

REVIEW OF STAR FESTIVAL

Program title:	<i>Star Festival</i> (version 1.0 for Macintosh)
Distributor:	Botticelli Interactive 104 South Street, Boston, MA 02111
Phone:	(617) 695-1960
Fax:	(617) 695-1962
Program information:	http://www-japan.mit.edu/starfest/
Download a demo:	http://www.botticelli.com/download.html
E-mail:	StarFest@botticelli.com
System requirements:	Mac 68040 or higher, System 7.1 or later with Japanese Language Kit installed, or Kanji Talk 7.1 or later, QuickTime 2.5 (included), 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM driver preferred.
Price:	US\$150.00 (S/H: \$5.00)

Reviewed by Tomo Yanagimachi, [University of Minnesota](#)

I was at the Association of Teachers of Japanese annual meeting in Boston in 1994 when a group of Japanese language instructors from MIT demonstrated a prototype of a multimedia CALL program which impressed everyone present. After a few years of waiting, the commercial version of the program has finally become available as Star Festival (hereafter SF), a culture and language CD-ROM for learners of Japanese as well as for a general audience with no background in the language.

SF differs from most other Japan- or Japanese-language-related software currently available on the market in that it includes an important but often neglected feature of successful language and culture learning: authentic linguistic and cultural materials are presented in context. SF revolves around 20 episodes which chronologically document MIT Professor Shigeru Miyagawa's (executive producer of SF) return to his home town, Hiratsuka, Japan, after 30 years' absence. He visits the train station, his childhood house, neighborhood stores, fish markets, and the family graveyard, before his stay culminates in the final episode on the Tanabata Star Festival in the town. Each episode consists of a beautifully produced documentary video clip with an English commentary, the professor's old family pictures, and culture and history notes. Some episodes also include an interview with local people, with Japanese and English subtitles. Each episode is so well integrated into the main theme of the software and so highly contextualized that you easily get immersed in the stories, and even start to feel as if you were making the journey with the professor.

Another advantage of SF is that its authentic audio and visual materials provide users with opportunities to interact with real language, people, and culture. The software's high sound and image quality also work well to increase the level of authenticity and presence. SF can give users a virtual homestay experience,

with the host family telling interesting about their life and history, showing you around the town; and introducing you to local people who speak in authentic language.

The software, unfortunately, also has a few drawbacks. First, I found it strange to find culture and history notes on items like hara-kiri and Mt. Fuji; these items are not just culturally stereotyped but also have no direct relevance to the theme of the episodes in which they are presented. A more focused selection of the entries should have been made, rather than trying to cover and present too many facets of Japanese life and history superficially. Culture notes in many episodes are, however, nicely interwoven with the theme of each episode.



One example is the "Fruit Shop" episode where users encounter an interview with an owner-wife of a fruit shop and then given culture notes through the written narratives of the professor's mother on items like "working in the family business" and "the role of daughter-in-law" in the Japanese family.

If every culture note were presented this way, users could easily relate what they are learning to an immediately available person, making learning more meaningful and effective.

Another drawback of SF is its not so user-friendly control panel. Although some users might like its futuristic, Star Trek-like design. I personally had a hard time figuring out how to get into the episodes that I wanted to look at. Furthermore, no alphabetic or thematic list of all the culture notes or search functions are given, so users have to go into each episode and look for particular items there. However, these drawbacks are relatively minor and are far outweighed by SF's advantages.

Given SF's major theme and extensive explanations of various aspects of Japanese culture and history, the software is especially recommended for pre-college level instructors who want to introduce these aspects to their students. It is also possible to use the program's documentary film clips and interviews as materials for language skills activities in intermediate to advanced-level college classes.

In summary, the arrival of Star Festival not only provides learners who are interested in Japanese language and culture with an effective study tool, but also shows language instructors what multimedia CALL programs can potentially offer the language teaching profession.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Tomo Yanagimachi has been involved in the Technology and L2 Learning, as well as the [Less Commonly Taught Languages \(LCTL\)](#) projects at the [Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition \(CARLA\)](#) of the University of Minnesota the past three years. He recently finished his dissertation on the acquisition of "zero pronoun use" by learners of Japanese. He will start teaching in the Japanese program of the University of Wisconsin, Madison in Fall, 1997.

E-mail: yana0001@tc.umn.edu