking that if I was going to feature Hokkaido, maybe a winter vacation game would be more fitting. (Laughs) So in *Bokunatsu* 3, we planted seeds of settings that we could use in a winter vacation version."

The notion of a winter vacation game seemed like an inevitability, and fans of the series would wonder aloud about it, including making fan art for such a thing. To hear Ayabe echo the desire to make a winter-themed spin-off is refreshing, especially when he continues talking about it. "If we make a winter vacation game, it wouldn't be a 'Boku no Fuyuyasumi,' but 'Watashi no Fuyuyasumi;' a girl version. I have thought of a scenario with Midori, the female cousin in *Bokunatsu* 3, being the main character." Perhaps the Millennium Kitchen office will get a little chillier someday.

Going back to talking about *Bokunatsu* 3, Ayabe shares further reflections on the setting and characters. Though he aspired to do right by his birthplace with his video game representation, his aspiration perhaps didn't make a perfect match with the *Bokunatsu* world. "I wanted to create it very realistically, and include more realistic personalities, but I may have been too realistic with it," Ayabe says, "So I have that 'uncompleted' feeling."

Hokkaido as a whole is a wide-open land, not quite as dense as Tokyo or most of the mainland. When it comes to making a game, any game, best represent Hokkaido, Ayabe says, "I feel like instead of the approach in the *Bokunatsu* series, which is hand-drawn, a 3D realtime approach with a first-person view might be a better match," adding, with a laugh, "When I played *Red Dead Redemption*, I wished the staff who made that could make something along those lines."

The setting of *My Summer Vacation* 3 also lessened the variety of areas Boku could explore—the other games all seem to have pieces of one another, be it a small beach, forest, or lake, but the farmland in the third game is very green, to put it simply. "Actually, I thought I did make some nice variation in the areas," Ayabe says, "But after finishing development, I felt it was necessary to have given the game more areas. And the reason why I didn't have an ocean area in this one is that I wanted to make it something different from 2." Regardless, Boku still finds places to swim in the third game, and the level of scenery is top-notch, just as the others. Ayabe's personal opinion of 3



is largely positive, though that feeling of incompleteness is apparent in how he talks about it. "When we released *Bokunatsu 3...* when you look at the PS3 market now, it's successful, but when we released it, the hardware was not selling too well, so the sales of the game weren't great either," Ayabe says.



With that in mind, Ayabe and Millennium Kitchen approached the fourth *My Summer Vacation* with a different thought about hardware than with the PS3 and the third game. "PSP was selling a lot here [in Japan], so the market was big, and our development team is not that big, so I was thinking that the PSP hardware was fitting for us. And we like to take care of the very fine details, so to do that, PSP seemed like the perfect hardware."

And so, *My Summer Vacation 4* started development on PSP, released in 2009, and followed the success of the port of the first game. Not only was it the first of the series to be exclusively portable, but it was the first to shift the story's time period forward from 1975 to 1985, with a new Boku who is eager and creative, carrying a sketchbook around as he explores the Setouchi islands in another seaside experience.

In the real world, 1985 was in the formative years of Japan's video game boom, and in recognition of that, *My Summer Vacation 4* includes a working arcade machine of *Qix*, the classic action-puzzle game. "In the '80s it was common to have arcade games in front of little shops," he says, "So I was thinking we had to have a game in there." One would assume *Qix* was one of Ayabe's favorite games, though that would be only half right. During development, "The whole team was giving out suggestions, and we had a whole list of games we were considering. Then Taito, who made *Qix*, was the one company where the boundary was so low. They were like, 'Oh, OK, fine, sure, why don't you do that? And we'll take care of the porting!'" Taito was also the first company to respond, so Ayabe seized the opportunity and made *Qix* the tabletop arcade game Boku can stop and play at the nearby shop.

1985 was also when Nintendo's Famicom dominated the consumer game market—if things had worked out differently, and *My Summer Vacation 4* wasn't a Sony game, would Ayabe have included Nintendo's system instead? "I was originally thinking of having an arcade game, so I wasn't thinking of the Famicom," he says. "However, after you brought it up, I'm thinking that is actually a good idea; I might have wanted to do that. (Laughs)" Arcade games were Ayabe's bread and butter even before he entered the game industry in 1986, becoming a fan of shoot-em-ups. "Xevious was one of them, and *Qix* was one of my favorites," he says. "In 1986, *Dragon Quest* was released, so that's when I started playing the Famicom, and kind of shifted to console games instead of arcade games."

My Summer Vacation 4 may not look much different than *My Summer Vacation 2*, but the setting belies a different personality. The backgrounds are much more vibrant, and in terms of characters, Boku doesn't seem as shy, and there isn't as much melodrama within the story compared to certain moments in the other games. It's happier, and Ayabe doesn't disagree. "I felt like 3 didn't feel too much like a 'Japan summer,' and so



I wanted to create a game that feels more and more like that; happier and brighter. And so I picked the Setonai Sea, which has a very bright image of the ocean."

The sequel introduced something else new: a kind of energy meter that slowly depletes unless Boku has something to eat during the day, though most food in the game costs money, which needs to be found or earned. Here, Ayabe's desire for realism poked through once more. "Up till this sequel, you could go out and do whatever as much as you wanted without eating lunch, but I was thinking what would happen if I add a function where you have to eat something—otherwise you'll feel sick, because it's summer and it's hot out," he says. "It was kind of like an experiment for me; to add a function where you actually have to try hard to obtain something to eat and continue the game."

For a game series that went so long promoting its leisurely play style, adding something so traditionally game-like seems blasphemous. But, true to Ayabe's process, he went forward with it, and once more did not hear anything about it from Sony. He reiterates, "Throughout the whole series, the only thing we were told is to add a highway to *Bokunatsu 1*. After completion of the games, there were times the promotion division came to us and said 'the location should have been this place,' and it was like, OK, why are you bringing that up now? It might be a good thing or a bad thing, but yeah, Sony is really hands-off with us."



It's been some time since the last *My Summer Vacation* game. After *Bokunatsu 4*, the next title was *My Summer Vacation Portable 2*, a PSP port of the second game with some of the enhancements from 4, and released in 2010, just in time for the series' 10th anniversary. Ayabe, now a frequent presence on Twitter, shared an idea he had for a game, the concept being "kaiju that appear on Friday." Kaiju, the giant fictional monsters of the Godzilla and Ultraman schools, have been staples of Japanese pop culture for decades, and Ayabe's idea involved them entering the real world. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and it dovetailed with the beginnings of his next project. "In the *Guildo2* series, there's another game called *The Starship Damrey*," Ayabe says, "And in February 2012, the people who created that title approached us and asked if we wanted to be part of *Guildo2*." Level-5's *Guild* series is all about featuring creative game developers and giving them the opportunity to make short-form games with unique ideas.

"When they approached us, we thought it might be cool

to do that winter vacation game (*Laughs*). So I was originally thinking of submitting the concept for 'Watashi no Fuyuyasumi,'" adds Ayabe. "However, I heard from someone else that [Akihiro] Hino-san from Level-5 wanted bizarre or outrageous concepts, so I thought OK, 'The Kaiju That Appear on Friday' is unusual, so that might be a good concept." And so, that became the name of Ayabe's next game, retitled *Attack of the Friday Monsters* outside Japan.

The end product is a story set in the early '70s, about a young boy in a yellow shirt who runs around his town encountering the locals and eventually happening upon the eponymous Friday monsters. Though Ayabe didn't go with another "vacation" game, it looks and feels much like *My Summer Vacation*, only with a greater helping of fantasy. "I do feel like I want to explore

*"I DO FEEL
LIKE I WANT
TO EXPLORE
FANTASY
MORE"*

MUSIC MAN



If you expected the man behind such pleasant games would be into New Age or something along those lines, think again—Ayabe's tastes are more in the realm of techno and associated electronica, and practically all of his CD collection is stored in the Millennium Kitchen office. But it doesn't stop there. "I have like 1,500 vinyls at home," he says with a laugh, though he seems more interested than the content than the collection, adding "My kids have been drawing on the album jackets."



the fantasy part more," he says, "But the fantasy that's 'right next' to reality. That's the kind of thing that interests me a lot." Regardless, Ayabe brushed off the notion that elements of *Friday Monsters* were intended for a *Bokunatsu* sequel.

The game is also the first Millennium Kitchen project to be localized for overseas, an exciting prospect after making a series of games that may have been too rooted in Japanese culture to make an impact elsewhere. "It's exciting as a developer to see how that process works," says Ayabe, "But as a creator, I'm feeling a little scared about how it's going to be received by people."

For Ayabe, sharing the spotlight with other *Guild* creators like Keiji Inafune, Goichi Suda and Yoot Saito is a proud moment, but he remains modest, saying that he isn't one to want a lot of exposure in the media. "But then again," he says, "If I become famous and a lot of people know my name, that might bring more freedom for us in creating games, because they might be funded more or give us more opportunity. So it's like a balance, and I'm not sure what is best."



Talk turns to the journey the *My Summer Vacation* series has had so far. It wasn't too many years before other, curiously similar games were released, particularly the PS2 title *Inaka Kurashi* ("Country Living") from Victor (now Marvelous) and Konami's Nintendo DS adventure game *Houkago Shounen* ("After-School Boys"), the latter being the most obvious aping of Millennium Kitchen's games. In the end, those games flew far under the radar compared to *My Summer Vacation*, but it's still a mixed reaction for Ayabe. "People mimicking the way we express things is fine, but mimicking the time setting and the target audience I feel isn't so cool," he says.

Ayabe then shares a related anecdote. "After *Inaka Kurashi* was released, I had the opportunity to work with the producer, and I got to talk with him. When people came up to him and asked if he was inspired by *Bokunatsu*, he just said 'yes' because he's too tired to explain the whole story he had in mind. But the actual story is that he wasn't inspired by *Bokunatsu*; he came up with that story from a totally different angle, and that turned out to be *Inaka Kurashi*." It evokes the situation of that first fateful meeting with Sony, where great minds think alike. "But," says Ayabe, "The biggest feeling I have is that when I see a title that looks similar to the *Bokunatsu* series, I feel like, 'Why didn't you let us make this game?' (*Laughs*) I would've made it better."

After being "inducted" into the *Guild* series and coming out on top of what might now be a genre of "nostalgic adventure" games, where does Ayabe see himself? Does he have other game creators he admires? "Of course, I have people I admire, but I want to keep it a secret," he says with a laugh. Perhaps a good friend, then; a rival, even? "He might get mad if he hears this, but Mr. Uchida, producer of *Love Plus*," Ayabe says, laughing





again. "Among the people I know, he's the one that gives the most detailed feedback about the *Bokunatsu* series. He likes it a lot, so he would ask things like, 'Why was the grass in that pond shaped the way it was?' Very detailed and sharp questions. The games that we create are very different, but the directions we're headed are very similar." In fact, Millennium Kitchen has done some graphics work on two of Konami's *Tongari Boushi* (Magician's Quest) games, produced by Uchida's *Love Plus* studio.

Today, with *Friday Monsters* basically wrapped up, and the future of the *My Summer Vacation* series unknown (at least publicly), the question remains as to what's next for Ayabe and his studio. If 1975 became too long ago to be a viable setting for a game, *Bokunatsu 4*'s 1985 is in danger of getting to that point, too. Would a hypothetical sequel jump another 10 years to 1995? "Oh, that's a very good question," says Ayabe with a chuckle. Perhaps then he could include a period-appropriate original PlayStation in the game. "If I could do that, the game I'd want to include is *Ridge Racer*," says Ayabe, "Because in the programming house we worked with, the producer of *Ridge Racer* worked there. Also, if it's a Sony-related game, then *Jumping Flash!*"

And what of *My Summer Vacation 3*? It seems natural that it would follow the previous games and be ported to a handheld. The mere mention of such a thing causes Ayabe to playfully clutch his heart. "Maybe, perhaps, I'm not sure, but there may be something like that in my office that people could play... (Laughs) But for now, we don't have plans."

At first a childhood illustrator, then animator, then

programmer, and now game designer, Ayabe has also gradually become something of a writer. Besides writing the stories and scripts for his games, he has contributed verse for a *My Summer Vacation* art book, and most recently a genuine children's book, *Kurotoshiro-kun*, based on the book that a character from *My Summer Vacation Portable 2* tries to complete. Could he ever consider writing a real career separate from making games? "I feel I'm really good at writing conversational scenarios, but I don't feel confident that I'm able to express something just through writing," Ayabe says. "If someone approaches me, then maybe I might try something like that, but I don't feel like I want to go out there and do that."

He was approached, in fact, for quite the project. "I can't talk too much about this, but I wrote a script for a movie, and the company has already completed it, but I don't know if it's going to come out or not. But after doing that, I felt confident in expressing something through writing a scenario for a movie or something else visual. So maybe it's a possibility."



Leaving the Millennium Kitchen office is a much different feeling than entering it. What first appeared to be a homely hole in the wall is really an inviting house of creativity—serious enough to get work done, but whimsical enough to keep it from being a grind. Ayabe's pride for what he's produced is clear as day just by glancing in the conference room that proudly displays all that source material instead of locking it away in a file cabinet.

And why not be proud? Ayabe's company has seen some generally fortunate development experiences, from the rapid Sony greenlighting to the publisher's hands-off approach and even Taito's willingness to license out *Qix*. It would have you wondering where they got their four-leaf clover, but it may just be Kaz Ayabe, the creative soul at the center of it all who dedicates himself to crafting games that turn slices of life into wonderfully fulfilling stories—and who, like summer itself, is simply memorable.





The of Misfit Hardware



ARTIFACT #SDR2X3

Sony PSX

Crossed wires

About a decade ago, when the digital video recorder was a fairly new innovation, every electronics company tried to get on the train. In America, TiVo was the de facto unit to have, but in Japan, it was the Wild West in comparison. Sony made a grand entrance into the market in 2003 when they unveiled the PSX, essentially a DVR with a DVD player/recorder, plus a large hard drive (for the time), photo and music support and PlayStation 2 functionality bolted on. Or is it a PS2 with a DVR bolted on? Indeed, the PSX was yet another all-in-one game console like the Panasonic Q or LaserActive before it. It was also the last, though only because regular game consoles can do just about everything now, anyway.

The PSX was also the first Sony product to incorporate the Xross Media Bar (XMB) interface, years before the PSP and PS3 brought it to wider acceptance. It's not quite as flashy as later iterations, though, but it does replace the original PS2 system menu, letting you boot games or browse memory card saves from XMB. In addition, the hard drive is compatible with associated PS2 games, making for the ultimate DVR/DVD/*Final Fantasy XI* machine. If only you could record and play simultaneously.

Though the PSX makes quite a first impression with its almost crystalline white shell (or silver, depending on the model), it's also an unfortunate example of Sony's sometimes runaway passion for industrial design. The unit's front panel is kept as buttonless and inputless as possible, which is perfectly fine if you were buying it solely for DVR purposes. But it's natural that most people wanted the PSX to play PS2 games as well, and you would find the associated controller ports shoved to the rear with all the TV inputs. Sony also decided to make the rear panel recessed in the back a few inches, creating a "hideaway" that makes it ever so harder to reach back there and use the PS2 ports without A) pulling out the whole unit and B) removing a useless, detachable bottom panel that further blocks the cords. To rub salt in the wound, Sony made a matching white DualShock 2 for the PSX, yet it was sold separately. But it's not a total loss of user friendliness: a flip-down lid on the front reveals the PS2 memory card



Big, white, and sleek, the PSX was Sony's attempt to bring the most-used media formats of 2003 together in one box. But like most jack-of-all-trades systems, it was priced at a luxury-item tier, and nevertheless would be rendered obsolete at least three years after its release. And even after the release of the PlayStation 3, it is still probably the biggest, heaviest thing that plays PS2 games.

slots, USB port (yes, just one), Memory Stick slot, and navigation buttons.

At a glance, the PSX is a pretty nice product for a game fan who felt the PS2 didn't look fancy enough, and the DVR functionality was somewhat ahead of its time. But it hit the one big roadblock that threatened all multimedia game consoles of its type: price. The base model PSX was sold for roughly \$800, all but obliterating its appeal to people who would just as soon buy a separate PS2 and DVR.

And though it was less obvious at the time, the PSX was also bumping up against a sea change in the electronics industry: HDTV still had a few years to go before exploding in popularity, so the PSX was made ideal for 4:3 standard-def TVs. (At least it supported component video). And soon, digital distribution of music and movies would appear, not to mention the release of the PlayStation 3 a few years later (the original version of which supported everything *but* DVR functionality). Perhaps the worst knock against the PSX was after its release, when customer complaints grew in number due to the early models' tendency to overheat because of poor venting—there's that misplaced design passion again. Later PSX models would officially support PSP connections, letting you transfer media to and from the portable, but the PSX left as soon as it arrived, and today, if nothing else, Sony has a better grip on both the Japanese game and DVR market with the Torne and Nasne recorder units for PS3.

JUMPING FLASH!

SONY • PLAYSTATION • 1995

Who could have ever guessed that one of the best first-person shooters of the 32-bit era had nothing to do with the military or survival horror, and was Japanese as all get-out? When the PlayStation promised realistic 3D worlds, Sony got a talented small-time developer who knew their stuff to produce the kooky first-person platformer *Jumping Flash!* Like most FPS games, though, it does involve monsters from space.

Robotic rabbit hero Robbit jets through space to undo the evil machinations of Baron Aloha, who looks like a 1940s Japanese banker gone mad. The Baron has broken off chunks of planets to use them as part of his own personal resort, and it's up to Robbit to destroy Aloha's minions and return the pieces of the planet back to their rightful places. Robbit has the power to jump really high, even double jump, and that's useful in reaching the numerous floating platforms and areas that hide the jetpods. And better yet, you play the game through Robbit's eyes, experiencing every 50-foot leap.

Apologies if this sounds like the text on the back of the box (though you won't see the phrase "lose your lunch" used here), but

Jumping Flash! is still enjoyable enough to elicit those kinds of platitudes. In 2013, it looks like it's made of papercraft, but it's an abstract quality that has helped it as the years have gone on.

Jumping Flash! looks like it would be overly complex, but its beauty is in the fact that it's so straightforward: Robbit's main mission is to locate a few jetpods strewn around the spacious levels, then head to the exit, and maybe shoot down some enemies on the way. Secondary weapons look and act like fireworks, and repeatedly firing them can turn a mundane stage into a flashy spectacle, and you barely have to do anything.

Part of what makes *Jumping Flash!* so great is the way it gives you what you want. When you jump in any other first-person game, your character's gaze is fixed forward. Here, Robbit automatically looks down after the second midair jump, because if you were a robot rabbit that could jump super high and not hurt itself, you would want to look down and enjoy the view. (For the record, you can hold the look button to keep facing forward in case you need to keep an eye on an enemy,

specifically a boss). It encourages you to play with the game's central mechanic and explore the world, which few games really accomplish on this level.

In America, Sony relied on other games to drive sales of the PlayStation in its first years, but it was fortunate that they decided to publish *Jumping Flash!* anyway, because even if it wasn't *Toshinden* or *NFL GameDay*, it was cool enough to find an audience. It's likely that many PS owners were introduced to *Jumping Flash!* via demo discs, and casual exposure like that gives the game the unique identity of being a sleeper hit that, with its open 3D levels, also proved what the system could do better than many other games at the time. Main developer Exact had been plugging away at X68000 games, creating at least one 3D shooter (*Geograph Seal*) before being pulled into the PlayStation world. Their life was short after that, though they did produce the first *Ghost in the Shell* game for PlayStation; another fan favorite. But by being on the ground floor of PlayStation mania with an impressive and delightful game, they made an indelible mark on the system's early history.

3:54

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When

I'm asked what I like so much about the *My Summer Vacation* games (and believe me, I do get asked), I start by saying it's the scenery. I can't exactly quantify it; it's just how I'm wired. I grew up near the woods at the same time I started falling in love with video games, so there's a certain reaction I have when I see a game with a nice natural scene in it.

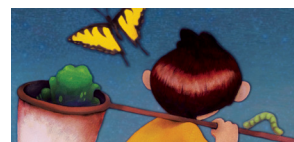
This did not start with *Bokunatsu*, either—I remember being particularly drawn to the castle in the background of the opening area of the NES game *Legacy of the Wizard*. It's just a tiny piece of pixel art that has no bearing on the rest of the game, but I wanted to be there. It was in the distance, over a hill, and I always had a fascination with wondering what was on the other side of a hill. And so when I found *My Summer Vacation*, I had a revelatory moment.

I'd had revelations before when playing some really good video games, but this was different. This was a game all about wondering what was over the hill, and often finally discovering it. It was immediately scenic and easy to love beyond the language barrier. That's really what I like about it, and I can't always be sure if people can understand or (better/worse yet) relate to it, but I know the game will continue to be there, and that I'll continue to love it.

It's nice to have games that push "realistic" detail, but the settings used lean far too much towards "realism" rather than "nature." The *Elder Scrolls* series does this the best in the realm of triple-A games, but it's saddled with the immense weight of content and the expectations of easily-agitated fans, which overshadow the strides made in creating natural beauty for a fantasy world.

Luckily we have modest game creators like Kaz Ayabe to place the same sort of emphasis on capturing natural beauty within games, and publishers like Sony and Level-5 who recognize and nurture it. Not to mention a planet full of amateur developers who express their ideas for beautiful naturally-inspired (not necessarily realistic) worlds, like in the PC title *Proteus*. It's a good time to see where video game settings can take us; places that aren't bombed-out cities or dank caverns. It won't be so bad to occasionally take the long way around to get past those, and see what's over the hill.

rdb



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EDITOR

Ray Barnholt
ray@scroll.vg

COVER ILLUSTRATION

Jacob Smiley
www.jacobsmiley.com

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SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Fraioli
Hiroko Minamoto
The 377 People on the Next Page

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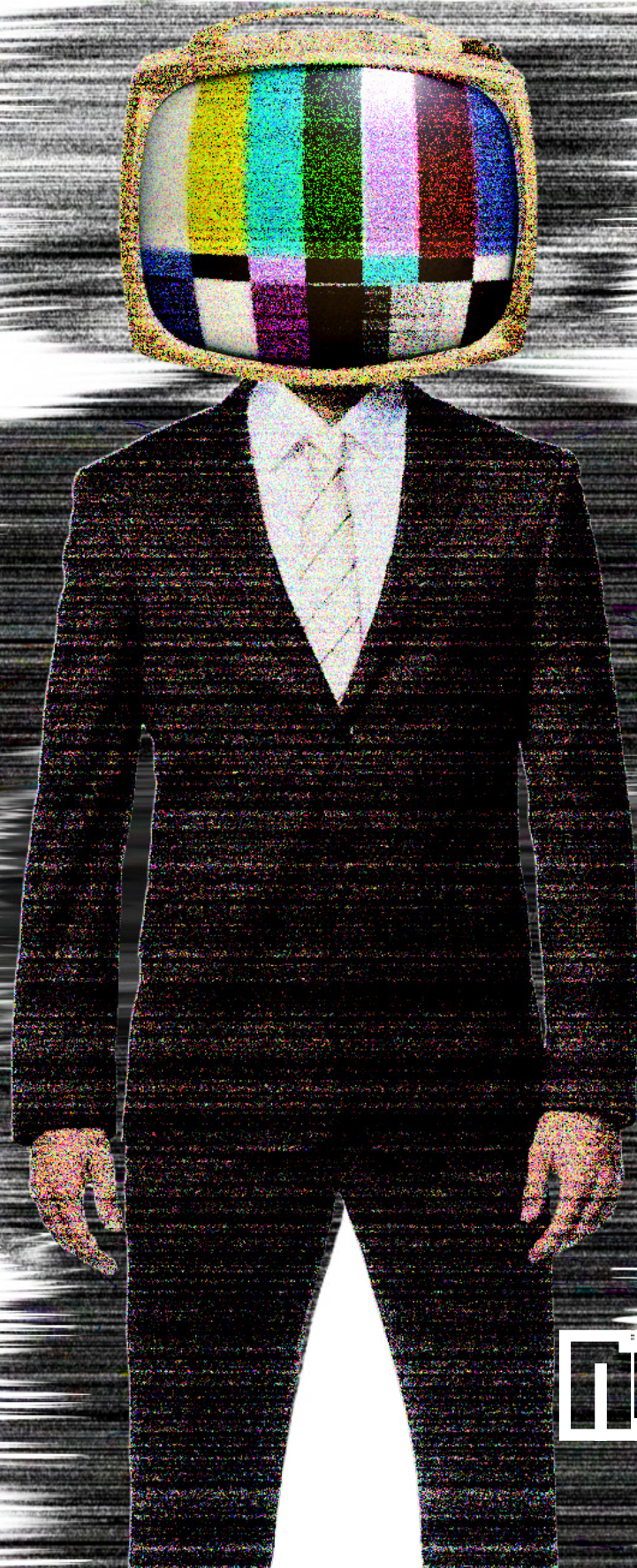
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| Liam E. | | | Rodney Andrade | Steve Ahlman | Zach Massey |
| | | | Ron Buckman III | | ZeroHermit |



next



