Youtube link: <https://youtu.be/eSa7vy8fydc>

**Yakuza: A series caught between East and West**

**Prologue**

SEGA’s popular franchise Yakuza is currently undergoing some major changes to reflect the growing success it has seen in the last few years.

The franchise is shifting genre from action beat ‘em ups to turn based JRPGs and introducing new leading characters to carry on the franchise.

The biggest of the changes though is that future games in the Yakuza franchise would no longer be using the name Yakuza, but instead be going by the name Like a Dragon.

The studio behind the franchise, Ryu Ga Gotoku Studios, have not released an official statement as to why the decision to change the name was made, but those familiar enough with the franchise might be able to hazard a guess as to why.

The most obvious reason for the change is that Like a Dragon is the English translation of the franchise’s Japanese name, Ryu Ga Gotoku. However, the change also marks a significant landmark for the franchise because it proves that it is now established enough to stick to its Japanese origins, as appose to catering to western audiences, something it was forced to do for a while.

So how did Yakuza go from a niche franchise with a small but loyal fan base to one of SEGA’s biggest and most popular franchises? That’s what we’re going to find out as we explore Yakuza’s rise in the west.

**TITLE: Yakuza: A series caught between the East and the West**

**The Dragon’s Journey Begins**

The story begins with Toshihiro Nagoshi, who in 1989 would join SEGA and stay there for another 30 years.

In his early days at SEGA, Nagoshi worked on several titles such as Daytona USA and Spikeout. While most notably known for creating Ryu Ga Gotoku, Nagoshi is also known for creating Super Monkey Ball, a stark contrast to Ryu Ga Gotoku as is amusingly told by these photos.

Super Monkey Ball didn’t do so well in Japan but was a big hit in the west. Despite proving he could make games western audiences could enjoy, for his next project he decided to ignore the west entirely and instead focus on making a game for Japanese audiences:

*“To be specific, it [the target audience] was actually adult Japanese males. I wasn’t really thinking about overseas audiences, nor was I thinking about younger and female audiences. Around that time there were a few Japanese games that proved popular internationally, but the genre of these games was mainly limited to fantasy, military, and sports.*

*There was a huge market for those genres, so I understand why everyone targeted them, but too much of the same thing is boring.” -* Toshihiro Nagoshi

With that in mind, Nagoshi chose the yakuza as the focus of the new IP he was developing. His reasons being that not only are the yakuza a sensitive subject in Japan and something many Japanese people are aware of but never exposed to, but the subject would lend itself to great human dramas, something he was keen to include in the game. The name he settled on was Ryu Ga Gotoku… Like a Dragon.

But wait! Where do dragons fit into a game about the yakuza?

So in a game about the yakuza, why did Nagoshi decide to call it Ryu Ga Gotoku? Where did the dragon The simple answer is that he thought it was cool. The correct Japanese is actually ‘Ryu no Gotoshi’, but that didn’t work for Nagoshi the way Ryu Ga Gotoku did. No matter how many other names he came up with, Ryu Ga Gotoku, despite being “weird Japanese”, was the one that looked and sounded the coolest. In his own words *“I’m glad that we prioritised coolness over correct Japanese.”*

**Success in the Homeland**

Released on 12th August 2005 for the Playstation 2, Ryu Ga Gotoku was a hit in Japan both commercially and critically. Speaking about the game’s success, Nagoshi cited, *"[Ryu ga Gotoku was successful] because there were only a few titles which directly portray original Japanese culture. Also, there is no other title which attempts to represent such a Japanese world view with a big budget title."*

While Nagoshi had actively chosen not to cater towards western audiences, Ryu Ga Gotoku would still be making its way over to the west, which presented a herculean task. How could a game so fundamentally Japanese translate to western audiences?

This may not seem like such a big deal now considering how obsessed westerners have become with Japanese culture but remember – this was 2005. “Japanophilia” wasn’t quite as prevalent as it is today.

Not only that but at the time Japan’s influence on the game industry was not as big as it once was in the 80s and 90s. Unless you were Nintendo, many of Japan’s biggest franchises were becoming fading stars as western IPs such as Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto were dominating the games market.

Perhaps Ryu Ga Gotoku could be the rising new star Japan’s gaming industry needed?

**A Struggle for Power**

Yakuza was released in September 2006 and while it fared well critically, it did not sell like it did in Japan.

Yakuza was criticized for its localization, which took the approach of making it less Japanese and more western. Most notably of these changes is the bad dialogue:

*“The following months consisted of me deciphering “Engrish” into sometimes cliché, sometimes ghetto-thug inspired dialogs. I was explicitly encouraged to add loads of fucks and shits. I remember reading a review shortly after the release that complained about the excessive usage of swear words.” –* Demian ‘Ryu Ichinose’ Smith

How characters interacted and character’s names were also changed to make it more western friendly. Not only that, but open world crime dramas were an over-saturated market in the west at the time and unfortunately Yakuza was just dismissed as “GTA in Japan”. A comparison that continues to piss off Yakuza fans to this day, but one that can’t really be blamed for being made. It’s literally the name of Japan’s biggest crime syndicate.

Speaking of, why was the name Like a Dragon “too Japanese” for the west? There’s dragons in the west, right? Well yes, but dragons represent very different things in Japan. Aside from visual differences, dragons are portrayed in western culture as these fire breathing beasts that bring havoc to the land and must be slain. But in Japan, dragons are seen as protectors; guardians who shield us from danger, powerful and wise beings who can offer strength and courage in times of turmoil. The dragon in question, Kazuma Kiryu, is just that, a protector. He uses his power to protect people, not cause destruction… Well okay, he does cause destruction, but to protect people! You get the idea. The concept of the dragon as a protector is once again something that at the time, would have likely gotten lost in translation.

While stripping away all of the ‘Japaneseness’ of Yakuza may seem dumb in hindsight, they made sense at the time.

As mentioned, Japan’s stronghold on the games industry was being undermined by the west with the release of new IPs, something Japan wasn’t really making at the time. Keiji Inafune, former Global Head of Production at Capcom, has called out Japan’s gaming industry for being too complacent and afraid of adapting with the times on multiple occasions, famously stating:

*“Man, Japan is over. We’re done. Our game industry is finished.”*

So when you have a game as fundamentally Japanese as Yakuza release at a time when being Japanese isn’t a good selling point, it makes sense to tone down the “Japaneseness”.

Taking Japanese products and taking the Japanese out of them was a proven successful business strategy at the time as seen by the popularity of localized animes such as Pokémon and Yu-Gi-Oh! This isn’t even a new concept. Companies like Sony were doing this back in the 80s with the Walkman.

The Yakuza franchise would go on to have difficulty establishing itself in the western gaming market as poor localization would plague the series for years with terrible marketing that did not help. One only needs to watch the god-awful trailer for Yakuza 4 to see just how hard they were trying to market it for the west.

Nagoshi had been clear about not wanting to appeal to the west too much, but as gaming’s influence continued to spread globally, it was something he ultimately couldn’t avoid. He obviously still wanted western fans to enjoy the game, but understood the importance of maintaining the game’s Japanese identity while doing so.

*“In Europe and the United States, I feel that the number of fans has increased little by little, but I can't say that the situation has improved yet. I feel that we should be a little more creative and appealing.”*

Fortunately, things would start to turn around for the Yakuza series…

**The Dragon Rises**

2017 saw the release of Yakuza 0, the game often credited as popularising the franchise in the west. Not only did it receive an overwhelmingly positive response, but it sold well too. (figures?)

At this point the west had become obsessed with Japanese culture. Japanophilia had really kicked in thanks to the rise of the internet, making it easier to consume Japanese culture than ever before, and without a western filter. This would benefit many Japanese franchises but Yakuza would be one of the ones to really shine. People came to love and appreciate the Japaneseness of the franchise, something that was actively taken away from it before.

Sega says that the success of Yakuza is partly because of the strong localization from Atlus which Sega purchased back in 2013.

"The studio understands both Japanese and American games very well, and is able to localize Japanese games in a way that accurately conveys the unique worldviews of Japanese titles to local gamers," the shareholder report says. "The studio is able to maximize the entertainment value of localized games that reflect these unique worldviews, and this has led to very positive reviews from local gamers. During the product development stage, game content is shared with the localization team for translation before the department is finished, facilitating the rapid release of foreign language versions of the game."

The franchise is doing better than ever before in the west. The games, which were originally Playstation exclusives, are now available on both Xbox and PC, with all games from the mainline franchises on Xbox Game Pass. Merchandise is now readily available and fan communities continue to thrive, helping to establish some of the franchise’s cast as beloved video game characters in their own right.

For Toshihiro Nagoshi, seeing Yakuza thrive in the west was a welcome step in the right direction. Not only that, but for Nagoshi, Yakuza’s success signifies a shifting culture in gaming, that being western and eastern gamers coming together and embracing each other’s cultures:

*“I think there is definitely a trend of Western players accepting games from Japan but also Japanese audiences really embracing Western games as well. Western games are succeeding in Japan much more than they used to. It’s really happening at the same time, players in each region embracing foreign games.”*

As it stands right now, there is no better time to be a Yakuza fan.

**A Sealed Legacy**

Last year it was announced that Toshihiro Nagoshi would be leaving SEGA to join Chinese tech company NetEase. Since then, he has started Nagoshi Studio, a subsidiary under NetEase Games. As to why he departed from SEGA after 30 years, Nagoshi said:

*“Guys, I don't want to be the CEO of Sega here. I'm a player and a game maker, I want to continue to push my career in that way.”*

Some fans are worried because well, Yakuza is fundamentally Nagoshi. Nagoshi pushed boundaries, he strived to make things that were different and unique, and that is what Yakuza is. Unique. And that’s why people love Yakuza.

In a way, Nagoshi’s departure reflects the narrative of the games. Kiryu is pushed further into becoming a prominent figure in the Tojo Clan, something he rejects as he just wants to live a quiet life. Nagoshi was being pushed by SEGA into taking on a more managerial heavy role, something he was not interested in as he wanted to remain in creative roles. As Kiryu bows out of the role as series protagonist, Nagoshi leaves SEGA to start a new journey.

While as previously mentioned, there is no better time to be a Yakuza fan, it is also a scary, albeit exciting time for the franchise. What will Yakuza look like without Nagoshi?

But as the franchise becomes known as Like a Dragon and new leaders, both real and fictional, take on central roles, fans from the east and the west and everywhere in between will be able to experience the exciting future for the franchise.

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