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**Japaneseness For Western Audiences in Video Games:**  
How the West Came to Desire Japanese Cultural Marks in their Video Games

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May 23, 2022

I have adhered to the honor code in this assignment.

## **Abstract**

This honors thesis studies trends in the localization of “Japaneseness” — aspects of Japanese culture — in Japanese video published in the West over the 40 year history of Japanese home console video games. Through case study analysis and comparisons of Japanese versions of video games with their Western counterparts that span from the mid-1980s to the present day, this thesis examines how Japanese video game companies choose to either remove or keep aspects of Japanese culture in the West, and how Western players respond to Japaneseness in their video games. This thesis argues that over the 40 year history of Japanese home video games in the West, there has been a shift in the tendency for Japanese video game companies from removing Japanese cultural markers and publishing Westernized versions in the West to keeping reference to Japanese culture and striving to publish Western versions that are authentic to their Japanese source. This thesis also argues that Western video game players since the mid-2010s have shown an increasing desire in playing games heavy in Japaneseness that parallels the boom in popularity of other Japanese media in the West, notably anime and manga.

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# 1. Introduction

In 2021, the video game industry was estimated to garner over \$180 billion in revenue, dwarfing other entertainment industries like movies, television and sports.<sup>1,2</sup> Even within the global recession caused by Covid-19, the video game industry has continued to grow; a survey found an estimated two-thirds of Americans played video games during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Within the games played in the last four decades, many were created in Japan. Japan is the third largest market for video games and the second country in the world in terms of the exports of video game related goods in 2019, with \$2.12 billion worth of exports.<sup>4,5</sup> Japanese game companies — such as Nintendo, Sony and Square Enix have attained international consciousness and Japanese game characters, like Mario, Pikachu, Kirby are recognized throughout the world and have had a massive impact on Japan’s pop culture and media. The influence of Japanese video games on the global stage is such that ex-prime minister Shinzo Abe disguised himself as Mario to announce the 2020 Tokyo Olympics during the closing ceremony in Rio in 2016.<sup>6</sup>

Video games as a creative medium and carrier of pop culture include many markers and signals that denote influence from a culture and identity — for Japan’s distinctive culture this notion has been called “Japaneseness.” Japaneseness in video games come from Japan’s cultural differences and its unique game design philosophy that give Japanese games a unique branding

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<sup>1</sup> Wijman, Tom. *The Games Market and Beyond in 2021: The Year in Numbers*. Newzoo, 2021,

<https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/the-games-market-in-2021-the-year-in-numbers-esports-cloud-gaming/>

<sup>2</sup> Bullard, Benjamin. *Video games are 2020’s biggest entertainment moneymaker, blowing past movies & sports combined*. SYFY, 2020, <https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/video-games-2020-revenues-outpace-movies-sports>.

<sup>3</sup> Snider, Mike. *Two-thirds of Americans, 227 million, play video games. For many games were an escape, stress relief in pandemic*. USA Today, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/gaming/2021/07/13/video-games-2021-covid-19-pandemic/7938713002/>.

<sup>4</sup> Newzoo. *Top 10 Countries/Markets by Game Revenues*. Newzoo, 2021, <https://newzoo.com/insights/rankings/top-10-countries-by-game-revenues/>.

<sup>5</sup> Workman, Daniel. *Top Video Games Exports by Country*. World’s Top Exports, 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/top-video-games-exports-by-country/>.

<sup>6</sup> International Olympic Committee. *Japan PM Abe Shinzo steals the show in Rio*. Olympic Channel, 2016, <https://olympics.com/en/video/japan-pm-abe-shinzo-steals-the-show-in-rio>.

distinguishable from games of other nations and cultures. Japan's video games can acquire Japaneseness from their creative and narrative nature through the use of elements like Japanese setting, characters and language similar to other media like film and literature; interactivity and purpose of "play" have also created Japaneseness unique to video games such as Japan's inclination for role-playing adventure games compared to shooter games common in the West. This thesis defines the "West" primarily as North America, Europe and Australia because of their coherent patterns of consumer taste and marketing strategies, as well as homogenous industry practices of companies from those regions. Despite video games' unique cultural and national influences, video games are a global market. Japanese video game companies who want to sell to foreign markets subject domestically created and marketed games to localization, a process that goes beyond just translation: it can entail changing story, art and character models or even gameplay<sup>7</sup> to appeal to certain regions. In the game industry, a tension exists between heavy localization that caters to a foreign target audience but feel insincere to the original, or light localizations that keep aspects of Japanese culture at the risk of alienating international audiences. Localization and how it treats Japaneseness has an enormous impact on Japanese games' international success.

This thesis argues that over the 40 year history of Japanese home video games in the West, there has been a shift in how companies localize Japaneseness and in the popularity of games heavy in Japaneseness.<sup>8</sup> Localization of Japanese games from 1985 until the early 2000s tended to extract Japaneseness to create a more Westernized product, with Japanese video games dominating due to their technological advantage and quality over Western games; but in the

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<sup>7</sup> Gameplay denotes how the player interacts and experiences the game. In essence, the "game" aspect of video games.

<sup>8</sup> This study focuses on the home video game industry that include console and PC gaming as opposed to arcades that were predominantly popular in the 1970s.

mid-2000s Western games overtook their Japanese counterpart in marketability and prevalence, leading to the Japanese video game industry slumping. The mid-2010s would see Japanese games that keep and even emphasize their Japaneseness grow in popularity in parallel with Japanese pop culture and media — especially those related to video games like anime and manga — booming in popularity.

To study Japanese game companies' transition from a tendency to remove Japaneseness to frequently preserving and highlighting Japaneseness in localizations in response to Western consumers' growing preference for “very Japanese” games, this research will categorize three time periods and examine case studies of video games in each of those phases, with an emphasis on the third, and current, period of the Japanese game industry. The first period is from 1985 to the mid-2000s; the case studies chosen will demonstrate that even as the video game industry advanced technologically, Japanese games tended to remove Japanese cultural markers during localization to offer Western audiences a Westernized game. The second period (mid-2000s to the mid-2010s) to the third period (mid-2010s to the present) would see a shift in both Western consumers buying games heavy in Japaneseness and Japanese video game companies localizing to meet consumer desire for “authentically Japanese” games.

This research builds on budding literature of game studies and localization studies, as well as media studies in particular with Japanese pop culture. The video games themselves are the entities on which localizations and Japaneseness occurs, making them important primary sources for this research. This thesis will focus on two case studies of video games, *Ōkami* and the *Yakuza* series, to demonstrate the very Japanese games going from unsuccessful in the second period to flourishing in the third period. The two most significant scholarly studies of Japaneseness in video games are Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon's *Video Games and Japaneseness: An*

*analysis of localization and circulation of Japanese video games in North America* (2011) and Mia Consalvo's *Atari to Zelda: Japan's videogames in global contexts* (2016). This study contends that there have been noteworthy developments in Japaneseness in video games in the West since that research was published. This thesis seeks to extend the dialogue on Japaneseness in video games by studying this very recent and drastic transformation in gaming publishers' choices about localization of games for export in response to evolving Western tastes. This research's argument for the shift in Japaneseness in video games in the West focuses on the second and third period, a time span from the mid-2000s until the present, using the first period that ranges from 1985 to the mid-2000s to demonstrate the context of early Japanese video games' tendency to localize in a way that removes Japanese cultural markers.<sup>9</sup>

Along with games as a primary source and academic literature on Japaneseness in video games, this thesis utilizes various sources, both primary and secondary, as well as other academic literature on Japanese video games, media and translation to complement the analysis. Because the focus of this research is on recent Japanese games in the West (since the mid-2010s), contemporary video game journalism is vital documentation as academic literature often lags behind. Video game journalism serves as a medium between the game industry and consumers: on one hand they receive scoops and relay news from the industry to consumers, and have access to exclusive interviews from game creators and localizers; on the other hand they are also critics and consumers, writing reviews and opinions about video games. This makes them crucial primary sources for analysis as they can convey Western consumers' general mood and opinion about games as well as creators and localizers' motive and insight on games through interviews. As secondary sources, the scoops can include crucial insights such as sales numbers that provide

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<sup>9</sup> The context and first period (from 1985 to the mid-2000s) will be discussed in section 5. *Case Studies of Japaneseness From the Past*; the main argument, and second and third periods (from the mid-2000s to the present) will be argued in section 6. *Case Studies of the Shift in Japaneseness*.

a basis for the popularity of a game. Academic research on video games is a small but quickly growing field of literature. One important area of academia this thesis employs is literature on video game localization. Some prominent scholars and writers within video game localization and translation remark are Miguel Á. Bernal-Merino book *Translation and Localisation in Video Games: Making Entertainment Software Global*, and Minako O'Hagan and Carme Mangiron's *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*.

This study will first strive to understand what video games are and how Japanese games differ from Western games in the section *Understanding Video Games*. In the following section, “*Japaneseness*” and *Localization*, this thesis will delve further into what Japaneseness is in video games and what localization practices and choices Japanese video game companies have when publishing their game internationally. The next section, *Rise of Japanese Media and Pop Culture in Relation to Video Games*, will examine the context in the rise in popularity of Japanese pop culture — in particular anime and manga — and its parallel with the Japanese video game industry. The section *Case Studies of Japaneseness From the Past* will analyze the trend of Japanese video games between 1985 and the mid-2000s of heavy localizations that remove Japaneseness through case studies of multiple games. The final section, *Case Studies of the Shift in Japaneseness*, will analyze *Ōkami*, a game that combines Japanese folklore and ink wash painting to create a uniquely Japanese game, and *Yakuza*, a game series that uses settings of major cities like Tokyo to immerse players into Japanese culture, that flopped when they were first released in the West in the mid-2000s (in the second period) but gained success beginning in the mid-2010s (in the third period). Through these two case studies, this thesis will analyze the contents of the game and of its Western localization, with a focus on elements of Japaneseness. In conjunction, this research will examine the growth in sales in the West as well as the reception

of the games and their Japanese aspects by investigating online video game journalism to discern the reasons for the rise of Japaneseness in Western games.

## 2. Understanding Video Games

### 2.1 What are Video Games?

First, it is important to understand what video games are and what differentiates them from other forms of media or games. Merriam-Webster defines video games as “an electronic game in which players control images on a video screen.”<sup>10</sup> The “electronic” component is important to distinguish video games from non-digital games such as sports and to classify it as an electronic medium akin to film and music, and the “game” aspect as something used for play and to interact with; but it remains vague in what exactly makes a video game.

A more encompassing definition of video game has been hotly debated between video game scholars, and even in the American legal system as portrayed by the judge presiding over the *Epic Games v. Apple* case in 2021 expressing “the Court begins with a definition of a videogame. Unfortunately, no one agrees and neither side introduced evidence of any commonly accepted industry definition.”<sup>11</sup> This is because video games are diverse: some have clearly defined goals, rules and scoring like a Mario game where often the aim is to get to the end of a level; others have no tangible goals like Minecraft that give players absolute freedom, or lack any challenge such as “walking simulators” where the player only moves their character with no obstacles. All of these fall under the umbrella of a video game.

One attempt made to formulate what makes a video game is from ludologist Mark J.P. Wolf:

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<sup>10</sup> Merriam-Webster. “video game”. Merriam-Webster, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/video%20game>.

<sup>11</sup> United States District Court for the Northern District of California. *Epic Games, Inc. v. Apple, Inc.* United States, 2021, pp. 68, <https://cand.uscourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/cases-of-interest/epic-games-v-apple/Epic-v.-Apple-20-cv-05640-YGR-Dkt-812-Order.pdf>.



“elements one would expect to find in a game are conflict (against an opponent or circumstances), rules (determining what can and cannot be done and when), use of some player ability (such as skill, strategy, or luck), and some kind of valued outcome (such as winning vs. losing, or the attaining of the highest score or fastest time for the completing of a task). All these are usually present in video games in some manner, though to differing degrees. In video games, the scoring of points, adherence to the “rules,” and the display of the game’s visuals are all monitored by a computer instead of by human beings. The computer can also control the opposing characters within a game, becoming a participant as well as a referee.”<sup>12</sup>

Wolf is careful to avoid sounding absolute, but touches on characteristics that are essential to video games; one that stands out is the interactive nature of video games. Video games are unique as an electronic medium in the way that they require the user, in this instance the player, to actively participate with the computer — the game.

Ian Bogost, video game designer and academic, goes further with the idea of games as a unique middleground with a user’s agency and a creators design as something, saying:

“we don’t watch or read games like we do cinema and novels and paintings, nor do we perform them like we might dance or football or Frisbee. Rather, we do something in-between with games. Yes, we ‘play’ games like we do sports, and yes, games bear ‘meaning,’ as do the fine and plastic arts.”<sup>13</sup>

The creator shapes an experience through story, art and gameplay with a voice reminiscent of any other art or media form, as evidenced by the Smithsonian and The Museum of Modern Art in New York acquiring and exhibiting video games as art.<sup>14,15</sup> Video games’ unique way of immersing their audience by being an active part of the work that differentiates it from other media like cinema, novels and paintings.

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<sup>12</sup> Wolf, Mark J.P. “What Is a Video Game?”. *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf. Greenwood Press, 2007, pp. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Bogost, Ian. *How to Talk About Videogames*. University Of Minnesota Press, 2015, pp. 1.

<sup>14</sup> McWhertor, Michael. *Smithsonian acquires Flower, Halo 2600 for its permanent collection*. Polygon, 2013, <https://www.polygon.com/2013/12/17/5222078/smithsonian-acquires-flower-halo-2600-for-its-permanent-collection>

<sup>15</sup> Solon, Olivia. *MoMA to Exhibit Videogames, From Pong to Minecraft*. Wired, 2012, <https://www.wired.com/2012/11/moma-videogames/>.

An important aspect to understand with video games is its two types of genres: setting genre and gameplay genre. The setting genre is the same as in any other medium like sci-fi, fantasy, or crime. The gameplay genre is unique to video games and pertains to how the game is played. An example is the first-person shooter genre (often shortened to FPS) where the player controls through a first-person perspective and experiences the action through the eyes of the characters. Platformers are a genre where at its most basic the objective is to overcome obstacles with the player's movements such as jumps; most *Mario* games are an example of this. There are countless different types of gameplay genres that have their own style of play. The gameplay genre is generally meant when discussing video game genres as it describes better the type of experience a video game will provide.<sup>16</sup>

## *2.2 Differences Between Japanese and Western Games and Gamers*

Just as Japanese and Western cultures differ, Japanese and Western games often have different styles: different themes, narratives, aesthetics and gameplay. Playing a Japanese game is a different experience from playing a game made in the United States or France, and Japanese gamers are prone to play different types of games than Western gamers which strongly impacts what type of games each region's industry produces. Game studies scholar Martin Picard advocates the term *geemu* (Japanese word for video game) as a way to differentiate games from the Japanese game industry ecosystem, especially to Western games.<sup>17</sup>

The first notable difference between Japanese and Western games is their preferred genres. Minako O'Hagan and Carme Mangiron notice that "Western players tend to prefer games involving action, such genres as sports, crime, and shooting games, particularly first-person

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<sup>16</sup> Apperley, Thomas H. "Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres." *Simulation & Gaming*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2006, pp. 6–23, doi:[10.1177/1046878105282278](https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878105282278).

<sup>17</sup> Picard, Martin. "The foundation of geemu: A brief history of early Japanese video games". *Game Studies* vol. 13, no. 2, 2013, <http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/picard>.

shooters (FPS)... On the other hand, Japanese players prefer simulation and narrative-driven games, such as fantasy, adventure and RPGs [role-playing games].”<sup>18</sup> This contrast in the popularity of genres extends to Japanese and Western developers. In 2021, the three best-selling games in America were *Call of Duty: Vanguard* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops - Cold War*, both first-person shooter action games by publisher Activision Blizzard, and *Madden NFL 22*, a sports game based on the NFL by publisher Electronic Arts; in Europe the two best selling games were *FIFA 22*, a soccer game by Electronic Arts again, and *Grand Theft Auto V* an action shooting game by company Rockstar Games.<sup>19,20</sup> All of these publishers were American. In contrast, the three highest grossing games in Japan in 2021 were all Japanese-made: *Monster Hunter: Rise*, a fantasy role-playing game by developer Capcom; *Pokémon Brilliant Diamond and Pokémon Shining Pearl*, again a role-playing game published by Nintendo; and *Momotaro Dentetsu: Showa, Heisei, Reiwa mo Teiban!*, a strategy game released exclusively in Japan by Konami.<sup>21</sup>

Another difference that legendary Japanese game director Hideo Kojima notices is that Japanese gamers “prefer more storytelling, more detailed settings within the game, a more narrative kind of style often with anime mixed into it” compared to Western gamers.<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly, Japanese games tend to be narrative-driven games; they also often employ themes

<sup>18</sup> O'Hagan, Minako, and Mangiron, Carme. *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins, 2013, pp. 205.

<sup>19</sup> Rousseau, Jeffrey. *2021 sets record for US games spending at \$60.4bn | US Annual Report*. GamesIndustry.biz, 2022.  
<https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2022-01-18-2021-sets-record-for-us-games-spending-at-usd60-4bn-us-annual-report>.

<sup>20</sup> Dring, Christopher. *Old games, FIFA and Switch dominated Europe in 2021 | European Market Report*. GamesIndustry.biz, 2022,  
<https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2022-01-27-old-games-fifa-and-switch-dominated-europe-in-2021-european-market-report>.

<sup>21</sup> Famitsu ファミ通. “‘2021 Nen Sofuto Hanbai Rankingu TOP100’ ‘Monhan Raizu’ ga Ichii. ‘Pokemon BD•SP’ mo Daburumirion Tassei De Nii ni. Joui 20 Saku Wo Suicchi You Sofuto Ga Dokusen”【2021年ソフト販売ランキング TOP100】『モンハンライズ』が1位。『ポケモンBD•SP』もダブルミリオン達成で2位に。上位20作をスイッチ用ソフトが独占 [‘2021 Video Game Sales Top 100 Ranking’ ‘Monhan Raizu’ is first. ‘Pokemon BD•SP’ is second also achieving double million sales. Nintendo Switch monopolizes the top 20]. Famitsu ファミ通, 2022,  
<https://www.famitsu.com/news/202202/06250169.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Kent, Steven. *Video games that get lost in translation*. NBC News, 2004.  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna4780423>.

and storytelling that is familiar in Japanese culture. Common narrative themes Mia Consalvo notices in Japanese video games are values like the power of belief, hope, teamwork and nobility in defeat that contrast common Western themes such as strength, victory and individuality.<sup>23</sup> Chris Kohler recognizes themes from Japanese storytelling — namely manga and anime — such as “the idea of the unassuming guy who succeeds against the odds [that] is a common theme in Japanese storytelling” are regularly present in Japanese video games.<sup>24</sup> Japanese and Western games have their own unique literary culture that affects their narrative styles.

Another distinct difference in the style between Japanese and Western games are their aesthetics and character designs. O’Hagan and Mangiron write that “Japanese video game designers often deploy anime and manga for character design and prefer stylized, cute characters such as Sonic, Link, and Mario. North American and European players prefer more masculine and realistic character design.”<sup>25</sup> This is evident when looking at each regions’ best selling games. On the Western side, all of the top selling games have a realistic graphical style. *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto* are realistic and strive to be as close to life as possible, resembling live-action movies. *FIFA* and *Madden* directly reproduce real-life professional sports, and their characters are models of real life athletes. The top Japanese games’ style is a stark contrast with more fantastical and cartoony aesthetics. *Monster Hunter: Rise*, *Pokemon*, *Momotaro Dentetsu: Showa, Heisei, Reiwa mo Teiban!* all have anime-styled aesthetics, with the latter two having cute art styles steeped in Japan’s *kawaii* culture.

J.C. Herz reasons that the Japanese anime artstyle “translated easily into early video games, which didn’t have the graphic resolution to represent characters with adult proportions.

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<sup>23</sup> op. cit., pp. 31-32.

<sup>24</sup> Kohler, Chris. *Power-up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*. Dover Publications, 2016, pp. 53.

<sup>25</sup> O’Hagan, Minako, and Mangiron, Carme. *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins, 2013, pp. 205.

Small, cute characters had fewer pixels per inch and were easier to use, and so video games borrowed, for reasons of expediency, what manga had developed as a matter of convention.”<sup>26</sup>

Hardware today is powerful, but graphical realism is “notably absent in the Japanese games but quite prevalent in Western games”, with Japan’s convention of stylized anime aesthetics remaining the norm even today.<sup>27</sup>

These differences can affect how players from Japan or the West react to games from other regions. For Japanese gamers, it is one of disapproval. Western games in Japan are seen as 洋ゲー (“Yōgē”) that carry a derogatory connotation of an inferior product; it is explicit in denoting an “other” type of game.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Japanese games come with expectations of a different type of game to Western consumers.<sup>29</sup> This perception is a critical aspect that constitutes Japaneseness and drives localization practices.

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<sup>26</sup> Hertz, J.C. *Joystick Nation*. Little, Brown and Company, 1997, pp. 162.

<sup>27</sup> Consalvo, Mia. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's videogames in global contexts*. MIT Press, 2016, pp. 30.

<sup>28</sup> 洋ゲー (“Yōgē”) is a slang shortened from 洋物ゲーム (“Yōmono Gēmu”), which literally translates to Western video game.

<sup>29</sup> Kohler, Chris, et al. “*Nihon ga ‘Yōgēmu wo Kirau Riyū’*” 日本が「洋物ゲーム」を嫌う理由 [The Reason Japan Hates “Western Games”]. Wired, 2010, <https://wired.jp/2010/09/28日本が「洋物ゲーム」を嫌う理由/>.

### 3. “Japaneseness” and Localization

#### 3.1 Japaneseness

Japaneseness is a broad term to describe any aspect or characteristic unique to Japan. Japan’s idiosyncratic culture, history, language aesthetics has pushed both Japanese and foreign scholars to study *Nihonjinron* (日本人論, literally "theories about the Japanese") in efforts to uncover what makes Japanese culture and identity distinct from the “Other” (usually denoting Western culture).<sup>30</sup> For example, what makes a painting from Japan independent from an American piece? *Nihonjinron* perceives Japaneseness in every aspect of Japanese life, culture, society, art, literature and media: in cinema, literature, the Japanese landscape and architecture, in Japanese values, martial arts, and even to wedding dresses and ceremonies.<sup>31,32,33,34,35,36,37</sup>

One area where Japaneseness is prevalent is in Japanese pop culture — such as in video games. What exactly is Japaneseness in video games? In simple terms, they are Japanese cultural markers found within games that can manifest through aspects such as art, narrative, themes and gameplay. Mia Consalvo, one of the leading authors on Japaneseness in video games, describes it from a Western perspective:

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<sup>30</sup> Sugimoto, Yoshio. “Making Sense of Nihonjinron.” *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 57, no. 1, 1999, pp. 81–96, doi:[10.1177/0725513699057000007](https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513699057000007).

<sup>31</sup> Davis, Darrell William. *Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film*. Columbia University Press, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Karni, Rebecca. “Made in Translation: Language, ‘Japaneseness’, ‘Englishness’, and ‘Global Culture’ in Ishiguro”. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 2015, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 318–348, doi: <https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.52.2.0318>.

<sup>33</sup> Craig, Claudia. “Notions of Japaneseness in Western Interpretations of Japanese Garden Design, 1870s-1930s”. *New Voices*, vol. 6, 2014, pp. 1-25, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21159/nv.06.01>.

<sup>34</sup> Edlinger, Astrid. “The Japanese Example-or the Art of Appropriation.” *Architecture and Identity*, edited by Peter Herrle and Erik Wegerhoff. LIT Verlag Münster, 2008: pp. 57-71.

<sup>35</sup> Yamakuse, Yoji. *Japaneseness: A Guide to Values and Virtues*. Stone Bridge Press, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> De la Fuente, Eduardo González. “In which Ways is Karate (dō) Japanese? A Consideration on Cultural Images of Bushidō and Nihonjinron in the Postwar Globalization of Martial Arts”. *Journal of Inter-Regional Studies: Regional and Global Perspectives*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2021. [https://www.waseda.jp/inst/oris/assets/uploads/2020/07/vol-4\\_01\\_-Eduardo-Gonzalez.pdf](https://www.waseda.jp/inst/oris/assets/uploads/2020/07/vol-4_01_-Eduardo-Gonzalez.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Goldstein-Gidoni, Ofra. *Packaged Japaneseness: Weddings, Business and Brides*. University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

“Some elements of Japanese culture feel foreign to Westerners and invoke that sense—the bento boxes, hashi, red paper lanterns, kanji script, folk music, folk tales, and invocations of religions not widely practiced in the West, such as Buddhism and Shintoism. There also are a breaking of taboos that cultures outside the West do not apply, ways of relating to others through levels of politeness, high school systems that differ radically from Western ones, and other elements of culture that do not feel familiar to Westerners.”<sup>38</sup>

Consalvo likens Japaneseness to a “signaling device” that sets off when exotic Japanese elements are perceived in video games by a global audience.<sup>39</sup>

Another scholar who studies Japaneseness in games, Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon focuses on the relationship between game creators and consumers to elucidate Japaneseness:

“Japaneseness is constructed performatively by the industry—or localization teams—and fans, a concept that implies a constant redefinition and reframing of what constitutes Japaneseness. New elements or new gameplay mechanics introduced in a particular Japanese video game, for example, can eventually be identified as Japanese by interpretative communities or interpretative structures and thus either preserved or removed by virtue of comparison with Western products.”<sup>40</sup>

Japaneseness occurs when the creator adds a Japanese cultural marker or a distinct Japanese element that is recognized by the player. Just as pop culture is constantly evolving, so does the notion of Japaneseness in video games.

Mia Consalvo argues that Japanese developers draw from their Japanese experiences that result in Japanese cultural markers and norms inside Japanese video games, intentionally or not.<sup>41</sup> Scholar of Japanese games Rachel Hutchinson claims that games cannot be considered to be completely culturally neutral.<sup>42</sup> Japaneseness can be obvious, such as games set in Japan with

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<sup>38</sup> Consalvo, Mia. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's videogames in global contexts*. MIT Press, 2016, pp. 217.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Pelletier-Gagnon, Jérémie. *Video Games and Japaneseness: An analysis of localization and circulation of Japanese video games in North America*. McGill University, 2011, pp. 99, <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/q524js91s>.

<sup>41</sup> Consalvo, Mia. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's videogames in global contexts*. MIT Press, 2016, pp. 94-95.

<sup>42</sup> Hutchinson, Rachel. *Japanese Culture Through Videogames*. Routledge, 2019, pp. 28.

a narrative and characters influenced by Japanese culture, or subtle such as through a game exploring themes like Japanese societal conformity. Japan's stylized anime aesthetics are also a byproduct of Japanese game developers coexisting with Japan's veteran anime and manga industry.<sup>43</sup>

Another example of Japaneseness in gameplay styles. One example is the JRPG genre, short for Japanese role-playing games. They have been categorized as their own subgenre due to their distinctive traits, namely turn-based combat, magical elements, a party system and character progression through "leveling up". It is not only that they are role-playing games made in Japan, but their unique identity that gives a feeling different from most Western role-playing games. Japanese games often play differently due to Japanese game developers having different game design philosophies. This is a Japaneseness unique to video games as it is associated with gameplay.

Games showcase Japaneseness in a myriad of different forms and to varying degrees. Some games ooze Japaneseness in every aspect — story, dialogue, gameplay — while other games have only traces of Japaneseness or indirect influences. This study will explore how Japaneseness is exhibited in Western versions of Japanese video games and Western players' growing desire to play distinctly games with Japaneseness.

### *3.2 Localization*

In order for a Japanese game to be sold outside of Japan, it needs to be localized. To O'Hagan and Mangeron, "game localization refers to all the many and varied processes involved in transforming game software developed in one country into a form suitable for sale in target territories, according to a new set of user environments with specific linguistic, cultural, and

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<sup>43</sup> Consalvo, Mia. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's videogames in global contexts*. MIT Press, 2016, pp. 166.



technical implications.”<sup>44</sup> Translation of text is just one part of localization. A localization’s goal is to allow a foreign player to have an equal (or even superior) experience to a native player; if a game’s localization is poor, the foreign player will be unable to play or get immersed in the game leading to a negative experience and compromising global sales.<sup>45</sup>

There is more to video game localization than just direct translation; awareness of cultural differences is crucial. Heather Maxwell Chandler and Stephanie O’Malley Deming stress how mishandling culture can lead to an offensive or incongruent localization that disengages targeted players.<sup>46</sup> Miguel Á. Bernal-Merino calls video game localization a “target-oriented translation” that adapts texts to the structures and cultural context of the target language.<sup>47</sup> The complexity of video games makes this a gargantuan task as text is not the only element needed to translate, but art, music and gameplay are all subject to localization and can all have cultural significance. Localizers sometimes opt to completely change dialogue, texts and segments of a game — or even to cut them out — with the intention of being comprehensible, non-offensive or less exotic to a target audience. Mia Consalvo asserts that “localizers act as ‘culture brokers’ and reinterpret or ‘dub’ that noise into something not just comprehensible but also enjoyable for players in other countries who speak other languages”, “noise” being opaque cultural elements. This creates “cultural filtering” — cultural adaptation that leads to localized versions of a video game differing from the original version.<sup>48,49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> O’Hagan, Minako, and Mangiron, Carme. *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins, 2013, pp. 19.

<sup>45</sup> Chandler, Heather Maxwell, and O’Malley Deming, Stephanie. *The Game Localization Handbook*. Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Bernal-Merino, Miguel Á. *Translation and Localisation in Video Games: Making Entertainment Software Global*. Taylor & Francis, 2014, pp. 86.

<sup>48</sup> Consalvo, Mia. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's videogames in global contexts*. MIT Press, 2016, pp. 123.

<sup>49</sup> O’Hagan, Minako, and Mangiron, Carme. *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins, 2013, pp. 173.

The first and often biggest aspect of localization work is translating text. Texts in video games can be diegetic like dialogue and narration or non-diegetic such as user-interfaces, menus and tutorials. Translation of diegetic text has been likened to translating comic books that require fluent conversational style and emphasize keeping the “look and feel” of the original text while being functional and understood by the target audience.<sup>50,51</sup> This can lead to texts differing between versions. One example is Jeremy Blaustein, translator of the spy game *Metal Gear Solid*, who increased espionage language and intensified the brutality in the English version of the game to cater to North American gamers. Blaustein cites how he jargonized the neutral sounding Japanese term “現地調達” (“Genchichōtatsu” literally meaning to “acquire locally”) to the military sounding “OSP” (“on-site procurement”). To Blaustein, localization is not a science but an art where he has to “take liberties with the text to capture the essence of the words, in an attempt to recreate the *feeling* of the original for a very different audience with a very different cultural background.”<sup>52</sup>

The second way a game can be localized is changing the visuals, story and setting. Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon calls this “fictional transfiguration” that “stands for all types of major or minor transformations located at the level of visual representation including characters' appearances, the fictional worlds, as well as the general aesthetic.”<sup>53</sup> The term transfiguration (defined as “a change in form or appearance”) suggests more acute cultural filtering than text translation.<sup>54</sup> Text translation is needed to overcome the language barrier, but changing art,

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<sup>50</sup> op. cit., pp. 161.

<sup>51</sup> Bernal-Merino, Miguel Á. *Translation and Localisation in Video Games: Making Entertainment Software Global*. Taylor & Francis, 2014, pp. 60.

<sup>52</sup> Blaustein, Jeremy. *The bizarre, true story of Metal Gear Solid's English translation*. Polygon, 2019. <https://www.polygon.com/2019/7/18/20696081/metal-gear-solid-translation-japanese-english-jeremy-blaustein>.

<sup>53</sup> Pelletier-Gagnon, Jérémie. *Video Games and Japaneseness: An analysis of localization and circulation of Japanese video games in North America*. McGill University, 2011, pp. 45, <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/q524js91s>.

<sup>54</sup> Merriam-Webster. “transfiguration”. Merriam-Webster, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transfiguration>.

narrative, character identity, and music is usually done to overcome a cultural barrier. For example, it would be possible for an American player to play a game set in Japan with Japanese themes and with non-diegetic signs and storefronts in Japanese, but it would be nearly impossible if all the characters spoke in Japanese and menus were in kanji. Changing the setting from Japan to America, the characters' personality to be more typically American, and signs and storefronts to English would make the American player "feel" as if the game is set in America instead of Japan. It removes Japaneseness and acts as cultural filtering.

The third and most extreme aspect of localization is through gameplay — changing the way the game is played. Pelletier-Gagnon calls this "gameplay transfiguration". This can include tinkering with the difficulty of a game to make it harder or easier, altering the pace of play quicker or slower by changing the movement speed of the player or refashioning an ability of the player, or modifying level design. Transfiguring gameplay has a less obvious impact on culture than transfiguring visuals (such as removing kanji scripts or turning a shintō shrine to a church) but changing how a game is played — the heart of a game — often brings the greatest divergence between a localization and the original. There is Japaneseness in gameplay; modifying gameplay in an effort to appease a new target audience is an influential tool used by game developers and localizers that impacts Japaneseness.

Localization costs money, and the degree to which a game is localized depends as much on the budget of the game as the will of the creators. There are two main scales of localization: partial and full localization.<sup>55,56</sup> Partial localization where only a textual translation of a game is undertaken with little to no fictional or gameplay transfiguration and as such tend to keep more

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<sup>55</sup> O'Hagan, Minako, and Mangiron, Carme. *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins, 2013, pp. 142.

<sup>56</sup> Chandler, Heather Maxwell, and O'Malley Deming, Stephanie. *The Game Localization Handbook*. Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2012.

Japaneseness intact. Full localization where everything is localized — often including dubbing where there is voice acting, altering story, setting and gameplay where necessary — with the goal of making a version most familiar to the target audience. It is costlier and usually reserved for large-budget productions. Full localization also leans towards less Japaneseness as cultural markers are replaced by references local to the target audience.

A recent trend for game companies to facilitate localization and cultural adaption is to create the original game as culturally neutral as possible through a process called “internationalization”. Chandler and O’Mally defines the goal of internationalization as to create a game with little to no local cultural markers so as to require a minimum amount of localization, creating a game easy to export to a global audience.<sup>57</sup> Internationalization is an area where localization affects the game development process itself as it pushes for a global-friendly base game, and is synonymous with “localization-friendly game development”; but it has been criticized as ushering a “global sameness” that removes unique cultural diversity in video games.<sup>58,59</sup> It reveals a tension between games as both an international product that exists in a global market and as a cultural product made in a country with a unique culture.

Japaneseness is at the center of the tension precipitated in the localization of Japanese video games. Trends in video game localization like transfiguration and internationalization threaten to strip away distinct Japanese cultural character in Japanese video games. Can a video game be a product of a cultural heritage while existing in an international market? This study will examine the evolution of how Japanese game companies localize Japanesenes.

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> O'Hagan, Minako, and Mangiron, Carme. *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins, 2013, pp. 80.

<sup>59</sup> Pym, Anthony. *The Moving Text*. John Benjamins Publishing, 2004, pp. 37.

#### 4. Rise of Japanese Media and Pop Culture in Relation to Video Games

This thesis argues that the growth of the very Japanese game in the West that has happened in the second half of the 2010s is alongside a stark gain in popularity of Japanese media and pop culture, especially those closely related to video games such as anime and manga. Japanese media, especially anime and manga, has seen a boom in international audiences since the mid-2010s creating an environment where Western consumers' desire "very Japanese" games. This analysis will first define pop culture, as well as media and video games' role in pop culture; then will be an examination of Japanese pop culture, media and video games across three time periods — 1985 to the mid-2000s, the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s and the mid-2010s to the present — to observe how the evolution of Japanese pop culture and media in the West have evolved alongside Japan's global video game industry. This thesis argues that in the West, a rise in popularity of Japanese media — especially anime and manga — has had a positive impact on the popularity of "very Japanese" games. Also, this thesis argues that in the past forty years there has been a shift in the perception of Japanese pop culture from an image of a hot spot of cutting-edge technology to an admiration focused on Japan's entertainment industry and culture.

Cultural anthropologist Shirley Fedorak defines popular culture — often shortened to pop culture — as "the culture of our everyday lives."<sup>60</sup> Pop culture are objects and symbols commonly referred to as "artifacts" by scholars that are prevalent in society.<sup>61</sup> Pop culture artifacts are familiar to a significant amount of a certain population, particularly the masses or "common" people, and are characterized by mass circulation. They can be found in areas such as fashion, music, sport and film. Examples of American pop culture are hit songs like *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)* by Beyoncé or symbols from franchises that are commonly

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<sup>60</sup> Fedorak, Shirley. *Pop Culture: The Culture of Everyday Life*. University of Toronto Press, 2009, pp. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Werner, Valentin. *The language of pop culture*. Routledge, 2018.

recognized, like the “No-Ghost Sign” from *Ghostbusters*. Pop culture often carries “cultural markers”: aspects of a culture that create a feeling of belonging to a certain identity group.<sup>62</sup> Hollywood is ingrained in the American social and national identity. Different cultures have different expressions of popular culture.

Although pop culture is often created at a local level, it is often exported to enter a global circulation. Pop culture artifacts can easily travel globally through its mass appeal such as how North American hip-hop is listened to throughout the globe. Pop culture’s exportation can have various motives, such as politics often seen through cultural diplomacy where a nation pushes it for soft power, or economic such as the unique “brand” pop culture gives audiences, such as Hollywood movies benefitting from a well-established global reputation of big budgets and high productions. Pop culture is spread through mass media and information systems, notably television and the Internet.<sup>63</sup>

Entertainment media — or mass media — is sometimes thought of as synonymous to pop culture due to the significance of mediums such as film, television and music in creating pop culture artifacts and spreading pop culture.<sup>64</sup> Most people watch TV and movies, or listen to music to some extent. Popular media contrasts “elite” forms of entertainment and culture that has barriers to accessibility and is often not designed for a broad audience, like opera, or to an audience outside of a certain cultural identity, like Japanese Noh theater. Pop culture and media are constantly evolving; they are influenced by the popular current and society but they also exert influence on general consumer preferences. Media empowers creators to convey cultural markers that indicate national and cultural identity of a work. National and cultural

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<sup>62</sup> Chua, Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi. *East Asian pop culture: Analysing the Korean wave*. Hong Kong University Press, 2008.

<sup>63</sup> Fedorak, Shirley. *Pop Culture: The Culture of Everyday Life*. University of Toronto Press, 2009, pp. 116.

<sup>64</sup> Strinati, Dominic. *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. Routledge, 1995, pp. 8.

characteristics of media are not only differentiated through language, but can be recognized from style or medium. Anime and manga, for instance, have become synonymous with Japanese pop culture.

Media industries make an active choice to export their products globally in order to reach a broad audience. Hollywood movies are shown at movie theaters from Europe to Asia instead of just in the United States, multiplying potential consumers and revenue. Technology, especially the Internet, have accelerated the reach of pop culture and blurred the line between national and global; but cultural markers that signal national identity still persist.<sup>65</sup> For example, streaming giant Netflix invests heavily in local production to then sell to a global audience; surprise hit series of 2021 *Squid Game* is a fully Korean production that gained international attention.<sup>66</sup> Japan's pop culture, especially anime and manga, has also seen its spread intensify through the Internet.

Video games have also become important artifacts of pop culture. The staggering growth of the video game industry, both in revenue and number of consumers, have made video games among the most influential entertainment media and by consequence conveyor of pop culture.<sup>67</sup> Games also have exportability: video game companies persistently localize and sell to international markets. Games' large and growing number of consumers further spread the influence of games within pop cultures throughout the world. And like other media such as cinema, video games — despite becoming a global industry and circulation of pop culture — often still carry cultural markers that give them a national and cultural identity, notably Japaneseness.

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<sup>65</sup> Marcel Danesi. "Popular Culture". *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2020, pp. 272–289, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ywcct/mbaa008>.

<sup>66</sup> McKay, Kit. *How Netflix produces local-to-global viral hits like Squid Game*. Papercup, 2021, <https://www.papercup.com/blog/netflix-localization-strategy>.

<sup>67</sup> Bullard, Benjamin. *Video games are 2020's biggest entertainment moneymaker, blowing past movies & sports combined*. SYFY, 2020, <https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/video-games-2020-revenues-outpace-movies-sports>.

Although not a uniquely Japanese medium, video games' importance in Japan has had a significant influence in its pop culture, and conversely Japan's importance in the global video game industry has led it to have a remarkable impact on video game culture. Japan's video game industry has created important artifacts of pop culture. Mario, for example, is widely recognized as a game and character, same for *Pokemon* and Pikachu or even competitive fighting game *Street Fighter* and its renowned special move the "Hadouken". Genres and styles in games, like the JRPGs or anime-like graphics, have also become expressions of Japanese pop-culture. Video games are ingrained in Japan's culture and reputation.<sup>68,69</sup>

This thesis splits the analysis of Japanese pop culture and comparison to the Japanese video game industry into three time periods. The first is from 1985 to the mid-2000s which constitutes the beginning of console video games and the first boom of Japanese games and media. Next will be from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s that aligns with the slump of the Japanese video game industry. The final period will be from the mid-2010s to the present; this is the rise of the "very Japanese" video games that parallels the ascent of Japanese pop culture and media, in particular anime and manga, in the West. This study's focus is on the rise of Japaneseness in game to the West that occurs in the third period within the context of period one and two to demonstrate a historical development.

The first period beginning 1985 until the mid-2000s is a time when Japanese culture, technology, media and video games were dominant in the world. In 1983, the North American home video game market crashed, leading Western companies to lose faith and vacate the industry; it left the market open for Japanese company Nintendo to introduce their Nintendo Entertainment System in 1985 in North America, single handedly revitalizing the video game

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<sup>68</sup> Discussed in 2.2 *Differences Between Japanese and Western Games and Gamers* and 3.1 *Japaneseness*.

<sup>69</sup> Schules, Douglas. "Kawaii Japan: Defining JRPGs through the Cultural Media Mix". *Geemu and media mix: Theoretical approaches to Japanese video games*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 53-76



industry in the West.<sup>70,71</sup> Japanese hardware quickly dominated; Nintendo from 1985 and early 1990s commanded a reported 90% monopoly of the video games console market, only broken by other Japanese firm Sony's PlayStation that launched in 1994.<sup>72,73</sup> It would not be until the arrival of Microsoft's Xbox in 2001 that Japanese hardware manufacturers would see any foreign competition.<sup>74</sup> Japanese consoles were technologically innovative and soundly designed; for instance the Nintendo Entertainment System's graphical and system capabilities were a generational leap, and its controller revolutionized the way games were played.<sup>75</sup> Japan also held supremacy in the game software market. Japanese games would be consistently associated with innovative and tight design in this time period with little competition from other countries.<sup>76</sup> The Japanese game industry, both hardware and software, were associated with good design and cutting-edge technology in the West which would feed its dominance in the international video game industry.

The cutting-edge video game industry would feed into Japan's "cool" reputation and into its pop culture and technology. Douglas McGray wrote the influential article *Japan's Gross National Cool* in 2002 examining the rise of Japan's "cool" image in the West built up since the 1980s through pop culture and consumer electronics.<sup>77</sup> McGray observes that "cool Japan" is especially pronounced in places where Japan was innovating, such as in technology and gadgets,

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<sup>70</sup> Wolf, Mark J.P. "The Video Game Industry Crash". *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf. Greenwood Press, 2007, pp. 105.

<sup>71</sup> Kohler, Chris. *Power-up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*. Dover Publications, 2016, pp. 8.

<sup>72</sup> Pham, Alex. *Nintendo Struggles for Victory of Old*. Los Angeles Times, 2003, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-sep-25-fi-nintendo25-story.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Cox, Joe. "Is there a first mover advantage in the market for Japanese video games systems?". *The Asia Pacific Journal of Economics & Business*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2006, pp. 18-33.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>75</sup> Kim, Tae K. *How Nintendo's NES console changed gaming*. PC World, 2010, [https://www.pcworld.idg.com.au/article/367375/how\\_nintendo\\_nes\\_console\\_changed\\_gaming/](https://www.pcworld.idg.com.au/article/367375/how_nintendo_nes_console_changed_gaming/).

<sup>76</sup> Prisco, Jacopo. *How Japan changed video games forever*. CNN, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/12/asia/future-japan-videogame-landmarks/index.html>.

<sup>77</sup> McGray, Douglas. "Japan's Gross National Cool". *Foreign Policy*, no. 130, 2002, pp. 44-54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3183487>.

and not in traditional Japanese customs and culture, pointing to sumo wrestling. It is important to point out that McGray's "cool Japan" is different from Cool Japan Fund Inc., a government controlled company that invests in companies that promote Japanese culture founded in 2013 in a bid for the Japanese government to promote its soft power.<sup>78</sup> The program has mostly been deemed a failure, showing that "cool Japan" is driven by industries and by consumers.<sup>79</sup> Video games were under this umbrella of "cool Japan" through being technologically advanced created by the Japanese video game industry.

One important aspect of "cool Japan" that McGray touches upon is Japanese media — especially anime and manga — and the pop culture artifacts that arise from it, calling it the "*Pokemon* Hegemon."<sup>80</sup> Japanese media like anime began airing on television in America and Europe, the most notable being *Dragon Ball Z* in 1996, but this era was characterized by heavy Westernized localizations, such as dubbing and altering Japanese cultural markers as seen by the *Pokemon* show changing the word "onigiri" (Japanese rice ball) to "donut".<sup>81,82</sup> Furthermore, Susan Napier characterizes anime as "mukokuseki" (translated as "stateless") to refer to anime's cross-national, global characteristics; an example being canonically Japanese schoolgirl Usagi from the anime *Sailor Moon* having natural blonde hair making her character look non-Japanese.<sup>83</sup> Napier mostly points to this era as prevalent in her observations of "mukokuseki" (although it still exists to some extent in contemporary anime). Dubbed, heavily

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<sup>78</sup> Cool Japan Fund Inc. *What is Cool Japan Fund?*. Cool Japan Fund, Inc., <https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/about/cjfund.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Saito, Yuka. *Cool Japan Fund's big ambitions mostly fall flat*. Nikkei, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Cool-Japan-Fund-s-big-ambitions-mostly-fall-flat?page=1>.

<sup>80</sup> McGray, Douglas. "Japan's Gross National Cool". *Foreign Policy*, no. 130, 2002, pp. 44–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3183487>.

<sup>81</sup> Jensen, Thor K. *25 Years Ago, Dragon Ball Z Hit American TV for the First Time*. PCMag, 2021, <https://www.pcmag.com/news/25-years-ago-dragon-ball-z-hit-american-tv-for-the-first-time>.

<sup>82</sup> Greatcoolman2. *pokemon jelly filled donut dub and sub comparison*. Youtube, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3KNAtmHov0>.

<sup>83</sup> Napier, Susan J. *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

localized anime featuring “mukokuseki” airing alongside Western cartoons blurred Japanese cultural markers, creating a situation that Mia Consalvo calls “banal cosmopolitanism” represented by Western consumers not realizing what they are consuming is Japanese; Fabienne Darling-Wolf corroborates this by surveying Western cartoon watchers of that time who remarked that they were “not ‘really noticing a difference’” between Japanese and other types of cartoons.<sup>84,85</sup> Japanese video games in this era succeeded by making the best quality and most innovative products compared to other nations with, and similar to other Japanese media had a tendency to localize to be familiar to Western audiences. This thesis will show in 5. *Case Studies of Japaneseness From the Past*, that this trend of heavy localization and removing “cultural odors” was present in Japanese video games published in the West at this time as well.

The following decade from 2005 to 2015 would see a slump of the Japanese video game industry as Japanese companies would struggle to keep their innovative edge to Western game creators, leading to declining sales and loss of market share. Japan’s global share of the video game market shrunk an estimated 40% from 2002 to 2009.<sup>86</sup> Japan’s innovation and quality in video games was stagnating, and Western game companies that had been playing catch-up had overtaken Japanese game companies in production value and innovation. Blockbuster hits were no longer Japanese, but often made in the United States or in Europe. The one outlier would be Nintendo, who saw massive success with their Wii and games in 2006 (although they saw their own slump from 2012 to 2017).<sup>87</sup> Western developers were spending significantly more

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<sup>84</sup> Consalvo, Mia. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's videogames in global contexts*. MIT Press, 2016, pp. 22-23.

<sup>85</sup> Darling-Wolf, Fabienne. “Imagining the Global: Transnational Media and Global Audiences.” *Imagining the Global: Transnational Media and Popular Culture Beyond East and West*, University of Michigan Press, 2015, pp. 124–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65sw7r.10>.

<sup>86</sup> Tabuchi, Hiroko. *Japanese Playing a New Video Game: Catch-Up*. New York Times, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/technology/20game.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Cain, Ron. *The Dark Age Of Nintendo (2012-2017)*. WhatCulture, 2020, <https://whatculture.com/gaming/the-dark-age-of-nintendo-2012-2017>.

developing games than their Japanese counterparts, reaching a broader audience.<sup>88</sup> Many legendary Japanese game directors called out Japan's stagnating video game industry: Hideo Kojima accused Japan of being behind in "technology, gameplay and world view", Shinji Mikami stated that Western developers worked harder and took more risks than in Japan, and Keiji Inafune claimed bluntly that "Japan is over" after seeing the games shown at a Japanese game convention.<sup>89,90,91</sup> Japan no longer defined gaming.

Western consumers' tastes leaned heavily towards realism in graphics and mature style of games, leaving Japan's tendency for anime and stylized games as seeming out of date.<sup>92</sup> President of Nintendo Satoru Iwata points to the inability for Japanese developers to match hardware and software developments (that allows for more photorealistic games) as the reason for Japanese games stagnating.<sup>93</sup> Anime-inspired aesthetics went against this trend. Japanese media like anime in the late 2000s and early 2010s would also remain relatively hegemonized by a few massive, heavily localized and dubbed anime airing on television; anime in general as a Japanese medium was still considered niche. As such, anime had seemingly little impact on Japanese games in the Western video game market. Losing the technological edge that McGray noted was a crucial aspect of "cool Japan" in the 1980s to early 2000s, Japanese video games were struggling to entice a mainstream Western audience and only connecting with a small niche category of gamers.

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<sup>88</sup> Tabuchi, Hiroko. *Japanese Playing a New Video Game: Catch-Up*. The New York Times, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/technology/20game.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Dutton, Fred. *Kojima: Japanese developers lack global outlook, technological skills*. Eurogamer, 2012, <https://www.eurogamer.net/kojima-japanese-developers-lack-global-outlook-technological-skills>.

<sup>90</sup> Brightman, James. *Western devs "working harder," taking more risks - Mikami*. Gameindustry.biz, 2013, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2013-06-28-western-devs-working-harder-taking-more-risks-mikami>.

<sup>91</sup> Chester, Nick. *TGS 09: Keiji Inafune dumps on Tokyo Game Show 2009*, Destructoid, 2009, <https://www.destructoid.com/tgs-09-keiji-inafune-dumps-on-tokyo-game-show-2009/>.

<sup>92</sup> As seen in 2.2 *Differences Between Japanese and Western Games and Gamers*.

<sup>93</sup> Totilo, Stephen. *Japanese Games are Less Popular These Days Because of Changing Tastes In Graphics, Says Nintendo*. Kotaku, 2011, <https://kotaku.com/japanese-games-are-less-popular-these-days-because-of-c-5797769>.

From 2015 to the present is when this thesis observes a second rise of Japanese video games in the West characterized by a growing desire for “authentically” Japanese games fuelled by a stark growth of interest in Japanese culture, especially pop culture like anime and manga. The meteoric proliferation of anime in the West is the most astonishing. Crunchyroll, an anime-exclusive streaming service in North America, Europe and Australia has grown from an estimated 400,000 users in 2014 to 2 million in 2018, and even further to 4 million in 2021.<sup>94</sup> Netflix also noticed this evolution in their consumer’s tastes, claiming that over half of their global audience had watched at least one anime.<sup>95</sup> Netflix reacted by investing \$1 billion producing 30 original anime in the year 2018, a number that has increased to 40 in the year 2020.<sup>96,97</sup> Most other major streaming platforms like Amazon Prime and Hulu are making similar investments.<sup>98</sup> Manga sales have in parallel seen a massive spike in sales in the West.<sup>99</sup> Anime and manga is progressively becoming part of the mainstream.

Through the Internet, anime has not only seen its number of Western viewers increase dramatically, but also anime is less heavily localized than before. Crunchyroll, the “hub for anime”, has a focus on subtitled content; Netflix, too, offers their anime with subtitles and are famous for not forcing local creators to pander to international audiences.<sup>100</sup> In other words, many Japanese cultural markers that were once localized are commonplace in anime available

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<sup>94</sup> Statista. *Number of Crunchyroll paying subscribers worldwide from 2012 to 2021*.

<sup>95</sup> Du, Lisa and Zhao, Shirley. *U.S. audiences can't get enough of Japanese action shows and anime*. The Japan Times, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2021/05/14/entertainment-news/u-s-audiences-cant-get-enough-japanese-action-shows-anime/>.

<sup>96</sup> BBC. *Is Japanese anime going mainstream?*. BBC, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20191127-the-spirited-world-of-japanese-anime>.

<sup>97</sup> Salkowitz, Rob. *Netflix Announces A Motherlode Of Anime Content For 2022*. Forbes, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2022/03/30/netflix-announces-a-motherlode-of-anime-content-for-2022/?sh=7485d68e42d2>.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>99</sup> Johnston, Rich. *The Manga Drought Of 2021 Is Hitting*. Bleeding Cool, 2021, <https://bleedingcool.com/comics/the-manga-drought-of-2021-in-hitting/>.

<sup>100</sup> McKay, Kit. *How Netflix produces local-to-global viral hits like Squid Game*. Papercup, 2021, <https://www.papercup.com/blog/netflix-localization-strategy>.

globally through streaming services. Streaming services also shift the manner in which anime is consumed. Crunchyroll is exclusively for Japanese anime, and major streaming platforms categorize anime differently to other animation like Western cartoons; this is in stark divergence to anime airing on television alongside Western cartoons. This makes it much less likely that Western consumers overlook the fact that anime is Japanese. An example is the anime *Demon Slayer* whose movie was number one at the box office in 2021 that is unambiguously Japanese.<sup>101</sup> Along with being offered subtitled with Japanese voices, it is set in Taishō era Japan (1912 to 1926) and includes many traditional Japanese cultural influences from *yōkai* (folkloric monsters) to characters wearing kimonos and *haori* coats.<sup>102</sup> This has reduced the extent of “mukokuseki” in modern anime. Anime has both become more popular and more “Japanese” in the West, leading to an environment favorable to very Japanese games. Promoting Japanese cultural markers such as stylized anime-like aesthetics has created a new avenue for Japanese video game companies to recover from their decade-long slump.

Japan’s past dominance in the video game industry from 1985 to the 2000s is different from the current resurgence of Japanese games: it has shifted from being technologically advanced to more acute interest in Japan’s pop culture, entertainment media and cultural differences. Japan has lost most of its reputation as an innovative powerhouse, but its reputation as a global behemoth of pop culture is stronger than ever.<sup>103,104,105</sup> The “gross national cool” that

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<sup>101</sup> Amidi, Amid. ‘*Demon Slayer*’ Becomes First Anime In Decades To Hit No. 1 At U.S. Box Office. Cartoon Brew, 2021, <https://www.cartoonbrew.com/box-office-report/demon-slayer-becomes-first-anime-to-hit-no-1-at-u-s-box-office-in-decades-204814.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Green, Ronald S. and Bergeron, Susan J. “Teaching Cultural, Historical, and Religious Landscapes with the Anime *Demon Slayer*”. *Engaging Asia: Film, Documentaries, and Television*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2021, <https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/GreenBergeronEAAFall2021.pdf>.

<sup>103</sup> Schöttli, Urs. *Japan’s innovation struggle*. GIS Report, 2020, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/japan-innovation/>.

<sup>104</sup> Fensom, Anthony. *Japan’s Lost Art of Innovation*. The Diplomat, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/10/japans-lost-art-of-innovation/>.

<sup>105</sup> Bain, Marc. *How Japan’s global image morphed from military empire to eccentric pop-culture superpower*. Quartz, 2020, <https://qz.com/1806376/japans-image-has-changed-from-fierce-to-lovable-over-the-decades/>.

McGray described has evolved from a fascination with Japan's cutting-edge technology to a fascination with Japanese culture and media. This thesis argues that this shift is reflected in Japan's video game industry as well. Japanese video games have not overtaken Western games in budget or technological advance, but have instead found success after a decade of struggling with games that promote Japanese cultural markers related to pop culture. Anime and manga especially are tightly connected to Japanese video games: they are digital media that attract similar audiences as they share many design similarities such as computer animated visuals (as opposed to live action with real people).<sup>106</sup> The Japanese video game industry is also closely linked with the anime and manga industry through what is called a "media mix". Cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito describes it as a "synergistic relationship between multiple media formats, particularly animation [anime], comics [manga], video games".<sup>107</sup> There are countless Japanese franchises that are both video games and anime: for example *Pokemon* that although originally a video game has an anime and manga adaptation; or the aforementioned manga and anime *Demon Slayer* that was made into a video game in 2021. As such, anime, manga and video games (in particular Japanese video games) are within the same sphere of influence, and as anime and manga gains popularity in the West so do Japanese video games. The case studies of the game *Ōkami* and of the *Yakuza* in the section *Case Studies of the Shift in Japaneseness* will demonstrate Japanese games seeing success since the mid-2010s not because they are technologically ahead but rather because their authenticity to Japanese culture has found a spot in mainstream Western video game industry.

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<sup>106</sup> As discussed in 2.2 *Differences Between Japanese and Western Games and Gamers* and 3.1 *Japaneseness*, many Japanese games have "anime"-styled visuals. In other words, many games resemble anime visually.

<sup>107</sup> Ito, Mizuki. *Mobilizing the Imagination in Everyday Play: The Case of Japanese Media Mixes*. Springer, 2010, pp. 86. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-7091-0096-7\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-7091-0096-7_6).

## 5. Case Studies of Japaneseness From the Past

### 5.1 Intro

In order to provide historical, cultural, and technological context for this thesis' argument for the shift in Japaneseness in Western games occurring in the from the mid-2000s to the present, this section examines the evolution of localization from 1985 to the mid-2000s. As such, this section and the case studies that accompany it span from 1985 to the mid-2000s, a period when the Japanese video game industry was globally dominant and Japanese media — including video games — tended to remove Japanese cultural markers in localizations.<sup>108</sup> To follow the progression of Japanese video game localizations within this first period that spans from 1985 to the mid-2000s, this study will adapt time periods used by video game localization scholars Mangiron and O'Hagan to follow this progression: the first section will encompass the “Early Japanese Video Game Localization” in the 1980s and the “Growth Phase” from 1990 to 1995, followed by the “Development Phase” from 1995 to 2000, and finishing with the “Maturing Phase” from 2000 to 2005.<sup>109,110</sup> Splitting the analysis of the first period into different time frames will show an evolution in localization norms and techniques, and illuminate the reasons for Japanese game publishers' choices about localization in the past.

As we will see in this section, the trend in this period before 2005 was for Japanese game developers to localize Japaneseness in favor of a Western version that is more Westernized. Having mostly access to games with a tendency to expunge Japaneseness, Western video game players approached these games with an attitude of through what Mia Consalvo called “banal

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<sup>108</sup> As discussed in 4. *Rise of Japanese Media and Pop Culture in Relation to Video Games*.

<sup>109</sup> O'Hagan, Minako, and Mangiron, Carme. *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins, 2013, pp. 46.

<sup>110</sup> Mangiron and O'Hagan split this period into four stages: “Early phase” prior to the mid-1980s; a “Growth phase” that spanned mid-80s to the mid-90s; a “Development phase” from the mid-1990s to the late-1990s; and a “Maturing phase” lasting from 2000 to 2005. This study slightly modifies these periods to fit its analysis.



cosmopolitan” — not realizing that the Japanese games they were playing were foreign.<sup>111</sup>

Western gamers simply bought and played games that were quality and popular, which in this time period tended to be Japanese but heavily localized to remove hints of being culturally Japanese. Utilizing these tools will allow this research to analyze modern games effectively.

### *5.2 Early Japanese Video Game Localization (1980s) and Growth Phase (1990 - 1995)*

The first fifteen years of Japanese video game localization, spanning from the 1980s to around 1995, is marked by full localizations that heavily adapt to create a distinct Western version and by consequence erases traces of Japaneseness. Nintendo was the main global console manufacturer in this period starting with the NES; in order to appease a foreign market, Nintendo created their own self-imposed censorship and quality control for games to be published in the West on their system.<sup>112</sup> To avoid a repeat of the 1983 video game industry crash which was blamed on an oversaturation of poor-quality games, Nintendo required every official NES game to have a seal of approval, which would also extend to their subsequent console the SNES into the 1990s. This served Nintendo to supervise the quality of games released on their console, but also as a way to police the content on their system; with Nintendo consoles controlling up to 90% of the market developers had few options other than to follow the rules.<sup>113</sup> Through this, Nintendo played a significant role in shaping localization norms in this period.<sup>114</sup>

Nintendo was very strict in censoring adult content like excessive violence and sexually suggestive content, creating clear difference between Japanese and Western versions of NES

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<sup>111</sup> Consalvo, Mia. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's videogames in global contexts*. MIT Press, 2016, pp. 22-23.

<sup>112</sup> As seen in 4. *Rise of Japanese Media and Pop Culture in Relation to Video Games*.

<sup>113</sup> Arnone, John M. "Game (not) over: How a mark saved video games." *J. Contemp. Legal Issues* vol. 19, 2010, pp. 247-253, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/contli19&id=257&collection=journals&index=>.

<sup>114</sup> Pham, Alex. *Nintendo Struggles for Victory of Old*. Los Angeles Times, 2003, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-sep-25-fi-nintendo25-story.html>.

games. Every Japanese developer with goals of selling their games in the West had to have their game cleared by Nintendo censors, who prohibited elements such as “illegal drugs, explicit or suggestive sexuality, alcohol, smoking materials, graphic depictions of death, gratuitous or excessive violence, foul language, and ethnic, religious, nationalistic or sexual stereotypes of language or symbols.”<sup>115</sup> This was a way for Nintendo to distance themselves from the vulgar reputation video games were gaining in the West — such as they cause addiction and violence in children — especially in the United States.<sup>116</sup> Examples of this censorship can be seen in Technōs Japan’s *The Combatribes* had flowing blood removed (as seen in **figure 4.1**) and Square Enix’s *Final Fantasy VI* female characters in revealing clothing were covered up (as seen in **figure 4.2**). This also affected textual translations in games, such as Square Enix’s *Final Fantasy* translating きょうかい (“[Christian] church”) to “Clinic” (as seen in **figure 4.3**). In this time, Japanese games gained a reputation for being more mature and risqué compared to their Western counterparts that were excessively kid-friendly, creating a type of Japaneseness unique to this time period.

Japanese video game companies that were first attempting to set foot in the Western video game market often localized their games with the goal of effacing Japaneseness as much as possible to create a game more familiar to Western consumers. Mia Consalvo argues that Japaneseness in the NES and SNES era was a type of “cultural odor” that for Japanese game creators tied them to the “‘Japan panic’ of the 1980s in the United States.”<sup>117</sup> The removal of Japaneseness often manifested through fictional transfiguration: complete conversions of art, setting, names and characters.<sup>118</sup> The relatively small scale of video games — limited number of assets, little texts, and no voice acting — made the option of complete fictional transfigurations

<sup>115</sup> Arsenault, Dominic. “System Profile : The Nintendo Entertainment System (NES)”. *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf. Greenwood Press, 2007, pp. 111.

<sup>116</sup> Walker, Jess. *A Short History of Game Panics*. Reason, 2014, <https://reason.com/2014/05/07/a-short-history-of-game-panics/>.

<sup>117</sup> Consalvo, Mia. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's videogames in global contexts*. MIT Press, 2016, pp. 154.

<sup>118</sup> As seen in the 3.2 *Localization*.

feasible. This further instituted a norm with Japanese game developers to create divergent versions of the same game for Japanese and Western audiences.

One example of this is the game *Power Blazer* (パワーブレイザー, “*Pawā Burezā*”) in Japan and *Power Blade* in the West who completely localized its Japaneseness to create an Americanized version for the West. *Power Blazer*, released in 1990 in Japan, is a platformer where the player controls a stubby half-robot, half-human with a boomerang as a weapon.<sup>119</sup> *Power Blazer* (as seen in **figure 4.4**) visually shares many distinctive Japanese traits discussed in the *Differences Between Japanese and Western Games and Gamers* part: a cute cartoonish art style with a small endearing protagonist. When deciding to publish in the West (1991 in North America and 1992 in Europe), *Power Blazer*’s cutesy anime aesthetics were completely transformed into a cool Hollywood-inspired aesthetic. The name was altered to the cooler *Power Blade* and many art assets were remodeled, most evidently seen with the cute protagonist changed to a muscular Arnold Schwarzenegger look alike (**figure 4.4**) — a stylistic change also highlighted in the box art (**figure 4.5**). *Power Blazer* shows the extent Japanese game developers would go to rub out traces of Japaneseness and present games close in cultural proximity.

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<sup>119</sup> Kalata, Kurt. *Power Blade / Power Blazer*. Hardcore Gaming 101, 2007, <http://www.hardcoregaming101.net/power-blade/>.

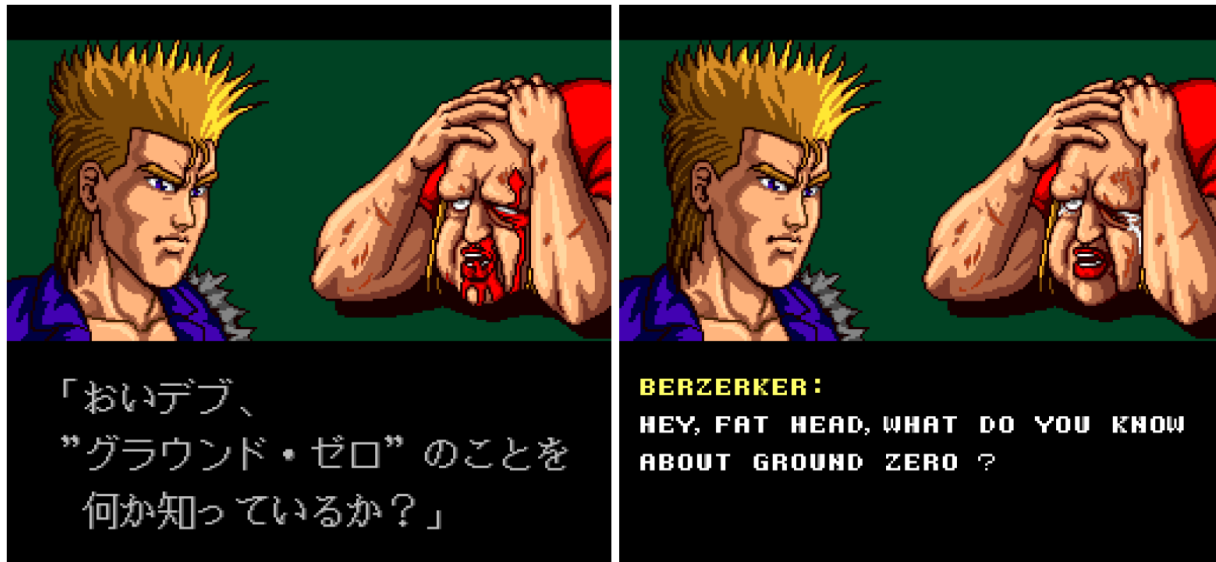


Figure 4.1: *The Combatribes* (1992), Japanese version (left) has blood flowing from the villain removed in the Western versions (right). From <https://legendsoflocalization.com/game-localization-and-nintendo-of-americas-content-policies-in-the-1990s/>.



Figure 4.2: *Final Fantasy VI* (1994), Japanese version (left) has a female enemy's posterior exposed that has been covered up in Western versions (right). From <https://legendsoflocalization.com/game-localization-and-nintendo-of-americas-content-policies-in-the-1990s/>.



Figure 4.3: *Final Fantasy* (1987), Japanese version (left) writes the player's location in the purple textbox as きょうかい ("[Christian] church"); in the North America version (right) this is changed to the secular "Clinic". From <https://legendsoflocalization.com/game-localization-and-nintendo-of-americas-content-policies-in-the-1990s/>.



Figure 4.4: Screenshots of the Japanese version *Power Blazer* (1990) on the left and the Western version *Power Blade* (North America: 1991, Europe: 1992) on the right.



Figure 4.5: Left is the Japanese cover of *Power Blazer*, right is the Western cover of *Power Blade*. The Japanese cover is from <http://www.hardcoregaming101.net/power-blade/>; the Western cover is from [http://www.thecoverproject.net/view.php?cover\\_id=12722](http://www.thecoverproject.net/view.php?cover_id=12722).

### 5.3 Development Phase (1995 - 2000)

The mid-1990s would represent a technological shift in the video game industry with the shift from the second to the third dimension bringing with it bigger and more complex games, but Japanese developers' propensity to remove Japaneseness during localizations remained similar. One major shift in the video game industry was Nintendo's loss of market share in the console industry; Sony's newcomer console the Playstation would become a breakaway success.<sup>120</sup> This would result in Nintendo's self-imposed censorship requirements to hold less weight in the video game industry that, along with the establishment of age rating bodies (such as the ESRB rating in North America in 1994), would phase out between mature Japanese games

<sup>120</sup> Skedd, Kirsten. *New Versatility in Video Game Consoles Helps Boost Sales*. InStat, 2001, [https://web.archive.org/web/20050219220223/http://www.instat.com/pr/2001/mm0019st\\_pr.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20050219220223/http://www.instat.com/pr/2001/mm0019st_pr.htm).



being toned down in the West.<sup>121</sup> The Japaneseness coming from Japan's reputation for more adult-targeted content was short lived.

Japaneseness in the form of cultural references and gameplay still tended to be seen as “cultural odors” and removed in Western localizations. A telling example is the localization of Atlus' 女神異聞録ペルソナ (*Megami Ibunroku Perusona*) renamed to *Revelations: Persona* in North America. The original Japanese version is steeped in Japaneseness: it is set in modern-day Japan and focuses on a group of high school students, a setting commonly seen in Japanese entertainment like anime and manga, and makes many references to modern-day Japanese culture; it is a JRPG, a distinctly Japanese genre.<sup>122</sup>

Atlus' Nich Maragos explains that “the company was afraid that Americans may not be able to relate to the many Japanese references in the title”, a sentiment shared by the localization team according to former marketing manager Gail Salamanca who clarified that “a majority of the references to Japan and Japanese culture were either altered or changed”.<sup>123,124</sup> The name of the town the game is set in was changed from the Japanese-sounding *Mikage-chō* (御影町) to American-sounding Lunarvale, and the currency in the game was changed from yen to dollars. Characters' Japanese names were Americanized such as Eriko to Ellen, Masao to Mark, Maki to Mary and Ayase to Alana. Most drastically, Japanese characters' designs were revised to look more American; examples are Eriko's hair that was refashioned from black to blonde, and most noticeably Masao race was changed from Japanese to African-American (as can be seen in **figure 4.6**). The game's difficulty was also lowered, namely with the removal of a notoriously

<sup>121</sup> ESRB. *Our History*. ESRB, <https://www.esrb.org/history/>.

<sup>122</sup> As discussed in the 2.2 *Differences Between Japanese and Western Games and Gamers*.

<sup>123</sup> North, Dale. *Anime Expo '08: Atlus' Shin Megami Tensei panel*. Destructoid, 2008, <https://www.destructoid.com/anime-expo-08-atlus-shin-megami-tensei-panel/>.

<sup>124</sup> Wallace, Kimberley. *Perfecting Persona: How Atlus USA Bloomed*. Game Informer, 2013, <https://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2013/09/17/perfecting-persona-how-atlus-usa-bloomed.aspx>.

hard “Snow Queen” section, to avoid alienating American players.<sup>125</sup> *Revelations: Persona* displays the skepticism Japanese game developers had in Western players being able to understand Japaneseness; Japaneseness is seen as something that estranges players outside of Japan, who are habituated with games with banal cosmopolitanism.



Figure 4.6: *Megami Ibunroku Persona/Revelations: Persona* (1996), screenshots of the Japanese version (left) with the character Masao (nicknamed “Mark”) as ethnically Japanese, and the North American localization (right) with the same character whose actual name is changed to Mark and his ethnicity to African-American.

#### 5.4 Maturing Phase (2000 - 2005)

The turn of the millennium brought with it a new generation of consoles with greater technological capabilities, resulting in games becoming bigger and costlier and the need to sell to a larger global audience became more significant. This early to mid-2000s saw the advent of Triple-A classified games: games produced and distributed by a mid-sized or major publisher, which typically have higher development and marketing budgets than other tiers of games characterized by “high risks and high returns.”<sup>126</sup> This change in the industry forced large Japanese game developers and publishers to have to sell to an international audience —

<sup>125</sup> Jeriaska. *Interview: Atlus Talks Translating Shin Megami Tensei: Persona for PSP*. Game Developer, 2009, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/pc/interview-atlus-talks-translating-i-shin-megami-tensei-persona-i-for-psp>.

<sup>126</sup> Bernevega, Alexander, and Alex Gekker. “The Industry of Landlords: Exploring the Assetization of the Triple-A Game.” *Games and Culture*, vol. 17, no. 1, Jan. 2022, pp. 47–69, doi: [10.1177/15554120211014151](https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211014151).



especially in the West — while the cost of localization rose. Along with the increase in sizes of texts and the complexity of the assets making fictional transfiguration more complicated, this period also saw the prevalence of voice acting and cinematics, adding an extra layer of intricacy in the localization process.<sup>127</sup>

This pushed larger Japanese developers to implement internationalization in their games. An example is the best selling Japanese home console game in 2001 *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*; released on the Playstation 2, *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s budget was a hefty \$10 million making an international market a must.<sup>128,129</sup> The game takes place near New York City within an alternate history where the Cold War ended during the late 1990s. The two protagonists, Solid Snake and Raiden, are spies for fictional US Army elite special forces FOXHOUND; all the characters are American or Russian playing within a Cold War inspired narrative that is reminiscent of Western media. *Metal Gear Solid 2* has an abundance of cinematics and dialogue that are fully voiced, and in all versions outside of Japan dubbed in English. This further separates *Metal Gear Solid 2* from its Japanese roots in the Western version; its internationalization makes it virtually indistinguishable from a game made in the West. As with *Metal Gear Solid 2*, we see major Japanese publishers like Konami and Square Enix push internationalization and heavy localizations when publishing their games in the West.

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<sup>127</sup> O'Hagan, Minako, and Mangiron, Carme. *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins, 2013, pp. 58-59.

<sup>128</sup> NPD. *NPD REPORTS ANNUAL 2001 U.S. INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT SALES SHATTER INDUSTRY RECORD*. NPD, 2002, [https://web.archive.org/web/20040814133238/http://www.npd.com/dynamic/releases/press\\_020207.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20040814133238/http://www.npd.com/dynamic/releases/press_020207.htm).

<sup>129</sup> Keighly, Geoff. *The Final Hours of Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*. GameSpot, 2012, <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/the-final-hours-of-metal-gear-solid-2-sons-of-liberty/1100-6376810/>.



Figure 4.7: *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001), American spy protagonist Solid Snake sneaking around in a New York industrial complex, a setting reminiscent of Western espionage films.

## 6. Case Studies of the Shift in Japaneseness

### 6.1 Intro

This section will examine the shift of the rise of Japaneseness that has happened between the mid-2000s to the present, chronologically following the previous section whose case studies spanned between 1985 to the mid-2000s. Specifically, the shift that this thesis is suggesting is between the second period (mid-2000s to mid-2010s) when the Japanese video game industry encountered a slump and the very Japanese games were often overlooked in the Western market, and the third period (mid-2010s to the present) where Japanese pop culture — especially anime and manga — begin finding a broad international audience in parallel with very Japanese games finding profitability in the West. This thesis will investigate two case studies that are distinctively Japanese in their own unique ways as primary sources: the game *Ōkami* and the *Yakuza* series. *Ōkami* through its adventure story-driven game based on Japanese mythology and traditional arts and the *Yakuza* series through its immersive setting of modern Japan's urban environment construct games that are distinctively Japanese to a Western audience. Both games failed to find an international audience when they first released in the mid-2000s; but persevering until the mid-2010s, they started amassing mainstream success in the West — their Japanese cultural markers became a selling point.

To define the “rise” of Japaneseness in video games, this analysis will focus on the Western consumer and how they react to Japaneseness in video games, using sales numbers as the key way to quantify the popularity of a game. The industry also reacts to consumers' tastes and to what sells, impacting what actions video game companies take and what kind of games they choose to make and how they choose to localize. What video game consumers can buy is

contingent on what video game companies choose to publish. This dynamic is crucial to understanding the position of Japaneseness in the West.

The third essential actor in this study is video game journalism and reviews. This research uses game journalist websites like IGN, GameSpot, Kotaku and the myriad of video game news media because they provide a wealth of contemporary information useful to understanding video games and the culture and market that surrounds them. As this study deals with very recent games and events with limited scholarly literature and sales numbers of games are not always available, game journalism's up to date reporting is essential for this analysis. Game media also serve as a middleman between consumers and the industry: game journalists are gamers themselves and provide useful insight on the consumer-front, as well as consumers being their target audience; but as reporters they are privy to scoops and interviews with important industry personalities such as game directors and localization teams. Game media also provide reviews that contribute to the critical reception of games. Metacritic is a website that aggregates reviews of video games from major game news outlets (like IGN, GameSpot and Kotaku mentioned previously) that this paper will utilize to evaluate critical reception of a game. Game journalism and reviewing are critical sources for this analysis.<sup>130</sup>

## 6.2 Japaneseness Through Japanese Tradition: *Ōkami*

A game full of Japaneseness is *Ōkami*, published by major Japanese publisher Capcom and developed by subsidiary studio Clover Studio. *Ōkami* is marked by its Japaneseness, taking direct inspiration from Japanese tradition in the woodblock print art style and gameplay, and from classical Japanese folklore in its world, story and characters. The Western localization of *Ōkami* honors that identity with a minimal translation that keeps the majority of those Japanese

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<sup>130</sup> <https://www.metacritic.com/>

cultural markers intact, offering Western players a uniquely Japanese product both in nature and in spirit. This case study will juxtapose *Ōkami*'s Japaneseness with its reception in the Western market. When first released in 2006 in North America and 2007 in Europe and Australia *Ōkami* failed to attract an audience outside of Japan and was a commercial flop globally, but when re-released in 2017 the game was met with success. This thesis will first examine *Ōkami*'s packaging, story, setting, art direction and gameplay to establish what makes the game distinctly Japanese, followed by an analysis of *Ōkami*'s localization and how it remains authentic to its Japanese version; the analysis will conclude with a study contrasting *Ōkami*'s two major releases in the West, first before 2010 and then its re-releases post-2015, observing the sales and reception of the game. When *Ōkami* first released exceedingly Japanese games often failed to attract a large audience in the West which reflected on *Ōkami*'s poor sales, but in the second half of the 2010s as Japanese media and pop culture burgeoned internationally Western gamers desiring Japaneseness would power *Ōkami* into success in the West.

In *Ōkami*, the player takes the role of Amaterasu, the Shintō goddess of the sun reincarnated as a white wolf. A seal binding the eight-headed demon serpent dragon Orochi has been released and casting darkness and barrenness onto the land, Amaterasu must venture out into the world of Nippon to bring light and life back. Throughout the adventure Amaterasu will acquire various other godly powers like the ability to make withered plants and tree bloom again and to bring out the sun at night; she is also endowed with fighting prowess, as the player will battle legions of demons and enemies to defeat the dark powers plaguing the world of Nippon.

With the North American, European and Australian title being *Ōkami*, Japaneseness is thrust at the Western player from the very beginning. The Japanese title is written in kanji as 大神; read as “ōkami”, it can be directly translated to “great god” in reference to the protagonist

Amaterasu who is directly based on the major Shintō goddess of the same name and her role as an important deity in the game itself as well. The Japanese title holds a double meaning, as *ōkami* can mean “wolf” (written as 狼 instead of 大神) in reference to Amaterasu in the game being both a wolf and a great deity. An americanized title would have been something akin to “Great God” or “Great Wolf” (or potentially a completely different title with an English-specific meaning). Instead the decision to directly romanize the Japanese title was made. The meaning of the title *Ōkami* will likely not be understood by many Western players but rather what is communicated is the importance of Japanese culture and style on the game. The title even includes a macron over the “o”, which only appears in English when transcribing foreign languages, accentuating the Japanese idiosyncrasy of the title. The heavily foreignized title signals to the Western audience that *Ōkami* is a game full of Japaneseness.<sup>131</sup>

In addition, *Ōkami*’s Western cover (**figure 5.1**) resembles a Japanese scroll, further creating a striking first impression that imprints Japaneseness on a Western audience. Foreground and center is an action shot of Amaterasu, the white wolf the player incarnates, drawn in a *sumi-e* style, which can be seen by the style of his outlines that alternates between strong and weak ink brushstrokes that is an archetype of *sumi-e*.<sup>132</sup> *Sumi-e* (also known as *suiboku-ga*) is a traditional East Asian ink wash painting that was first introduced in Japan in the 14th century during the Muromachi period and throughout the centuries distinguished itself as a traditional art-form in Japan.<sup>133</sup> The second eye-catching part on the foreground is the title. It has an ink and brush

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<sup>131</sup> The macron is the bar over vowels that signals a long vowel when transcribing Japanese into roman characters. The “Ō” in “Ōkami” has a macron on it, signaling that it is pronounced as “Ookami”. The Modified (or Revised) Hepburn Romanization System - the most commonly used in the English-speaking world and endorsed by Kenkyusha’s *New Japanese-English Dictionary* and the American National Standard system - advocates the macron. Kudo, Yoko. *Modified Hepburn Romanization System in Japanese Language Cataloging: Where to Look, What to Follow. Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 2011, vol. 49 no. 2, pp. 97-120, doi: [10.1080/01639374.2011.536751](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2011.536751)

<sup>132</sup> Okamoto, Naomi. *Japanese ink painting: the art of sumi-e*. Sterling Publishing Company, 1996.

<sup>133</sup> Stanley-Baker, Joan. *Japanese Art*, Thames and Hudson, 2000, pp. 118-124

resembling *shodō* (Japanese calligraphy) that further characterizes the singularly Japanese title. Even the trademark (“™”) besides the title is in the form of a *rakkan*, a red seal traditionally used as a signature by Japanese artists.<sup>134</sup> Behind the title is the distinct sun referencing Amaterasu’s role as the goddess of the sun; the perfectly circular and vivid blood red sun is styled in the Japanese woodblock print art *ukiyo-e* style of paintings.<sup>135</sup> With the pronounced markers of Japanese culture - especially from traditional Japanese culture - in the Western box art and title, *Ōkami* presents itself as a game with heavy Japaneseness that is unashamed to be different from Euro-American culture. The explicit Japaneseness does not end at the cover, but is constant throughout the game itself.

The artistic direction of *Ōkami* is steeped in Japaneseness. Much like the box art cover, the whole game’s aesthetic style and graphics echo *sumi-e* by using a rendering technology called “cel shading”. Cel shading is primarily a technique to create shading in animation and video games, but “also and more generally as an artistic style/method of making 3D graphics seem cartoonish”<sup>136</sup> giving it its alternative name of “toon shading”.<sup>137</sup> It is diametrically opposed to the realistic graphics favored by many AAA games from Western developers.<sup>138</sup> In *Ōkami*, the cel shading is ingeniously used on the outlines and textures of the art assets to create the brush and ink style that is characteristic of *sumi-e*, making the player feel as if they are playing inside a traditional *sumi-e* painting (as can be seen in **figures 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5**). This visual style is undeniably Japanese, and one that is striking and salient throughout the whole game.

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<sup>134</sup> Nakamura, Rei 中村玲. “*Shōzan Gen’yō no Rakkan ni Kan suru Shiron*” 照山元瑤の落款に関する試論 [Essay on the Signatures and Seals of Abbess Shōzan Gen’yō]. Sojo University Bulletin of Faculty of Arts 崇城大学芸術学部研究紀要, 2020.

<sup>135</sup> As can be seen in Sakai Hōitsu *The Rising Sun with Flowers and Trees of the Four Seasons* from the The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/77220>).

<sup>136</sup> Luque, R. Reyes. *The Cel Shading Technique*. Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2012, pp. 1. [https://raulreyesfinalproject.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/dissertation\\_cell-shading-raul\\_reyes\\_luque.pdf](https://raulreyesfinalproject.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/dissertation_cell-shading-raul_reyes_luque.pdf)

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> As seen in the 2.2 *Differences Between Japanese and Western Games and Gamers*.

Complementing the traditional Japanese visuals is the soundtrack reminiscent of traditional Japanese music. Traditional Japanese instruments like *shakuhachi*, *shamisen*, *koto* and *taiko* drum are the basis of the scoring that creates a soundtrack that would not seem out of place in a traditional Japanese performance. *Ōkami* is undoubtedly Japanese at an artistic level through its visuals and music.

*Ōkami*'s story and setting can be regarded as a reimagining of Japanese folklore and its mythical history, most notably of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*. These eighth century records are two of the oldest and most important works in ancient Japanese history and their introduction of the *kamis* and recital of the myths surrounding them are key texts to Shintōism, and by extension to Japanese tradition and culture. Many characters and stories from the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* are readapted into *Ōkami*. The protagonist Amaterasu is the major Shintō sun goddess Amaterasu. Susanō, Amaterasu's younger brother in mythology, is reinterpreted in the game as a swordsman and a descendant of Nagi and Nami, themselves based on Izanagi and Izanami the creation deities in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*. In a vital act in the game, the player aids Susanō in defeating the eight-headed demon serpent dragon Orochi to prevent Susanō's love interest Kushi from being sacrificed, paralleling a myth found in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* where Susanō slays Yamata-no-Orochi to save his future wife Kushinadahime. *Ōkami* also features "The Dragon Palace" ruled by Queen Otohime, a location and character found in "Legend of Urashima" found in the *Nihon Shoki*.<sup>139</sup> Throughout, the player battles *yōkai*, monsters and evil spirits from Japanese folklore. Rachel Hutchinson argues that these adaptations of mythical stories and characters are "a way to engage with modern Japanese perceptions of

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<sup>139</sup> Although Otohime is a princess in the original story rather than a queen like in the game.



Shintō, nature and the gods.”<sup>140</sup> *Ōkami* is a modern retelling of Shintō that allows players to immerse themselves in a traditional and mystical side of Japan.

The world of *Ōkami* allows the player to experience a Japan that is a mix of traditional and fantastical. Even the name, Nippon, harkens to ancient Japan. “Nippon” was used as early as the seventh century in Japan until “Nihon” became the more common pronunciation.<sup>141</sup> Nippon shares many of Japan’s natural beauties: lush forests covered in rivers and cherry blossom trees juxtaposed with a rugged mountainous landscape in an island nation surrounded by oceans. Director Hideki Kamiya explains that he was inspired by his childhood spent in Nagano prefecture — famous for its natural beauty — and wanted to evoke the “vision of Japan in his heart” which he associates with the traditional Japanese landscape.<sup>142</sup> Along with its mystical nature, *Ōkami*’s world is scattered with traditional Japanese structure such as Shintō shrines and *torii* gate (as seen in **figure 5.2**) and many of the residences are *kominkas*, classical stand-alone residential houses for merchants in the Japanese countryside (as seen in **figure 5.3**). Even with the similarity in naming, Nippon does not have a clear placement within Japan’s history. *Ōkami*’s world crafts a fantastical Japan not reminiscent of any one single era but of a spiritual past steeped in nostalgia that highlights a captivating aspect of Japaneseness.

The Japanese and Shintō influence extends to *Ōkami*’s gameplay. The game genre is a third-person action-adventure game with combat similar to other Japanese game developers Nintendo’s celebrated *The Legend of Zelda* games that director Hideki Kamiya reveals as a strong influence.<sup>143</sup> Its genre situates *Ōkami* comfortably within the Japanese style of games, but

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<sup>140</sup> Hutchinson, Rachel. *Japanese Culture Through Videogames*. Routledge, 2019, pp. 50.

<sup>141</sup> Japan Today. “Nippon or Nihon? No consensus on Japanese pronunciation of Japan”. Japan Today, 2014. <https://japantoday.com/category/features/nippon-or-nihon-no-consensus-on-japanese-pronunciation-of-japan>.

<sup>142</sup> Cutscenes. *Kamiya Chronicles: The Brush Up of Okami* | 神谷英樹:大神の筆起こし. Youtube, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZnE2-U3dE>.

<sup>143</sup> The Famicast. *Hideki Kamiya Interview* | *Famicast @ BitSummit 2018*. Youtube, 2018. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWkk\\_nwCvf8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWkk_nwCvf8).

its most unique gameplay mechanic draws direct influence from traditional Japanese culture and Shintō mythology — the Celestial Brush. Amaterasu has the ability to temporarily stop time and bring up a traditional Japanese scroll where the player can draw with a paintbrush and ink to conjure various godly powers (as seen in **figure 5.4**).<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, the Celestial Brush's powers elicit Amaterasu as a Shintō goddess. At the beginning of the game, the player is able to bring out the sun at night (as seen in **figure 5.5**), hinting at Amaterasu's mythological source as the goddess of the sun. As the player advances through the game, their Celestial Brush gains abilities to conjure powers related to nature such as gusts of wind or making a withered tree bloom again. As the player conceptually inhabits the role of a *sumi-e* artist drawing with ink on a scroll canvas to use Shintō inspired powers, creating a direct immersion with traditional Japanese culture.

As discussed so far, *Ōkami* is a game brimming in Japaneseness through its art, setting and story, and gameplay that has been kept in its Western versions through its localization. Similarly, the localizations of the text keeps the Japanese character of the original text, giving the Western consumer dialogue and text that fits the overall Japanese atmosphere. *Ōkami* has no voice acting, so the translation effort was focused on text: dialogue, user interfaces, menus. With *Ōkami*'s playtime reaching up to 30 hours, the localization of the text was still an imposing task; Capcom localization producer David Crislip recalls translating 1500 pages of text.<sup>145</sup>

*Ōkami*'s Western versions can be characterized as “partial localizations” with only textual translations, allowing Japaneseness to survive the localization. The menu and user interface texts are non-didactic making a direct translation easy; for the dialogue and story, the localization team retained references to Shintō mythology (as presented earlier). Despite the risk that Western

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<sup>144</sup> As seen in 2.2 *Differences Between Japanese and Western Games and Gamers*.

<sup>145</sup> Mielke, James. *The Wolf Whisperer*. 1Up.com, 2006.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20160305070226/http://www.1up.com/features/wolf-talk>.

players may not be familiar with them, Crislip explains the goal of the translation is to be as faithful to the Japanese flavor of the original text as possible, and players could do quick research to discover this part of Japanese culture.<sup>146</sup> The localization made some changes to the names of characters and locations that might be difficult to pronounce for non-Japanese players. Some of the characters' names were shortened to be easier to pronounce while still being recognizable to their Japanese names and folkloric roots, such as the character クシナダ (“Kushinada”) who was shortened “Kushi” in all Western localizations. Amaterasu's full name was not altered, but her Japanese-specific nickname アミ公 (“Amikō”) was altered to “Ammy”, a similar but more recognizable to a Western audience nickname. The world's name was changed from ナカツクニ (“Nakatsukuni”) to “Nippon”, a Japanese-sounding name more familiar to the West. Non-crucial aesthetics texts, such as onomatopoeia were kept in their original kanji form, as can be seen in **figure 5.5** where every time Amaterasu calls forth the sun the kanji 照 flows out of the sun, complementing *Ōkami*'s Japanese aesthetics.<sup>147</sup> Even in a puzzle where the solution requires the player to draw a kanji character, the localization team opted to give Western players hints instead of removing or completely modifying the section.<sup>148</sup> This results in a translation that is authentic to the original Japanese game and adds to the Japaneseness of the Western versions.

*Ōkami* was first released in Japan in April 2006 for the PlayStation 2, followed by the North American release the same year in September, and European and Australian releases in February 2007. This situates *Ōkami*'s first release in a time where Japanese games were beginning to sag behind, and many Western consumers were losing interest in the once dominant

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<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> The character indicates “illumination” or “shining” in Japanese.

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*

Japanese video game industry.<sup>149</sup> In the West, *Ōkami*'s unique and stunning visuals, strong story and setting based on Japanese culture and folklore, and fun gameplay based on the distinctive Celestial Brush resonated well with critics and avid japanophiles. The game received an overall score of 93 on Metacritic, a site that aggregates all major game review scores.<sup>150</sup> *Ōkami* was awarded by multiple major game review sites, among which were IGN's "Game of the Month" in September 2006 and eventually even "Game of the Year", best of the year from Edge and even "Artistic Achievement and Original Score" from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA).<sup>151,152,153,154</sup> Comparatively, *Ōkami*'s commercial reception was much more mild. After over a year, *Ōkami* had only sold around 270,000 copies — making it a disappointing number for a large budget game.<sup>155</sup> Producer Atsushi Inaba's hope that the striking style would attract gamers outside of Japan dwindled.<sup>156</sup> *Ōkami*'s glowing praise from critics and fans failed to attract a larger Western market; its overt Japaneseness and artistic design doomed it to being a cult hit.

At the time it was believed that *Ōkami*'s commercial shortcomings despite its critical acclaim was that it was a mismatch for PlayStation 2. *Ōkami*'s earliest 2006 release coincided with the launch of the next generation of consoles, the Xbox 360 in 2005 and the PlayStation 3 in 2006, which Capcom producer Motohide Eshiro believed were "overshadowing any other game

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<sup>149</sup> As discussed in the 2005 to 2015 period in 4. *Rise of Japanese Media and Pop Culture in Relation to Video Games* part.

<sup>150</sup> Metacritic. *Okami*. Metacritic, 2006, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/PlayStation-2/okami>.

<sup>151</sup> IGN PlayStation Team. *Game of the Month: September 2006*. IGN, 2006. <https://www.ign.com/articles/2006/10/03/game-of-the-month-september-2006-4>.

<sup>152</sup> IGN Staff. *Roundtable #185: Game of the Year*. IGN, 2007. <https://www.ign.com/articles/2007/01/12/roundtable-185-game-of-the-year>.

<sup>153</sup> Boyes, Emma. *Okami wins Edge award*. GameSpot, 2007. <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/okami-wins-iedge-i-award/1100-6176580/>.

<sup>154</sup> Game Developer Staff. *2007 UK BAFTA Game Award Winners Led By Nintendo*. Game Developer, 2007. [https://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=15975](https://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=15975).

<sup>155</sup> Casamassina, Matt. *Okami's Second Chance*. IGN, 2008. <https://www.ign.com/articles/2008/03/20/okamis-second-chance>.

<sup>156</sup> Barber, Ollie. *Beauty and the beast Okami*. The Guardian, 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2005/nov/24/games.shopping1>.

news” and consequently hurting *Ōkami*'s sales especially since it was released on slightly dated hardware.<sup>157</sup> In the West, the PlayStation 2 had also been marketed as a mature console and became popular for realistic and violent games like military shooters, an audience that could be considered unsuitable for a vivid and artistic game like *Ōkami*.<sup>158</sup> This led Capcom to believe that it was released on a console with a more suitable audience.

The most obvious destination for *Ōkami* was Nintendo's Wii console that was known for family-friendly and colorful games like *Mario* as well as the fortune of being current hardware.<sup>159</sup> By virtue of *Ōkami*'s cult status, Capcom's Christian Svensson recalled “petitions of people screaming for us to do Okami Wii, and we had so many posts on our message boards about it.”<sup>160</sup> Capcom enlisted Ready at Dawn studio to port the game to the Wii. It included a slightly crisper picture, and most significantly they utilized the laser pointer of the Wii remote for the Celestial Brush to recreate more closely the feeling of drawing. The Wii version released in April of 2008 in North America to a similar chorus: high critical and fan praise but disappointing sales. In its first few months *Ōkami* for Wii had only moved 280,000 copies in North America, frustrating Capcom who believed they had found a more suitable audience in the West.<sup>161</sup> *Ōkami*'s failed venture reveals that it was not an issue with the consoles and the audiences they were geared for, but rather with the timing the game was released — pre-2010 the audience in the West for the very Japanese game was insufficient.

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<sup>157</sup> Juba, Joe. *Okami Was At The Wrong Place At The Wrong Time*. Game Informer, 2011, <https://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2011/01/24/okami-was-at-the-wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time.aspx>.

<sup>158</sup> Calvin, Alex. *How Sony's PlayStation 2 took the world by storm*. GamesIndustry.biz, 2020, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2020-01-06-how-sonys-playstation-2-took-the-world-by-storm>.

<sup>159</sup> Sterlicchi, John. *Nintendo's Wii console captures new game market*. The Guardian, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2007/oct/10/usnews.internationalnews>.

<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Plunkett, Luke. *Okami On Wii Didn't Do So Well*. Kotaku, 2008, <https://kotaku.com/okami-on-wii-didnt-do-so-well-5031280>.

*Ōkami* used its Japanese influence to create a unique and beautiful video game experience, but regrettably it was released at a time when Japanese games — especially distinctly Japanese games — were often overlooked by Western gamers. The game even won the unenviable Guinness World Record for “Least commercially successful winner of a Game of the Year award”.<sup>162</sup> *Ōkami*'s lackluster performance is believed to be a major factor in Capcom's board of directors electing to dissolve Clover Studio in 2007 along with major staff leaving.<sup>163</sup> *Ōkami*'s critical and cult success kept enticing Capcom, who in 2010 in Japan and 2011 in North America and Europe released *Ōkamiden*, a “spiritual successor” for the Nintendo DS; being on a handheld, it was a much smaller budget game than its console predecessor.<sup>164</sup> It was met with similar middling sales in the West, as sales reached an estimated 280,000 copies.<sup>165</sup> This time period was unfavorable to games with heavy Japaneseness, which meant poor commercial success for *Ōkami* and closure for its developer Clover Studio .

Capcom kept the *Ōkami* intellectual property on the backburner until the next generation of consoles when a remastering was created for the PlayStation 3 in 2012, followed by a PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch and PC release in 2017. A remastering in video games means taking an older game and sprucing it up with up-to-date graphics and to work on modern gaming devices. Unlike a remake which insinuates a complete reimagining, a remastering only enhances the visuals while maintaining everything else, giving the name *Ōkami HD* to this new version. Capcom producer Natsuki Shiozawa cited *Ōkami*'s cult popularity mixed with the arrival of a “a

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<sup>162</sup> Guinness World Record. *Least commercially successful winner of a Game of the Year award*. Guinness World Record, 2009. <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/least-commercially-successful-winner-of-a-game-of-the-year-award>.

<sup>163</sup> Edge Staff. *Clover Studios to Dissolve*. Edge, 2006. <https://archive.ph/20120629225123/http://www.next-gen.biz/news/clover-studios-dissolve>.

<sup>164</sup> Dillard, Corbie. *E3 2010: Interviews: Okamiden - Capcom*. Nintendo Life, 2010. [https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2010/06/e3\\_2010\\_interviews\\_Ōkamiden\\_capcom](https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2010/06/e3_2010_interviews_Ōkamiden_capcom).

<sup>165</sup> VGChartz. *OkamiDen (DS)*. VGChartz, 2011. <https://www.vgchartz.com/game/38423/okamiden/>.

whole new generation of gamers” warranted giving *Ōkami* a second chance.<sup>166</sup> This new generation of gamers coincides with the rise in interest of Japanese pop culture and media in the West in the mid-2010s, especially with the latter releases in 2017.<sup>167</sup> This new prospective Western audience mixed with a small but passionate established fanbase, along with the fact that creating a remaster is cheaper than creating a game from scratch and the growth of online video game stores giving a less costly alternative to publishing created a situation favorable for Capcom to release *Ōkami HD*.

The gamble paid off for Capcom. *Ōkami HD* for the PlayStation 4, Xbox One and Nintendo Switch sold 1.8 million copies as of December 2021, gaining *Ōkami* the long-awaited pedestal of a platinum seller.<sup>168</sup> In addition, as of December 2020 the PC and PlayStation 3 versions sold approximately 536,000 and 529,000 units respectively.<sup>169</sup> Although this data most likely includes global sales, the scale at which *Ōkami HD* outdid its predecessor is remarkable, especially considering it is a glorified repackaging of games over a decade old. Despite being a flashy new game in 2006, *Ōkami* failed to capture a wide audience in the West. It shows that *Ōkami*, a game that spotlights and markets its abundant Japaneseness, could find more appeal with its second wind in the latter half of the 2010s with a Western audience that desires very Japanese games.

*Ōkami* is also not a game that is technologically advanced, but rather uses Japanese culture to create a distinctive style. The spreading in popularity of Japanese media and pop culture is established more on growth of media such as manga and anime and of Japanese culture

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<sup>166</sup> Campbell, Colin. *Why Capcom Remade Okami*. IGN, 2012.

<https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/10/11/why-capcom-remade-okami>.

<sup>167</sup> As tackled in the 2005 to 2015 period in section 3, part 3's *Rise of Japanese Media and Pop Culture in Relation to Video Games* part.

<sup>168</sup> Capcom. *Platinum Titles*. Capcom, 2021. <https://www.capcom.co.jp/ir/english/business/million.html#tab4>.

<sup>169</sup> Parijat, Shubhankar. *Okami HD Sold More on Switch Than Any Other Platform*. Gaming Bolt, 2020. <https://gamingbolt.com/okami-hd-sold-more-on-switch-than-any-other-platform>.



itself rather than Japan - and its games - being cutting-edge.<sup>170</sup> *Ōkami* is not technologically new - it is over fifteen years old - and looks back at an ancient Japan. It is *Ōkami*'s unique style and use of Japaneseness that attracts the Western consumer whose interest in Japanese culture and media has risen sharply in the second half of the 2010s. Director of the original game, Hideki Kamiya describes *Ōkami* gradually gaining recognition, just as Japaneseness gradually has become more popular in the West, and *Ōkami HD* fuelling the fans by making the game available to a new intrigued audience.<sup>171</sup> This building interest has led to Kamiya to start teasing a potential sequel over fifteen years after the original was first released (a real sequel unlike *Ōkamiden* which was a spiritual successor).<sup>172</sup> Perhaps in this current climate where Japanese media and very Japanese games are exceptionally popular in the West, a real *Ōkami* sequel could have the potential to straight away be a commercial success instead of simply the cult hit it was when it first released.



<sup>170</sup> As discussed in 4. Rise of Japanese Media and Pop Culture in Relation to Video Games part.

<sup>171</sup> Cutscenes. Kamiya Chronicles: First Steps | 神谷英樹: 最初の一步. Youtube, 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fHJTg0Xjvw&list=PLIXSMC8997x9oqauwQeY-A8Qal1bgyveS>.

<sup>172</sup> *ibid*.



Figure 5.1: the US cover of *Ōkami* for the PlayStation 2 released in 2006. From [http://www.thecoverproject.net/view.php?game\\_id=2056](http://www.thecoverproject.net/view.php?game_id=2056).



Figure 5.2: screenshot of the game's Japanese inspired nature — the mountainous landscape and a cherry blossom tree — and of a Shintō *torii* gate.



Figure 5.4: screenshot of Amaterasu using the Celestial Brush mechanic.

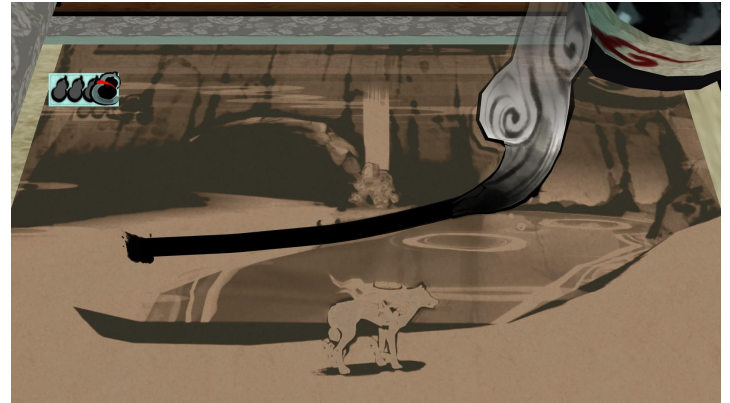


Figure 5.3: screenshot of a *kominka* (traditional Japanese-style house).



Figure 5.5: screenshot of Amaterasu bringing the sun out by using her Celestial Brush; the kanji character 照 signifies illumination.

### 6.3 Japaneseness Through Contemporary Japanese Culture: *Yakuza*

The *Yakuza* series, known as the *Ryū ga Gotoku* (龍が如く) in Japan, by video game giant SEGA illustrates the rise of Japaneseness in the West throughout from its first release in the West in 2006 until today. *Yakuza* gives players a uniquely Japanese experience, immersed in simulations of Japan's metropolises like Tokyo, imbued with Japan's pop culture through its yakuza plot sprinkled with distinctive Japanese humor and eccentricity. *Yakuza*'s distinct Japaneseness that hindered the series' commercial appeal when it first came out transformed into

being a major factor in its success in the West, evolving the way SEGA has chosen to localize the series for the West. This analysis will begin by taking a close look at what makes *Yakuza* “distinctly Japanese” games and how SEGA advertises the games’ Japaneseness; next the analysis will trace the *Yakuza* series from its inception to its latest release, focusing on how its sales and reception develop as well as its localization; concluding this analysis will examine *Yakuza*’s characteristics that led to its rise in popularity in newer gamers after the mid-2010s. *Yakuza*’s Japaneseness failed to attract a large audience in the West in its inception in 2005 and for over a decade, but the series saw its fortunes turn in the second half of the 2010s, its Japanese appeal became a surprise hit in the West in parallel to the rise of Japanese media and pop culture.

The *Yakuza* series (or *Ryū ga Gotoku* in Japan) is imbued with Japaneseness in all its games through its visuals and gameplay. The games are based on fictional yakuza, Japanese organized crime syndicates akin to the Mafia, and their setting and plotlines are heavily inspired by yakuza films, a popular genre that has marked popular culture in Japan.<sup>173</sup> *Yakuza*’s world is situated in contemporary Japan. The focal town much of the series is set in Kamurocho (神室町, *Kamurochō*, seen in **figure 5.6**) is modeled from Tokyo’s popular entertainment and night life district Kabukicho (that is also known for its yakuza), and another important location is Sotenbori (蒼天堀, *Sōtenbori*) directly inspired by Osaka’s Dotonbori district.<sup>174</sup> The *Yakuza* games’ world are brimming with venues the player can explore that evoke the Japanese environment: stores like *konbinis*, Japanese convenience stores (seen in **figure 5.7**), and real Japanese retail store chain Don Quijote (seen in **figure 5.7**); restaurants showcase diverse Japanese cuisine, from the illustrious sushi and tonkotsu ramen to the more obscure Nagasaki

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<sup>173</sup> Coates, Jennifer. “The Yakuza film: a genre ‘endorsed by the people’”. *The Japanese Cinema Book* edited by Hideaki Fujiki and Alastair Phillips. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, pp. 348-360.

<sup>174</sup> Schreiber, Mark. *Kabukicho: where worlds collide*. The Japan Times, 2002, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2002/01/20/general/kabukicho-where-worlds-collide/>.

champon and okonomiyaki. The characters inhabiting this Japanese environment are also unambiguously Japanese, with Japanese names and features such as dark black hair, exemplified by protagonist Kazuma Kiryu. *Yakuza*'s setting, narrative and characters' has likened it to an interactive yakuza drama and gives a distinct Japanese identity.<sup>175</sup>

The *Yakuza* series also takes advantage of the interactive nature of video games to immerse the player into its Japanese world and atmosphere. *Yakuza*'s genre is an open world action-adventure (as seen in **figure 5.8**), a style of game where the player can explore and approach objectives freely inside a virtual world (which in *Yakuza*'s case are the world of Kamurocho and Sotenbori). The open world format allows player explore towns modeled after real Japanese towns and to visit and interact with the Japanese stores and restaurants mentioned previously, but also to partake in a myriad of activities found in Japan such as shogi, a Japanese board game comparable to chess, hostess clubs, playing games and arcade games at a SEGA game center, or even doing karaoke (as seen in **figure 5.9**). Director Toshihiro Nagoshi asserts his studio's "authentic" Japanese experience enables the creation of a virtual world that perfectly immerses players into the "real" Japan.<sup>176</sup>

A defining trait of *Yakuza*'s brand is its quirky and extravagant nature which also makes *Yakuza* feel Japanese, especially to some Western audiences. Although *Yakuza*'s main plots are serious, the tone often does a complete one-eighty into the ridiculous when the player does the optional content. An example of *Yakuza*'s excessive style is in its combat: the player has the ability to pick up any object as a weapon, even a bicycle, to wildly swing around at enemies making fights over the top (as seen in **figure 5.8**). The innumerable side activities are often a source of hilarity. For example when the player dances disco or sings karaoke (as seen in **figure**

<sup>175</sup> DocHaus. *Yakuza*. Giant Bomb, 2021, <https://www.giantbomb.com/yakuza/3025-766/>.

<sup>176</sup> OTAQUEST. *EXILE SEKAI Interviews TOSHIHIRO NAGOSHI Part 3 - From Kamurocho to the World*. Youtube, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zm9DHnP2RoA>.

5.9), the image of protagonist Kazuma Kiryu — a menacing gangster — boogieing or singing his heart out and creates a contrast that is absurd. This connects *Yakuza* to the reputation Japanese media and pop culture has accumulated in the West for quirkiness and outrageousness like culture icon Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, famous for vivacious music and outrageous fashion.<sup>177,178,179</sup> *Yakuza*'s eccentricity gives it a strikingly Japanese perception similar to other Japanese pop.

The first *Ryū ga Gotoku* game (that would come to be known as *Yakuza* in the West) was released in Japan in December 2005 for the PlayStation 2 to critical and commercial success. Japanese video game reviewer Famitsu awarded the game a 9/10, and the game would go on to sell over 230,000 copies in 2005.<sup>180,181</sup> Director Toshihiro Nagoshi accredits the success to “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.”<sup>182</sup> From its origins Japaneseness has been essential to the *Yakuza* series.

Following the success of the first *Yakuza* game in Japan, SEGA opted to localize *Ryū ga Gotoku* and publish to the West as *Yakuza* nine months later in September 2006. SEGA expressed that the goal of the localization was “that the subtle nuances of the game were brought to life”, resulting in what Carme Mangiron designates as “dual localization” that strives to please both

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<sup>177</sup> Alt, Matt. *Pure Invention: How Japan's Pop Culture Conquered the World*. Crown, 2020, pp. 186.

<sup>178</sup> Bain, Marc. *How Japan's global image morphed from military empire to eccentric pop-culture superpower*.

Quartz, 2020, <https://qz.com/1806376/japans-image-has-changed-from-fierce-to-lovable-over-the-decades/>.

<sup>179</sup> Wonderland. Interview: Kyary Pamyu Pamyu. Wonderland, 2017, <https://www.wonderlandmagazine.com/2017/02/06/interview-kyary-pamyu-pamyu/#>.

<sup>180</sup> Keita 慶太. “*Ryū ga Gotoku (PS2) no Rebyū・Hyōka・Kansō Jōhō*” 龍が如く(PS2)のレビュー・評価・感想情報 [Review of Like a Dragon (PS2)・Judging・Impressions]. Famitsu ファミ通 2007, <https://www.famitsu.com/games/t/232/reviews/>.

<sup>181</sup> Geimin.net. “2005 Nen Terebigēmu Sofuto Uriage TOP500” 2005年テレビゲームソフト売り上げTOP500 [Top 500 Video Game Sales in 2005]. Geimin.net, 2006, [https://web.archive.org/web/20141228093934/http://geimin.net/da/db/2005\\_ne\\_fa/index.php](https://web.archive.org/web/20141228093934/http://geimin.net/da/db/2005_ne_fa/index.php).

<sup>182</sup> Constantine, John. *Tokyo Beat Down: The Story of Yakuza*. 1Up.com 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160525140414/http://www.1up.com/features/story-yakuza-franchise>.

fans of Japanese culture and mainstream players who are not necessarily familiar with it.<sup>183,184</sup>

The first *Yakuza*'s localization retains aspects of Japaneseness such as the Japanese setting — the town of Kabukicho — and characters, and the name change from *Ryū ga Gotoku* into *Yakuza* translates retains the game's Japanese concept. Many characters' names are touched to be easier to pronounce while keeping their Japaneseness, such as Akira Nishikiyama to Akira Nishiki and Sai no Hanaya to Kage. SEGA spent big in the localization however, choosing to do a “full localization” enlisting Hollywood stars like Mark Hamill of Star Wars fame and Michael Madsen to dub and replace the original Japanese voices. Dubbing was common in this time period, believed as necessary to appeal to a wider global audience.<sup>185</sup> The first *Yakuza* game's localization was a cocktail of Japaneseness with Americanization.

*Yakuza* bombed commercially in the West, failing to attract a general audience and its cultural adaption was criticized. The game was viewed favorably by critics garnering a 75 on Metacritic with positive comments focused on its immersive Japanese world; but it failed to entice a large Western Audience and sold dismally.<sup>186,187,188,189</sup> *Yakuza*'s dubbing was criticized for its awkward attempts to make the game more mature to a Western audience by adding excessive swearing and altering the personalities of many characters to be more edgy. Instead, the Western versions often suffer from an overly gritty tone and characters that failed to match the context.<sup>190</sup>

The localization's attempt to overly-Americanize also backfired as it was wildly mistaken as a

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<sup>183</sup> Adams, David. *Yakuza Voice Cast Revealed*. IGN, 2006, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2006/06/16/yakuza-voice-cast-revealed>.

<sup>184</sup> Mangiron, Carme. *Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games*. Arts. Vol. 10. No. 1. Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 2021, pp. 11.

<sup>185</sup> As discussed in *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* in 5.4 Maturing Phase (2000 - 2005).

<sup>186</sup> Metacritic. *Yakuza*. Metacritic, 2006, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/PlayStation-2/yakuza>.

<sup>187</sup> Castro, Juan. *Yakuza Review*. IGN, 2006, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2006/09/06/yakuza-review>.

<sup>188</sup> Kasavin, Greg. *Yakuza Review*. GameSpot, 2006, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/yakuza-review/1900-6157009/>.

<sup>189</sup> Gibson, Ellie. *Yakuza 3 won't go west, says SEGA*. Eurogamer, 2009, <https://www.eurogamer.net/yakuza-3-wont-go-west-says-SEGA>.

<sup>190</sup> Mangiron, Carme. *Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games*. Arts. Vol. 10. No. 1. Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 2021, pp. 11.



clone of Western crime games, notably the massively popular *Grand Theft Auto* series, instead of a uniquely Japanese game.<sup>191</sup> SEGA's decision to restyle the title *Ryū ga Gotoku* — “Like a Dragon” — to *Yakuza* emphasized the criminal aspect in the Western versions putting it in the category of other crime video games. *Yakuza*'s expensive attempt to create a mixture between Japaneseness and Westernization misfired, creating a game that fell short other than catering to a small niche audience seeking Japaneseness.

Following the success in Japan, SEGA quickly followed with a sequel a year later in December 2006, but the shaky reception in the West would detain *Yakuza 2* until September 2008 with a radically different localization philosophy. The first *Yakuza*'s costly and poorly received English dub by forgoing it in subsequent games, opting for subtitles instead; Associate producer Kevin Fane explains that SEGA's decision for *Yakuza 2* to undergo a “partial localization” was to keep the Western versions authentic to the Japanese culture as, but also that it would be cheaper.<sup>192</sup> Much like the first game, *Ryū ga Gotoku* was a success in Japan selling over 572,000 copies in its first year<sup>193</sup> and a flop in the West, selling a measly 40,000 copies in the United States.<sup>194</sup> Despite *Yakuza 2* gaining good critical reception (with a 77 on Metacritic) and accommodating its small fanbase and consumers interested in Japanese culture in its localization, it slipped outside of the radar of the majority Western video game players.<sup>195</sup> Games heavy in Japaneseness and who used it as a selling point had little appeal in the West at this time.

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<sup>191</sup> Webster, Andrew. *Yakuza 0 on PS4 is the perfect introduction to this weird, wild crime series*. The Verge, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/1/19/14323874/yakuza-0-ps4-review>.

<sup>192</sup> Siliconera Staff. *SEGA tells us why they kept the Japanese voice track in Yakuza 2*. Siliconera, 2008, <https://www.siliconera.com/SEGA-tells-us-why-they-kept-the-japanese-voice-track-in-yakuza-2/>.

<sup>193</sup> Garaph. *Yakuza 2*. Garaph, 2007, <http://garaph.info/softwareindividual.php/gid/2540>.

<sup>194</sup> Gibson, Ellie. *Yakuza 3 won't go west, says SEGA*. Eurogamer, 2009, <https://www.eurogamer.net/yakuza-3-wont-go-west-says-SEGA>.

<sup>195</sup> Metacritic. *Yakuza 2*. Metacritic, 2008, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/PlayStation-2/yakuza-2>.

*Yakuza*'s continued success in Japan kept the series alive, but the disappointment of the first two games in the West resulted in SEGA forgoing a localization and Western release for the third game.<sup>196</sup> Fane suspected that

"the Western market has been less and less enamored with Japanese titles over the last several years, with a few notable exceptions, and when it comes to gritty, urban action, there are Western-developed games that are more immediately relevant. *Yakuza* hasn't found its audience on this side of the Pacific because, on a fundamental level, there is no audience to find."<sup>197</sup>

Fane's explanation is in line with this research's timeline of the slump in the Japanese video game industry during the mid to late 2000s. The Western video game industry had caught up to Japan in terms of budget and recognition, and Western consumers tended to prefer games that were culturally more familiar. Instead of attempting to cater to a global audience by internationalizing, SEGA opted to pursue the *Yakuza* series' Japanese identity and to create games targeted with only a Japanese audience in mind.<sup>198</sup> This is evident by *Yakuza*'s Japan-exclusive spinoff released between the second and third main installment called *Ryū ga Gotoku Kenzan!* (龍が如く 見参!) where *Yakuza* characters are transported to 1605 Kyoto and recast as historically significant swordsmen like Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojirō. *Kenzan!* relies on knowledge of Japanese history and culture even more than the main entries. *Yakuza*'s reliance on Japaneseness gave it critical credibility and a strong niche audience, but was ill-fated to a larger Western audience.

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<sup>196</sup> Gibson, Ellie. *Yakuza 3 won't go west, says SEGA*. Eurogamer, 2009, <https://www.eurogamer.net/yakuza-3-wont-go-west-says-SEGA>.

<sup>197</sup> Constantine, John. *Tokyo Beat Down: The Story of Yakuza*. 1Up.com 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160525140414/http://www.1up.com/features/story-yakuza-franchise>.

<sup>198</sup> OTAQUEST. *EXILE SEKAI Interviews TOSHIHIRO NAGOSHI Part 3 - From Kamurocho to the World*. Youtube, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zm9DHnP2RoA>.

In a surprising turn of events, SEGA reversed their decision and announced that *Yakuza 3* would get a western localization and release in the end, citing fan demand<sup>199</sup>. *Yakuza* had amassed a small but vocal group of “hardcore” fans enough to tempt SEGA into giving one of their flagship Japanese titles another chance at a broader audience, but the announcement came after a long wait of nearly a year since the Japanese release forcing SEGA to rush the localization and by consequence be forced cut content to meet the deadline of March 2010.<sup>200,201</sup> The cut content would be parts with heavy Japanese influence that scatter the world — the hostess bars, shogi and Mah-jong games, a Japanese trivia quiz, and a myriad of side missions — that SEGA claimed would not detract from the narrative.<sup>202</sup> This was met with anger from the niche japanophile fans and critics; the side activities that were removed are a defining ingredient of the series significant in giving *Yakuza*’s characteristic Japaneseness.<sup>203,204</sup>

In reaction to backlash against and cut content of *Yakuza 3* and even from the awkward localization of *Yakuza 1*, SEGA rethought their strategy for *Yakuza 4*’s Western release. In direct response to *Yakuza 3*, SEGA publicized that the majority of side missions and activities that are signature components of Tokyo culture would be retained from the original Japanese version.<sup>205</sup> In *Yakuza 4*, Western players can return to the hostess clubs, as well as partake in pachinko, onsen (Japanese hot spring) and hanafuda (Japanese playing cards). Eager to separate themselves from awkward Americanizations (especially of the first *Yakuza* installment), producer Yasuhiro

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<sup>199</sup> Eva, Kevin. *East Meets West – Yakuza 3 Coming In 2010*. PlayStation Blog, 2009, <https://blog.PlayStation.com/archive/2009/12/08/east-meets-west-yakuza-3-coming-in-2010/>.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> Totilo, Stephen. *SEGA: Yakuza 3 Cuts Were Necessary For Western Release*. Kotaku, 2010, <https://kotaku.com/SEGA-yakuza-3-cuts-were-necessary-for-western-release-5479525>.

<sup>202</sup> Miller, Greg. *Yakuza 3 Loses Content in the West*, IGN 2010, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2010/02/23/yakuza-3-loses-content-in-the-west>.

<sup>203</sup> Plunkett, Luke. *Yakuza 3 Players Say A Lot More Was Cut Than Hostess Bars*. Kotaku, 2010, <https://kotaku.com/yakuza-3-players-say-a-lot-more-was-cut-than-hostess-ba-5491650>.

<sup>204</sup> Ashcraft, Brian. *SEGA, You Are Once Again Making A Giant Mistake*. Kotaku 2010, <https://kotaku.com/SEGA-you-are-once-again-making-a-giant-mistake-5478862>.

<sup>205</sup> Totilo, Stephen. *SEGA: Yakuza 4 Cuts Will Be Minor*. Kotaku, 2010, <https://kotaku.com/SEGA-yakuza-4-cuts-will-be-minor-5656944>.



Noguchi sought “to bring a more complete localization that was more faithful to the source material.”<sup>206</sup> *Yakuza 4*’s “‘de-Westernize’ certain aspects of the legacy localization changes from *Yakuza 1*”; the protagonist, Kazuma Kiryu, who was always called by his first name in Western versions is referred to by his surname Kiryu like in the Japanese version, and ads for real Japan-exclusive services like Mobage Town and Ameba Pigg can be seen livening up Tokyo in the game.<sup>207</sup> SEGA, responding to ardent fans, accentuated foreignized localizations, highlighting the game’s Japaneseness.

Despite *Yakuza* embracing its Japaneseness pleasing its hardcore fanbase, the series failed to make waves putting its future outside of Japan in limbo demonstrating the lukewarm reception of very Japanese games to the general Western public. *Yakuza 3* and *4* sold poorly in the West (*Yakuza 4* estimated to have only sold 120,000 copies, and similar for *Yakuza 3*).<sup>208</sup> As a last ditch effort SEGA localized *Yakuza: Dead Souls* in 2012, a bizarre non-canon zombie game spin-off, but the game flopped even worse reaching a woeful 70,000 copies in North America.<sup>209</sup> *Yakuza*’s sales could not recover its AAA budget localization costs, causing SEGA to become quiet about publishing *Yakuza 5* — that had released in 2012 in Japan — to the West; the silence would last a drawn out two years when Sony announced a partnership with SEGA to fund *Yakuza 5*’s localization and release for its PlayStation 3 console to the West in 2015 — three years after its Japanese release.<sup>210,211</sup> By 2015 the PlayStation 3 was on its last legs as its successor, the

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<sup>206</sup> Fletcher, JC. *Yakuza 4 producer Yasuhiro Noguchi on re-localizing the series*. Engadget, 2011, <https://www.engadget.com/2011-04-13-yakuza-4-producer-yasuhiro-noguchi-on-re-localizing-the-series.html?guccounter=1>.

<sup>207</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> Santos, Wayne. *Can Yakuza Make A Comeback In The West?*. Comics Gaming Magazine, 2014, <https://www.cgmagonline.com/articles/features/can-yakuza-make-comeback-west/>.

<sup>209</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> Bogos, Steven. *Yakuza 5 Devs Have No Plans For Western Release*. The Escapist, 2013, <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/yakuza-5-devs-have-no-plans-for-western-release/>.

<sup>211</sup> McWhertor, Michael. *Yakuza 5 is coming to PS3 in North America and Europe*. Polygon, 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/2014/12/6/7345297/yakuza-5-is-coming-to-ps4-in-north-america-and-europe>.

PlayStation 4, had been out for over a year; to save costs Sony and SEGA gave *Yakuza 5* limited marketing and only released it on Sony's digital media store PlayStation Store waiving a physical edition on store shelves and restricting *Yakuza 5*'s visibility all caused it to sell poorly.<sup>212,213</sup> In the ten years between 2005 and 2015 that the *Yakuza* series existed, it had received two kinds of receptions: illustrious commercial success in Japan, and indifference and commercial duds in the West. For all its critical acclaim and its sustained popularity in Japan, *Yakuza*'s Japaneseness fell short as a selling point to an uninterested Western audience and only reaching cult status.

As the video game industry transitioned console generations *Yakuza*'s lackluster performances in the West prompted critics and fans to speculate on the series' future, but SEGA's perseverance was rewarded as *Yakuza* benefited from the West's dramatic increase in Japaneseness in games to become a commercial accomplishment.<sup>214,215</sup> Moving into the second half of the 2010s, SEGA continued to push for a global strategy with a desire to continue localizing Japanese games for the West, most apparent in SEGA's move to acquire the Japanese developer and publisher Atlus in 2016.<sup>216</sup> This research first discussed Atlus for their Americanized localization of *Revelations: Persona* in the *Development Phase (1995 - 2000)* part, but since then Atlus revamped their image, becoming known for publishing JRPGs bountiful in Japaneseness and for excelling in authentic localizations to a niche Western audience.<sup>217,218</sup>

SEGA promoted "Atlus' ability to localize and release Japanese video game products

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<sup>212</sup> Khan, Imran. *How Yakuza 0 paved the way for Like a Dragon*. Inverse, 2020, <https://www.inverse.com/gaming/yakuza-like-a-dragon-localization-interview>.

<sup>213</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> Santos, Wayne. *Can Yakuza Make A Comeback In The West?*. Comics Gaming Magazine, 2014, <https://www.cgmagonline.com/articles/features/can-yakuza-make-comeback-west/>.

<sup>215</sup> Bailey, Kat. *What Does SEGA's Yakuza 5 Announcement Mean for the Future of the Series?*. USgamer, 2014, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/what-does-SEGAs-yakuza-5-announcement-mean-for-the-future-of-the-series>.

<sup>216</sup> McWhertor, Michael. *SEGA will publish all future Atlus games, finalizes acquisition*. Polygon, 2016, <https://www.polygon.com/2016/4/1/11345238/SEGA-will-publish-all-future-atlus-games-finalizes-acquisition>.

<sup>217</sup> Wallace, Kimberley. *Perfecting Persona: How Atlus USA Bloomed*. Game Informer, 2013, <https://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2013/09/17/perfecting-persona-how-atlus-usa-bloomed.aspx>.

<sup>218</sup> Khan, Imran. *How Yakuza 0 paved the way for Like a Dragon*. Inverse, 2020, <https://www.inverse.com/gaming/yakuza-like-a-dragon-localization-interview>.

efficiently”, substantiating the motive to obtain Atlus’ localization prowess and initiative to bring very Japanese games to the West.<sup>219</sup> SEGA likely recognized the growing popularity of Japanese pop culture and media and a desire for Japaneseness in games in the West in the second half of the 2010s to turn around the *Yakuza* series’ popularity outside of Japan.

With Atlus on board, SEGA worked to bring very Japanese games to the West with conviction that it will appeal to an audience that desires Japaneseness. *Yakuza 0*, a prequel set in 1980s Tokyo and Osaka, and *Yakuza Kiwami*, a complete remake of the first game released in 2005, would be the next main installment in the series. Localization producer Sam Mullen explains that it “gives new players a place to start and step into the series”, but also a fresh start for SEGA to sell *Yakuza* to a new generation of Japan-enthusiastic Western gamers.<sup>220</sup> Following the example from *Yakuza 4* and *5*, SEGA and Atlus would choose a foreignized localization that keeps the game’s Japaneseness — like its Japanese audio — and with no cut content; Atlus’ expertise in handling Japaneseness would prove useful as producer Scott Stritcher describes the aim of the localization was to “generally lean heavily toward keeping it as authentic” as possible with the expectation “that people getting a game called *Yakuza* are generally going to want an authentic Japanese experience.”<sup>221</sup> *Yakuza 0* and *Kiwami* both came out in 2017 in the West with localizations that were faithful to its Japanese roots to an audience receptive to it.

SEGA and Atlus’ gamble paid off as *Yakuza 0* released in North America and Europe in January 2017 and *Yakuza Kiwami* released later in August would become consecutive hits, marking the series’ turnaround from niche commercial failure to blockbuster status. Although

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<sup>219</sup> McWhertor, Michael. *SEGA will publish all future Atlus games, finalizes acquisition*. Polygon, 2016, <https://www.polygon.com/2016/4/1/11345238/SEGA-will-publish-all-future-atlus-games-finalizes-acquisition>.

<sup>220</sup> Gwaltney, Javy. *How SEGA Brought Yakuza 0 To The West*. Game Informer, 2017, <https://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2017/02/21/SEGA-on-the-challenges-of-bringing-yakuza-0-west.aspx>.

<sup>221</sup> Klepek, Patrick. *How SEGA's Localization Team Has Faithfully Kept Yakuza Quirky and Weird*. VICE, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dpb4z/how-SEGAs-localization-team-has-faithfully-kept-yakuza-quirky-and-weird>.

SEGA has not released explicit sales figures, they would reveal that both games had sold exceptionally well outside of Japan.<sup>222</sup> To corroborate this *Yakuza 0* would become the eighth best selling game in the United Kingdom in its release week marking the first time a *Yakuza* game would break a top ten best selling list in the West as well as reports of stock running out, and in North America *Yakuza 0* and *Kiwami* was inducted into the “PlayStation Hits” collection where Sony reprints some of the most popular games on its PlayStation 4 alongside industry juggernauts like *Uncharted 4*, *Battlefield 4* and *Doom*.<sup>223,224,225</sup> After twelve difficult years of publishing in the West, *Yakuza* found a mainstream audience to justify their localization and publishing costs and gained strong momentum going into the second half of the 2010s.

SEGA quickly followed up on the triumph by publishing two new entries for the West with *Yakuza 6* and *Yakuza Kiwami 2*. *Yakuza 6* would be the last to feature protagonist Kazuma Kiryu, completing the overarching plot of the main game, being a direct follow up to *Yakuza 5* that had been released three years prior. Despite being the sixth entry in the series, *Yakuza 6* would prove the series' be the most successful venture to date in the West.<sup>226</sup> Sales in the West even equaled its Japanese numbers, a sign that a very Japanese game like *Yakuza* reached worldwide appeal.<sup>227</sup> *Yakuza Kiwami 2* followed the first *Kiwami* game's model, entirely

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<sup>222</sup> Kim, Matt. *Strong Yakuza Sales Prompt SEGA to Improve Localization for Simultaneous International Releases*. USgamer, 2018, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/strong-yakuza-sales-prompt-SEGA-to-improve-localization-for-simultaneous-international-releases>.

<sup>223</sup> Hussain, Tamoor. *Top 10 UK Sales Chart: Resident Evil 7 Has Third-Best Debut In Series History*. GameSpot, 2017, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/top-10-uk-sales-chart-resident-evil-7-has-third-be/1100-6447369/>.

<sup>224</sup> Shields, Craig. *Yakuza 0 stock running low in the UK*. Pause Resume, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170128021407/http://www.pauseresume.com/yakuza-0-stock-running-low-in-uk/>.

<sup>225</sup> Yee, Marie. *Introducing PlayStation Hits: Great Games at a Great Price*. PlayStation Blog, 2018, <https://blog.playstation.com/2018/06/19/introducing-playstation-hits-great-games-at-a-great-price/>.

<sup>226</sup> Nash, Anthony. *Yakuza 6 Has Biggest Series Launch in the United States*. PlayStation Lifestyle, 2018, <https://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2018/05/24/yakuza-6-sales-give-it-best-us-release-of-any-game-in-the-series/>.

<sup>227</sup> Kim, Matt. *Strong Yakuza Sales Prompt SEGA to Improve Localization for Simultaneous International Releases*. USgamer, 2018, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/strong-yakuza-sales-prompt-SEGA-to-improve-localization-for-simultaneous-international-releases>.

remaking the second entry first released in 2007. SEGA credited the success of the first remake as the motivation for releasing *Kiwami 2* in the West.<sup>228</sup> The string of successes for *Yakuza* outside of Japan authenticated the series as a genuine success rather than just a fluke, signaling the growth of the very Japanese games in the West.

For SEGA, the root of their recent achievements lies in creating games targeted for a Japanese audience. Series director Nagoshi Toshihiro explains that throughout his work on the games, he would always design with a Japanese audience in mind, leading to a product that is filled with references to Japanese culture.<sup>229</sup> SEGA encouraged this and built it into their recent business strategy, writing that with “efforts to create a games that Japanese fans will appreciate, the title has become popular not only in Japan but also won over fans overseas.”<sup>230</sup> Providing Western gamers with games that emphasize Japaneseness, namely *Yakuza*, has become a core approach for SEGA’s business, and one that they accredit much profit to.

In addition, SEGA localized with the intention of keeping authenticity and carefully constructing it to be accessible to an audience outside of Japan invested heavily “to localize Japanese games in a way that accurately conveys the unique world views of Japanese titles to local gamers”, evidenced by the acquisition of Atlus and SEGA promising more “extreme localization” — meaning more thorough localizations — for every game since *Yakuza 4*.<sup>231,232</sup> The localization team works to be faithful to elements that promote *Yakuza*’s Japaneseness, such

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<sup>228</sup> George. *Yakuza Kiwami 2 happened due to how well Yakuza 0 and Yakuza Kiwami did outside Japan*. SEGAbits, 2017, <http://SEGAbits.com/blog/2017/08/31/yakuza-kiwami-2-happened-due-to-how-well-yakuza-0-and-yakuza-kiwami-did-outside-japan/>.

<sup>229</sup> OTAQUEST. *EXILE SEKAI Interviews TOSHIHIRO NAGOSHI Part 3 - From Kamurocho to the World*. Youtube, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zm9DHnP2RoA>.

<sup>230</sup> SEGA Sammy Holdings. *SEGA SAMMY HOLDINGS Integrated Report 20*. SEGA Sammy Holdings, 2018, pp. 49, [https://www.SEGAsammy.co.jp/english/ir/library/pdf/printing\\_annual/2018/ssh\\_ar18e\\_web.pdf](https://www.SEGAsammy.co.jp/english/ir/library/pdf/printing_annual/2018/ssh_ar18e_web.pdf).

<sup>231</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> Good, S. Owen. *Yakuza Kiwami 2 launches in the West this August*. Polygon, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/3/17/17134560/yakuza-kiwami-2-launch-date-west-ps4>.

as mentions of Yakuza and Tokyo or products seen only in Japan, while making confusing language and ideas, such as Japanese-only idioms and puns, understandable to foreign languages.<sup>233</sup> An example of this is *The Yakuza Remastered Collection* released in 2020 that combines and re-release *Yakuza 3*, *4* and *5* into a single package. All three of those games already have complete localizations, but SEGA still chose to undertake a “rigorous re-localization,” claiming “English scripts for each game have been reviewed, revised, and even rewritten.”<sup>234</sup> Much of the re-localization’s goal was making the Western version more authentically Japanese, from adding previously cut content like shogi and the hostess clubs in *Yakuza 3* to using original Okinawan fish names instead of their generic English name.<sup>235</sup> Both SEGA and director Toshihiro Nagoshi explicitly acclaim *Yakuza*’s polished localization as a determining factor in *Yakuza*’s international success.<sup>236,237</sup>

*Yakuza*’s authentic realization of Japan has also induced a phenomenon called “virtual tourism”. *Yakuza*’s rendition of Japan allows foreigners to immerse themselves in Japan without physically traveling; in essence *Yakuza* creates a virtual vacation that can be consumed from one’s home. The localization of *Yakuza*’s commitment to authenticity, its vibrant cityscape that feel alive with bustle from virtual characters and activities to do (like karaoke or eating ramen), and its open-world nature that gives the player absolute freedom to explore at their leisure makes *Yakuza* among the most convincing virtual tours of Japan available. Japan saw a boom in tourism

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<sup>233</sup> Klepek, Patrick. *How SEGA's Localization Team Has Faithfully Kept Yakuza Quirky and Weird*. VICE, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dpb4z/how-SEGAs-localization-team-has-faithfully-kept-yakuza-quirky-and-weird>.

<sup>234</sup> McWhertor, Michael. *SEGA bringing Yakuza 3, 4, and 5 to the West with Yakuza Remastered Collection*. Polygon, 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/2019/8/20/20814029/yakuza-3-4-5-remaster-collection-release-date-ps4>.

<sup>235</sup> Cullen, Johnny. *SEGA's commitment to better localization brings more Western players to popular Japanese franchises*. GameDaily.biz, 2019, <https://gamedaily.biz/article/1346/SEGAs-commitment-to-better-localization-brings-more-western-players-to-popular-japanese-franchises>.

<sup>236</sup> SEGA Sammy Holdings. *SEGA SAMMY HOLDINGS Integrated Report 20*. SEGA Sammy Holdings, 2018, pp. 49, [https://www.SEGAsammy.co.jp/english/ir/library/pdf/printing\\_annual/2018/ssb\\_ar18e\\_web.pdf](https://www.SEGAsammy.co.jp/english/ir/library/pdf/printing_annual/2018/ssb_ar18e_web.pdf).

<sup>237</sup> OTAQUEST. *EXILE SEKAI Interviews TOSHIHIRO NAGOSHI Part 3 - From Kamurocho to the World*. Youtube, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zm9DHn2RoA>.

from the mid-2010s to before the pandemic put an end to most travel; 2019 saw three times as many tourists as 2013.<sup>238</sup> As Japan has exponentially become a more desirable tourist destination, many game journalists have promoted *Yakuza* as an instrument for virtual vacation, undoubtedly giving *Yakuza* more spotlight and appeal in the West.<sup>239,240,241</sup>

*Yakuza*'s quirky style has also lent itself to the Internet age, aiding the series in gaining recognition as a famous artifact of pop culture. As discussed earlier, a defining characteristic of the *Yakuza*'s games is its eccentricity that not only makes it distinctly part of Japan's quirky pop culture and media to a Western audience, but a prime target for the Internet's meme culture where bizarre humor often thrives to become viral. The best example of this is the song "Baka Mitai" (ばかみたい). First introduced in *Yakuza 5*, the song is best known for its use in *Yakuza 0* as a karaoke song sung by protagonist Kazuma Kiryu (as seen in **figure 5.9**); the contrast of a solemn yakuza nearly breaking into tears singing captured the hearts of people on the World Wide Web and the song went viral with variations of the song and joke sprung up.<sup>242,243</sup> "Baka Mitai" (sometimes called "Dame Da Ne" after the song's most well known line) emerging as an Internet meme has made it appreciated beyond even the gaming world and brought innumerable visibility onto the series. Bizarreness is a part of *Yakuza*'s Japanese identity that has propelled the series through an Internet era that thrives on the unconventional.

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<sup>238</sup> JTB Tourism Research & Consulting Co. *Japan-bound Statistics*. JTB Tourism Research & Consulting Co., 2022, <https://www.tourism.jp/en/tourism-database/stats/inbound/>.

<sup>239</sup> Greene, Gavin. "Kamuro Nights: A Personal Retrospective of the Yakuza Series". *Level Design Processes and Experiences*. AK Peters, 2017, 4.

<sup>240</sup> Hetfeld, Malindy. *After I stepped into Yakuza's world, Yakuza's world seeped into mine*. Eurogamer, 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/after-i-stepped-into-yakuzas-world-yakuzas-world-seeped-into-mine>.

<sup>241</sup> Plunkett, Luke. *The Joys of Using Games For Virtual Tourism*. Kotaku, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/the-joys-of-using-games-for-virtual-tourism-5939108>.

<sup>242</sup> Various videos of the song on Youtube alone have combined tens of millions of views ([https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=baka+mitai](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=baka+mitai)).

<sup>243</sup> Cryer, Hirun. *Yakuza's Baka Mitai is Now a Meme, and Kazuma Kiryu's Actor is Very Happy*. USgamer, 2020, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/kazuma-kiryus-actor-is-very-happy-with-baka-mitais-newfound-popularity>.



The latest entry in the *Yakuza* series, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (sometimes called simply *Yakuza 7*) is a testament to SEGA's priority in authentic localizations paying off as the game would simultaneously accentuate its Japaneseness and be the most successful installment to date. *Yakuza 6* fulfilled the story of protagonist Kazuma Kiryu, so *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* reboots the series within *Yakuza*'s world with new protagonist Ichiban Kasuga and a new setting in Yokohama called Isezaki Ijincho (伊勢佐木異人町, *Isezaki ijinchō*) modeled after real-life Isezaki district.<sup>244</sup> *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* does not simply start a new storyline, but completely metamorphoses its gameplay genre from an action-adventure game to a Japanese role-playing game, a distinctively Japanese style of game (seen in **figure 5.8**).<sup>245</sup> Series recurrent elements of Japaneseness such as yakuza inspired plot and characters, a Japanese urban playground with activities like shogi, and the hallmark absurdity are all present, but additionally centering the game on a distinctly Japanese style of game — the JRPG — makes *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* the most Japanese feeling game yet. *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* is also the most successful entry in the series, which according to SEGA's Vice President Shuji Utsumi, is on account of its worldwide sales, and has even been heavily marketed by Microsoft for its newest Xbox console.<sup>246,247</sup> Even as the series leans heavier on Japanese influences its popularity in the West continually grows, demonstrating the popularity of Japaneseness in the West.

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<sup>244</sup> Ryuichi, Kataoka 片岡龍一. “‘Ryū ga Gotoku 7 Hikari to Yami no Yukue’ ha Yokohama・Isezaki Ijinchō ga Mein daga, Tōkyō・Kamurochō to Ōsaka・Sōtenbori nimo Ikeru”『龍が如く7 光と闇の行方』は横浜・伊勢佐木異人町がメインだが、東京・神室町と大阪・蒼天堀にも行ける [“*Like a Dragon 7: Destinatonion of Light and Darkness*” is mainly in Yokohama’s Isezaki Ijincho, but you can also go to Tokyo’s Kamurocho and Osaka’s Sotenbori]. IGN, 2019, <https://jp.ign.com/ryu-ga-gotoku-7/38550/news/7>.

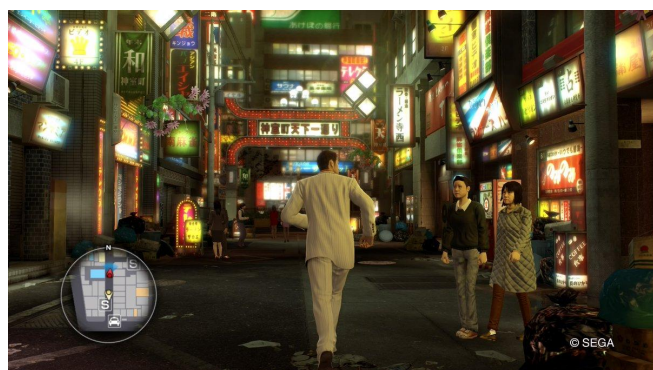
<sup>245</sup> As explained in section 3, part 2’s Japaneseness part.

<sup>246</sup> De Meo, Francesco. *Yakuza: Like a Dragon Is the Most Successful Entry in the Series Worldwide; SEGA Wants To “Globally Expand” Atlus’ Games*. Wccftch, 2020, <https://wccftch.com/yakuza-like-a-dragon-is-the-most-successful-entry-in-the-series-worldwide-SEGA-wants-to-globally-expand-atlus-games/>.

<sup>247</sup> Klepek, Patrick. *How SEGA's Localization Team Has Faithfully Kept Yakuza Quirky and Weird*. VICE, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dpb4z/how-SEGAs-localization-team-has-faithfully-kept-yakuza-quirky-and-weird>.



The *Yakuza* series' future looks bright with its popularity growing in both Japan and the West in stark contrast to its origins when it seemed doomed to stay a niche product in Japan. SEGA in a 2020 annual integrated report placed *Yakuza* as a centerpiece of its “Made in Japan” initiative to publish very Japanese games internationally, noting it was “highly evaluated by overseas users.”<sup>248</sup> There are also reports of a Hollywood movie in development based on the *Yakuza* game, showing the series’ franchise potential in the eyes of SEGA.<sup>249</sup> *Yakuza*’s success also aligns with this thesis’ timeline of the rise of Japanese games: between 2005 and 2017, the *Yakuza* series seemed incapable to attract a large audience in the West, but as Japanese pop culture and media started exploding in popularity in the second half of the 2010s the *Yakuza* was able to break through in the West and become a blockbuster series by spotlighting its Japaneseness. The *Yakuza* games’ popularity comes from their distinguishing Japanese style rather than being technologically advanced, displaying this thesis’ argument that the current rise of Japaneseness since the mid-2010s in games is due to interest in Japanese culture. The *Yakuza* series is a paragon of the rise of Japaneseness in relation to Japanese pop culture and media in the West.



<sup>248</sup> Bolding, Jonathan. *The Yakuza series has cracked 14M sales*. PC Gamer, 2020, <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-yakuza-series-has-cracked-14m-sales/>.

<sup>249</sup> McNary, Dave. *SEGA Developing Live-Action Adaptation Based on ‘Yakuza’ Video Game With 1212, Wild Sheep*. Variety, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/yakuza-movie-SEGA-video-game-1234781210/>.

Figure 5.6: Left is an ingame screenshot of series recurring town Kamurocho (神室町, *Kamurochō*) in *Yakuza 0* (2015), modeled on the Kabukicho district of Tokyo (right). Right image from <https://tokyocheapo.com/entertainment/things-to-do-in-kabukicho/>.



Figure 5.7: Screenshots of in-game stores in *Yakuza 0* (2015) that are genuine replicas of real Japanese stores. Left is a *konbini*, a Japanese convenience store; right is the discount chain store Don Quijote, a discount chain store found throughout Japan.



Figure 5.8: Screenshots of gameplay in *Yakuza*. Left is a screenshot of action-adventure combat from *Yakuza 0* (2015), the gameplay style of every *Yakuza* game except *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*. Right is a screenshot of the turn-based JRPG combat in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (2020). Right image from <https://www.destructoid.com/yakuza-like-a-dragon-is-a-fun-and-freaky-new-take-on-the-one-of-a-kind-series/>.



Figure 5.9: Screenshots of optional side activities (mini-games) in *Yakuza 0* (2015). Left is protagonist Kazuma Kiryu disco dancing; right is Kiryu singing “Baka Mitai” (ばかみたい) during karaoke.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis has shown through its case studies a transition in how Japaneseness in video games is handled by Japanese video game companies, and how these Japanese cultural markers are accepted in the West. In the first boom of the Japanese video game industry (1980s to mid-2000s), Japanese video games dominated the international market because they had the most advanced and best quality games. Japanese games had little competition with other nations, and were successful in selling directly to Western consumers by offering them Westernized games with close cultural proximity. As such the games displayed in *Case Studies of Japaneseness From the Past* show how Japaneseness was often erased to appeal to Western players. But when Japan lost its global supremacy of the video game market in the mid-2000s, heavily localized Japanese games had to contend directly with Western games. As a differentiating feature, Japanese video game companies attempt to bring more authentically Japanese games to differentiate themselves from Western games, as we see with *Ōkami* and the *Yakuza* series. In the mid-2010s, the very Japanese game was able to attract large Western audiences. Instead of directly competing with Western games, the very Japanese game can market itself to a growing Western audience fascinated by Japanese culture and media, especially anime. This development has given a future for Japanese developers to succeed spotlighting Japaneseness.

Trying too hard to appease a global audience can lead to negative results by watering down cultural influences that are at the heart of all creative mediums and making them “colorless”. Square Enix, one of Japan’s largest video game companies, was heavily impacted by



the slump of the Japanese video game industry.<sup>250</sup> CEO Yosuke Matsuda reflected and explained that:

“in the past [before 2014], when we developed console games with a worldwide premise, we lost our focus, and not only did they end up being games that weren’t for the Japanese, but they ended up being incomplete titles that weren’t even fit for a global audience.”<sup>251</sup>

Matsuda, recognizing the growing demand for very Japanese games, announced Square Enix’s plans for new games to be “heavy JRPGs”, allowing both its developers the comfort to focus on creating a quality game and to sell to a growing audience of Western gamers yearning for Japaneseness.<sup>252</sup> *Ōkami* and the *Yakuza* are also games that leaned into Japanese cultural influences instead of pandering to an impossibly broad international audience, resulting in distinct and celebrated games. CEO of Japanese video game company Spike Chunsoft Mitsutoshi Sakurai explains the growing global audience for the very Japanese games as “Japanese content is fresh and unique to their [Western] mind.”<sup>253</sup> Japanese cultural influences allow Japanese game developers the creativity and freedom to create exciting and special games, and giant companies like Sega with *Yakuza*, Capcom with *Ōkami*, Square Enix and Spike Chunsoft among others are coming alive to that idea. The popularity of the very Japanese game — alongside anime and manga — in the West is continuously growing, establishing an exciting future for Japanese companies in the global video game industry and for fans.

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<sup>250</sup> Makkuch, Eddie. *Square Enix: 'Huge slump' in NA sales hurt Tomb Raider, Hitman, Sleeping Dogs*. GameSpot, 2013, <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/square-enix-huge-slump-in-na-sales-hurt-tomb-raider-hitman-sleeping-dogs/1100-6406625/>.

<sup>251</sup> SATO. *Bravely Default's Success In The West Is Making Square Enix Rethink Their JRPGs*. Siliconera, 2014, <https://www.siliconera.com/bravely-defaults-success-west-making-square-enix-rethink-jrpgs/>.

<sup>252</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> Sinclair, Brendan. *Appealing to the West by focusing on the East*. Gameindustry.biz, 2018, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-05-14-appealing-to-the-west-by-focusing-on-the-east>.

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