

issue 23: General Issue 2014



FCJ-171 Expectations denied: Fan and industry conflict around the localisation of the Japanese video game Yakuza 3

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Abstract:

Online fan cultures provides researchers with a space to observe and analyse the development and establishment of fan participation with media properties. The visibility of, and zealous postings by, fans on online forums offers a valuable opportunity to explore what happens when fans feel their expectations are being denied or limited by creator or industry actions. This article examines the fallout around the localisation of the Japanese video game Yakuza 3 into the West in 2010.

Introduction

As various scholars (Jenkins, 2006a; Ito, 2007; Gray, 2010) have shown, fans can derive creative and emotional pleasure out of the ‘world building’ occurring in complex media franchises like *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Jenkins, 2007), and *Star Wars* (Brooker, 2002). Media industries are also increasingly valuing the contributions fans are making to these large media franchises. As Joshua Green and Henry Jenkins (2009: 213) have pointed out, ‘fans

have been redefined as the drivers of wealth production within the new digital economy: their engagement and participation is actively being pursued.' As this research has shown, although audiences engage deeply and passionately with these large fictional worlds there is a growing expectation among fans that they will have some freedom to use and access this content in a way which best suits them. Within this context, online fan cultures have provided researchers with a 'consistently vocal and conspicuous' (Whiteman, 2009: 391) space to observe and analyse the development and establishment of fan participation with media properties (Bailey, 2002; Bury, 2005; Dutton, Consalvo, and Harper, 2011). As this article will show, the visibility of, and zealous postings by, fans on online forums offers a valuable opportunity to explore what happens when fans feel their expectations are being denied or limited by creator or industry actions.

This article examines the fallout around the localisation of the Japanese video game *Yakuza 3* into the West in 2010. The well-known multinational video game company Sega, which has its main headquarters in Tokyo, developed the *Yakuza* video game franchise. In addition to the *Yakuza* series it is responsible for such popular titles as *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Virtua Fighter*, *Phantasy Star* and *Total War*. While Sega has a long history of developing and publishing video game software and hardware unfortunate financial difficulties culminating in the poor sales of its Dreamcast console in the late 1990s led to the company abandoning its console manufacturing to become a third party game developer. Since being acquired by the Sammy Corporation in 2004 Sega has regained its momentum and enjoys strong domestic sales in its native Japanese market as well as success in expanding into western markets through collaborating with a number of western video game studios and localising games such as the *Yakuza* series. This article focusses firstly on the attempt of Sega to appeal to a western audience through localizing the *Yakuza* series.

To understand the conflicting expectations of industry and fans I will examine the fans participation on Sega's official online forum for the *Yakuza* series. This forum makes visible the competing agendas and assumptions held by fans and industry with regard to the localisation process, along with what it means to be a fan during a period of anxiety around a favourite media property. By looking at posts made to the *Yakuza* forum this article also explores the identifications adopted by fans as the future of the *Yakuza* series was thrown into doubt. By analysing the way fans shaped the discourse around *Yakuza 3* this article will contribute to further understanding the dual role of digital media users as both producers and consumers of media content (Bruns, 2008) as well as contributing to the academic research around fan culture practices during the transition from a broadcast to Web 2.0 media environment (Jenkins, 2006a; Baym and Burnett, 2009; Brooker, 2002; Gray, 2010).

Based on the work of Thompson (1971), Green and Jenkins (2009) develop the concept of the 'moral economy' of Web 2.0 (to explain how media downloaders and remixers justify their actions as appropriate and valuable). Green and Jenkins argue that the relationship between industry and audience is shaped through a moral economy composed of 'social expectations, emotional investments, and cultural transactions that create a shared understanding between all participants within an economic exchange' (Green and Jenkins, 2009: 214). So, for example, rather than focusing on the illegality of fans downloading and appropriating media content, Green and Jenkins explore how these acts can actually assist media content to attain higher visibility and popularity. It is this moral economy dynamic and the way in which it has shaped relations between *Yakuza 3* gamers and Sega that is the second focus of this article.

Trust

For Austin et al. (2006) the loss of trust between stakeholders is a key factor in cases where moral economy concerns emerge. Concerns around trust can be triggered when 'a rights-holder makes a choice that affects their audience's enjoyment of or ability to use or access their content, they gain or lose legitimacy—and with it, the audience's trust' (Austin et al., 2006: 12). Changes around access and use of content can be seen in industry concern about widespread copyright violation and mistrust of audience use of technology, as well as concerns about industry exploitation of fan labour, and a general loss of faith in business to act with the best interest of consumers in mind (Edelman, 2012). In response, Austin et al. (2006) argue for the need to recognise the claims for moral legitimacy that are occurring on both sides of the debate. In particular, Austin et al. (2006) suggest an alternative approach to the problem involved, based around engagement and participation with audiences, rather than criminalising and policing a user base.

The issue of trust was a concern for Sega leading up to the localisation of *Yakuza 3*, as the following interview with Sega Australia's managing director Darren Macbeth reveals:

Feedback from our fans online has suggested that there are more than a few gamers out there that are looking forward to a local Yakuza 3 release. ... We are listening to this feedback. However, releasing Japanese titles in the West is a tricky beast. In a lot of cases we have a very strong vocal group of fans, who demand the opportunity to play these games in their local markets and are very outspoken in their support. However, when the time comes, they are reluctant to stay committed and actually make the purchase. For this reason,

although taking consumer feedback into consideration is important, we really need to analyse the market and competitive landscape to determine for ourselves if localization of Japanese games is indeed warranted. (in Parker, 2009)

For Sega, while fans were vocal in their desire for *Yakuza 3*, this energy did not translate into what matters in the market - strong sales figures. There were also members of the fan community who wanted *Yakuza 3* to succeed commercially. In what I am about to describe, both Sega and some fans were attempting to achieve the outcome they want while not harming the commercial viability of *Yakuza 3*. On the one hand Sega needed to localise *Yakuza 3* by removing content while avoiding the risk of disenchanting their core fan base through these localisation choices. On the other hand fans wanted to make their displeasure known while avoiding the risk of driving down sales and undermining the possibility of future *Yakuza* game releases in the West.

In discussing moral economy, my concern in this article is to further understand the different agendas and expectations that were driving the debate around the localisation of *Yakuza 3*. By examining the *Yakuza* forum through moral economy I will show that fans adopted a range of identities as part of an ongoing debate around who was acting in the best interests of the video game franchise.

The need for both audience and industry to reconsider and renegotiate the relationship between audience and industry is an ongoing one, but in the case of *Yakuza 3*'s localisation it is one in which industry was increasingly being forced to realise the importance of listening and responding to fan concerns. As Green and Jenkins (2009: 214) argue:

... media companies are being forced to reassess the nature of consumer engagement and the value of audience participation in response to a shifting media environment characterized by... the increased power and capacity of consumers to shape the flow and reception of media content.

This article brings together three different ideas to help frame the discussion around fan/industry relationships: moral economy (Green and Jenkins, 2009), trust (Austin et al, 2006) and identity (Whiteman, 2009). To broadly contextualise these three positions: moral economy reveals the agendas operating within fan communities as they download and repurpose content from major franchise and media properties. The question of trust is an extension of this discussion – ultimately it is the glue that holds a moral economy together.

Identity, in this case, centres on how the fans view themselves relative to the media property in question, to the company that created the media property, and to other fans.

The *Yakuza* online forum

Although Sega's official forum for the *Yakuza* series isn't the archetypal, fan-produced, 'by fans for fans' website, there are three reasons that make it a significant and relevant focus for this study. First it has over 2000 members making it the largest online forum for the *Yakuza* franchise. Second, the discussion topics are broad and range from advice on how to win the game to criticisms of the games industry. Within this range of topics expression is free and open. This is not a space that simply reinforces a pro-Sega perspective. Indeed, this is one of the surprising ironies of this campaign to challenge Sega's localisation of *Yakuza 3* - it was organised and discussed on the very forum Sega created to promote their properties. Third, the forum is also elaborately set up to allow for a deeper experience of Sega's other video games. Consequently, there are various comments on the forum that reflect not only *Yakuza* fan opinion but also the broader location of *Yakuza* within Sega's other properties and video gaming in general. As I will show, these three aspects afford insights into why *Yakuza 3*'s localisation became a significant issue in industry-consumer relations for Sega. In a larger sense, this case also helps to further understand the story-telling function of forums to entrench particular narratives of a company's success and failure within the gaming community.

The focus of this article is one particular discussion thread started in March 2010 with the title 'Full list of cut content'. [1] As of April 2012 this thread had 151 posts and over 14,000 views, making it the most viewed thread within the *Yakuza* message board. Within this thread gamers compiled a list of what had been cut from *Yakuza 3* and expressed their concerns over the localisation process and what this meant for their experience of the game. In this article, I will argue that the conversations which emerged on this forum reveal the discursive strategies used by Western gamers to negotiate what it means to be a gamer and fan of this Japanese video game series during a time of uncertainty around the sustainability of localising it into the West. Additionally, these conversations reveal the broader expectations fans have concerning their rights as media users. As I will show, these fans used the discussion forum as a way to negotiate conflicting feelings of powerlessness over the decision making process and a moral righteousness around what they felt was best for the series. These twin feelings of powerlessness and righteousness were expressed in ways that were both collaborative with, and oppositional to, their view of Sega's market-driven concerns.

My analysis of those who posted messages to the *Yakuza 3* forum will focus on two core identities: firstly, those who drew on specific video game practices; and secondly, those who drew upon forms of new media practice such as modding, fan-subtitling, parallel importing via online stores, and digital downloading to get the game in the form they wanted. These identities will show that gamers bring with them a set of expectations around participating in complex, open world [2] video game franchises. While gamers recognise the financial and commercial pressures that often determine the outcome of the localisation process, they also hold an expectation that industry will recognise the emotional and identity-based investments they have in their favourite video game properties.

The *Yakuza* Video Game Series

Yakuza 3, or as it is known in Japan *Ryū ga Gotoku* (Like a Dragon), is a video game series based on the violent and corrupt crime world of the Japanese yakuza. In the game you play as Kazuma Kiryu as he rises and falls within the yakuza hierarchy and delivers 'street justice' to a series of villains and corrupt politicians. The *Yakuza* video game series was launched in 2005 for the PlayStation 2 game console and has so far spawned six spin-off titles. Three of these were direct sequels that continued the main narrative, with the other three being spin-off titles that expand the *Yakuza* world through new characters and settings such as *Kazuma's* ancestor in feudal Japan. The series has become one of the most successful video game franchises in Japan and has received a number of industry awards which have praised its story and gameplay (Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association and Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry, 2009). The popularity of these games has led to a live action movie adaptation as well as a radio drama series, a web TV series, a magazine series based on the games' hostess characters, and a supermarket full of related merchandise. [3] The spread of *Yakuza's* narrative across multiple media platforms mark it as one of the larger adult-oriented transmedia efforts to come from the Japanese video games industry.

In the West, the *Yakuza* series has received positive critical and fan reactions. While sales have been modest most of the series has been localised. [4] Much of the praise for the series has focused on the game's combination of 'open-world' adventuring with a central storyline of loyalty and revenge, all set against a highly detailed and immersive Japanese location. Fans and the gaming press have drawn comparisons with popular Western open-world games such as *Mass Effect* and the *Grand Theft Auto* series. But these comparisons are always made in the context of *Yakuza* being a uniquely Japanese game involving sub-missions and mini-games which are quirky, such as dating hostesses, and

traditional, such as playing Shogi (Japanese chess). This is a foreignness emphasised in this teaser for *Yakuza 3* on the video game news site Kotaku:

Gamers don't often get a chance to play the equivalent of a foreign film, a work that is intentionally left in its native tongue and tone. In March, on the PS3, with Yakuza 3, they can, trying a game that offers a distinct mix of brutality, novelty and almost-real-world grit. (Totilo, 2009)

Yakuza 3 was released in Japan in 2009 and a year later in the West. However, leading up to its launch concern had been growing in fan community and video game news sites that the amount of content cut from the game was larger than first expected. Responding to this growing concern a number of spokespeople from Sega attempted to curb the potential fallout by explaining the difficult choices the localisation team faced. On the Sega America forum, Sega's Assistant Community Manager Ruby Eclipse (2010b) explained

Ultimately, the choice that had to be made was either no Yakuza 3 in the west, or a version of the game that was almost exactly the same, but with a little less trivia. That said, our teams also understand that many of you guys love games like Yakuza because of that experience, and rest assured that we'll continue fighting on your behalf to make sure that going forward, we can provide as close to the full experience as possible – no matter how foreign.

However, concerns around the cuts and resulting gamer backlash frame games journalist Totilo's (2010) article for the Kotaku website which speculated on whether cuts would make or break the future of the series in the West:

Fans of the Yakuza series in the West have criticized Sega for dubbing the original game in the series and lauded the company's apparent shift with the subtitled Yakuza 3 to a more authentic-to-Japan approach. Online, fans appear to be angry. Whether this decision affects whether the game can sell big will be seen next month when Yakuza 3 is finally released in the U.S.

While these grim speculations on the *Yakuza* franchise's end were not fulfilled and further *Yakuza* titles have been localised since *Yakuza 3*, the negative gamer reaction to *Yakuza 3*'s localisation has made a lasting impact on the story being told of this franchise by the gaming press, fans and creators. This impact can be seen in the interview *Yakuza* producer

Masayoshi Kikuchi gave to the video game news website *Digital Spy* (Reynolds, 2010):

At the time there was an argument with Sega internally that in order to make the game more compatible and appealing to the Western market, we would do better off removing those mini-games that are hard to understand and heavily rooted in Japanese culture. We did what we thought would be good for the Western market, but after the game was released we received a lot of feedback from users in the complete opposite direction, asking for complete content. Learning from that experience this time, we've tried to include all content in the Japanese version you see in [Yakuza 4].

In the interview Kikuchi reveals that the decision to remove content from *Yakuza 3* was done in the hope it would make the game more appealing to a Western audience. He goes on to express his surprise at receiving such an assertive Western fan campaign to restore *Yakuza 3* to its complete state: 'It was a big surprise for us. I'm definitely pleased that people wanted to see more, but at the same time, I feel sorry for the fans who were let down by the cut content' (in Reynolds, 2010).

As I will show, a range of anxieties and opinions were voiced on the Sega forums. These included fears that these cuts had removed important narrative and game play experiences, to concerns that companies like Sega had lost touch with their fan base.

In discussing these issues on the *Yakuza* forum, posters framed many of their concerns around moral economy type positions. In these posts, moral economy concerns – specifically that the fan community had the best interest of the game in mind rather than Sega – were linked to three particular video game practices: interactivity, immersiveness and intertextuality.

Interactivity and narrative

Jansz and Martens (2005) point out that interactivity is considered to be one of the core elements of game play. Players feel more immersed in the game world through interacting with objects and the environment of the game. Studies such as the *Nielsen Interactive Entertainment research report* (2005: 14) have pointed out that the opportunity for gamers to escape into a fantasy world and use their imagination is one of the main reasons people

play video games. On the forum, being a gamer in *Yakuza 3* was aligned with interacting with the game world, in particular being able to complete the game. Thus the enjoyment posters expressed in collecting and using various items in the game to unlock the entire story and earn perks and achievements.

In the following post, for example, we see how the removal of the hostess clubs from the localised version impacted on the gaming experience:

*The problem is they cut host clubs, but almost every character refers to host clubs, about 40% of all items are related to Host Clubs, 2 story missions take place in host clubs, some substories are related to host clubs, there are places that promote host clubs (now they promote 1 bar or something which looks RETARDED becuse these places are full of GIRL PHOTOS, see, not bar or bottle photos). It's ***ging ridiculous. They could cut darts or bowling, all right, but without host clubs overall experience feels mangled! If you deny it - you haven't played the game. WTF I should do with all those that make Kaz more appealing for ladies? And all the gift items?*

To provide some background on these cuts, in the original Japanese game your character uses various items to romance hostesses and unlock a side-story where you groom a young girl to become the top hostess. While the Western version kept some of these encounters, they were moved from the hostess club to a hamburger restaurant and the side-story of grooming a hostess agency was removed. For this gamer, the absence of hostess clubs from the localised version sent ripples through the entire fabric of the game. While you could still collect various objects while playing the game, those that had been designed to win the affection of hostesses no longer had any use.

The interactive moments of the *Yakuza 3* game are presented by this poster as requiring players to be part of the flow of story across various locations and encounters with characters. By emphasising the disconnect between the main story, sub-stories and item-collecting this poster reveals the 'mangling' of interactivity which they felt had occurred in the localisation of *Yakuza 3*. Interactivity, for this gamer, involved meaningfully combining game content in a fluid, inter-connected environment. This emphasis on meaningful interaction defines the gamer as an emotionally invested participant in the world building of the game. While those who dismissed these cuts as being unimportant were portrayed as not having fully experienced the game. As one poster remarked: 'If you deny it - you haven't played the game'. Similar concerns around the loss of interactive game play due to the removal of the hostess clubs are seen here:

*Host Clubs are THE CORE of ALL TRIVIA in game. But cutting them SEGA pretty much ruined the game. I'm at Chapter 12 now and it's just disturbing and disappointing. They ****ing cut the ONLY thing that cannot be cut! The only thing that is related to everything including the main story!*

The damage of Sega's cuts to *Yakuza 3* is presented here as undermining the foundations upon which the game's main story is built. Instead of removing content that is of little direct importance to the game, the poster here argues that the removal of the Host Clubs has removed 'THE CORE of ALL TRIVIA in game'. Again, the interlocking foundation of missions and collectibles that support the main story had been seen to be lost.

This emphasis by gamers on defining themselves through the in-game actions of exploring and overcoming challenges is similar to Whiteman's (2009) findings about *Silent Hill* gamers who defined themselves 'as players of a game that required sophistication, focus and expertise' (Whiteman, 2009: 399). In Whiteman's study these claims positioned the gamer as more active than the passive audience for the live-action movie adaptation. Within the *Yakuza* claiming a deeper and more complete experience of the game was used to challenge those who felt the cut content was peripheral and unimportant. In the case of the *Yakuza* players, being able to play and beat the entire *Yakuza* game was seen as dependent upon the gamer interacting with missions, collectibles, and mini-games. The absence of any one part, even small elements caused posters to feel that the game was incomplete and the pleasure of beating all parts of the game was unsatisfying.

Immersion and marginal content

The framing of *Yakuza 3* as an immersive experience was fuelled by Sega's own promotion of the game. On their official website Sega proclaims: 'the epic feel of exploration, and Japanese culture, that the game offers are things you won't find anywhere else' (RubyEclipse, 2010a). Sega promised a 'real-world immersion' where gamers would:

... discover the authentic, sandy beaches of Okinawa or travel to the neon-lit adult playgrounds of Tokyo. Become a regular at nightclubs, restaurants and real-world stores to uncover hidden truths and gain access to side missions (2010).

Fans on the forums who felt their experience of the edited, localised form had not lived up to the publicity's hype later quoted these claims.

The concern that these cuts would disrupt the depth of interaction offered in the game was a central concern on the forum. While the cuts were seen to have a clear impact on the game's storyline, for others the main concern was the impact the cuts had on the game's immersiveness, in particular if these cuts restricted the freedom to explore an open-world environment. These latter concerns did not revolve around the loss of missions like the hostess club, but instead focused on losing smaller, marginal aspects of interacting with the *Yakuza* world. Consider, for example, the following post that raised one of the more marginal cuts that had been made – browsing the content of magazines at convenience stores.

It seems insignificant to want to browse the magazine, but the thing is, like Mass Effect 2, this game is all about immersion and it's the little things that all add up to make you feel like your really in this world. When you look at the mags but can't read them, for me, I felt a bit like I was pulled out of the world... when I found out the Japanese game lets you browse the mags, it would just add to the overall atmosphere of the game and would have kept me in the world at that moment in time.

By drawing a comparison to *Mass Effect* – a game that allows the player to experience a deep and layered role-playing space – this poster is highlighting an awareness of being 'pulled out of the world' because parts of the game have been removed. What is stressed here is the value and worth of being immersed in this world and how even small cuts can threaten the game-world's integrity. For this fan the game unfolds as a complex, interwoven set of missions and discoveries.

While the poster acknowledges that some of these encounters may seem marginal and unimportant to the overall game, nevertheless the lack of them – such as browsing magazines in the convenience store – are seen as undermining the foundations of the game's open-world experience. Here we see an emphasis on the peripheral as being central. It underpins the gamer's ability to immerse themselves fully within the virtual world of the game. This reprioritising of the marginal over the core experience is something theorised in Gray's (2010) idea of the 'paratext', in which the parts of a media franchise that are traditionally seen to be tangential spin-offs, such as movie posters, video games, and toys, become instead the central meaning-making space for a fan. A similar revaluing of the in-game *Yakuza* collectibles and paraphernalia is occurring here. For some gamers,

experiencing the marginal in-game content, like browsing a magazine, is central to their pleasure. It is through these peripheral encounters that posters tell a story of themselves as a skilled gamer immersed in a virtual world. In short, the cut content, trivia and marginalia may be peripheral to the main story, but *not* the interactivity. In this regard, *Yakuza* may not be the type of open world game where the mini-games and side-missions always mesh with the main story in the way they do in other open world games such as *Red Dead Redemption*. Yet *Yakuza 3* invites players to take pleasure in world building across high and low levels of intensity and risk while still keeping the gameplay systems intact.

Engaging in the world of *Yakuza* involves experiencing a cumulative immersion in which the synergy between peripheral content, core content and gamer participation results in an immersive gameplay for the gamer. For these gamers, *Yakuza* is a cumulative experience where the sum of its parts is greater than the whole, and as a result of the cuts in the Western version, the game had lost its potential for deep and rich world building.

Intertextuality and pop-cosmopolitanism

As the above discussion reveals, concerns around the loss of interactive and immersive experiences were also related to broader, intertextual and genre expectations gamers had developed through playing similar types of 'open-world' role-playing games. As I have shown above, removing side-missions and mini-games removed the skills and practices that gamers had used to complete similar games in the past. That is, gamers located *Yakuza 3* within a collection of other games that offered similar open world, role-playing experiences such as the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Mass Effect*. In most cases comparisons to other series were used to show the qualities they felt had been undermined through the cuts. This was evident in the comment described earlier in which a poster stated that they wanted *Yakuza 3* to remain closer to other games such as *Mass Effect* which allowed players to go deeply into that world through interacting with banal or incidental objects. There were also concerns that by removing content that was deemed unfamiliar to a Western audience Sega was depriving Western gamers of the opportunity to experience a unique Japanese approach to the open world genre of games, as revealed in the following comment:

The Yakuza series is like a foreign film, and it has to be left that way. You can tell they have no clue because they even changed the Japanese song in the title. The western audience loves the Japanese quirkiness. ... It is one reason why Japanese Anime has exploded in the west over the last decade.

Here we find an example of the type of ‘pop-cosmopolitan’ practices that Jenkins (2006b) has suggested emerged through the global popularity of popular culture like Japanese anime or Indian Bollywood films. Developing a new cultural literacy through enjoying foreign media forms is seen here as an enriching, if somewhat skewed, awareness of difference. As an ideal, enjoying and understanding foreign media becomes an act of connoisseurship and mastery. While these moves raise questions around the actual authenticity or deeper cultural sensitivity those claiming mastery over these forms have (Napier, 2001), nevertheless such moves challenge the market-oriented, business decisions to remove this content because it would turn an audience off.

As I have shown in this section, gamers emphasised the immersive, interactive and inter-textual experience of the *Yakuza* game to frame how their exploring and role-playing skills were being constrained by the cuts to the localised version. By contrasting the original game to the localised version they argued that these cuts caused narrative discontinuities that threatened the overall coherency and enjoyment of the game. The gamers’ emphasis on exploration and play within a dynamic virtual world was used to define their identity as the core audience for this game, an identity that knew what was best for the game.

While the denial of these game-play expectations and emotional investments revealed the basis of the moral economy posters were bringing to the discussion, nevertheless there were those who challenged the significance of these cuts. These posters argued that the cuts were minor and did not restrict anyone from experiencing *Yakuza 3*’s main story line. For example, this poster’s response to calls to boycott the game calls attention to the strength of the main game:

So, overall, yes, the cuts suck. But really, they are only a small percentage of a massive game. I’m happy with the game as is. Yes, Sega made stupid-cuts with little reason, but I think people boycotting the game because of it are blowing it way out of proportion. The game is still highly enjoyable, and I’d say only about 10 hours of stuff was cut. Yes, that is a lot, but not in a game as massive as Yakuza 3. Be thankful you got the game at all.

Some gamers even saw positives in this localised form, in particular the possibility that the localised version would sell more copies and secure the release of future *Yakuza* titles in the West. Others raised similar sales-oriented concerns around calls to boycott or discourage others from buying the game in the fear that these would drive down sales harming the long-term viability of the franchise in the West. Despite these disagreements – which often challenged the emphasis being placed on marginal or ancillary parts of the

game – these cuts were more often referred to as damaging the game and denying the expectations and skills of core gamers.

The Yakuza game and online culture

In sum, despite calls to ‘tone down’ and ‘put in perspective’ the anger towards Sega, the overall emphasis of most posts on the forum thread were aimed at making Sega aware of the damage the removal of this content had done and requesting the missing content be reintroduced back into the game.

As the previous analysis has shown, many of these concerns were framed around a concern that Sega had failed to live up to expectations. However, what made this more than just another example of the pitfalls in localising a Japanese video game into the West was that the localisation of *Yakuza 3* coincided with changes to the delivery of, and access to video games. While some posters were concerned with how these cuts undermined and restricted their immersion in the game, other members of the community posted comments on their broader consumption and usage patterns of video games. For these posters Sega’s approach to localising *Yakuza* revealed how out of step the company was with their practices of buying and playing games.

In the following post, for example, we see how the prevalence of online video game stores that sell various regional versions of games has created an awareness of difference. Access to these different versions of games has led to an awareness of how some markets were disadvantaged by poor localisations and deprived of content or services offered to other regions. This is a sentiment revealed in this comment replying to those who argued fans should be thankful that Sega localised *Yakuza 3* at all:

*‘We should not be grateful. It’s year 2010, you can buy ANY ****ing game, any version of it! Playasia, Shopto etc. And releasing such a cut version... It’s just intolerable’.*

Purchasing games online from overseas companies is one way to circumvent edited versions of games or limited local choices. The next post reveals the readiness of fans to directly involve themselves in the production and circulation of media content: ‘we need to get a group of people together to fansub this and create a patch for the Japanese version.

That will be the only way to get our content. It might take years though'. And another poster adds:

Hell, I'd be willing to work for Sega for free to release the cut content, I reckon all of the cuts they made to the game are horrible...WTF are hostesses doing in burger joints dressed like that? and what's with the cheesy lines? I could go on and on, but they if they manage to do that, then they can at least manage to change it back, I mean they have the original programming source, right? you get fansub groups who translate loads of anime for free, so I don't see why they just can't spend about a week (or less) translating the rest, if you know what I'm saying.

Posts such as these reveal the expectations some fans have that if a company is going to badly handle the release of media content, then fans will do it themselves. As Jenkins (2006c) and Lee (2011) have argued, the work of fansub groups to translate and circulate anime during the late 1990s is now seen as a significant example of fan piracy leading to the emergence of a strong commercial market for anime in the West. Such posts reveal an acceptance of reworking and accessing content that bypasses traditional, industry controlled means of localisation and distribution. These posts also demonstrate the posters' comfort at seeing themselves as both producers and consumers of their media. Posters present themselves as wanting to use the tools and collective resources of online communities towards the goal of getting the game in the form they and others want it.

Here we find examples of the sorts of 'reconceptualization of the audience' described by Jenkins (2006a) and further developed in Green & Jenkins (2009) where audiences are seen as being media creators through the types of participation with information and culture that have developed online (see also Baldwin, Hienert, and von Hippel, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Burgess and Green, 2009; Croteau, 2006; Hartley, 2009; Shirky, 2008). In this case, the broader media environment in which these gamers have grown up has created certain expectations about their involvement and participation in the entertainment experience and in terms of getting the content they want in the form and manner they prefer – specifically, for example, the ease of accessing obscure anime through the online fan subtitling networks and the ease of comparing and buying different regional versions of games through online retailers. The essence of the argument is that convergence needs to be understood beyond the bringing together of technologies into one media device. It needs instead to be understood 'as a cultural logic involving an ever more complex interplay across multiple channels of distribution' (Green and Jenkins, 2009: 215). Ultimately, these moves challenge the previous models of controlling content and territorial distribution of product. Instead we have 'consumer demands for media content where, when, and in what form they want it' (Green and Jenkins, 2009: 215).

While this participation benefits fans through offering pathways to becoming a professional, helping identity formation, and accumulating cultural capital, this phenomenon can also be seen as part of the 'free labour' that fans provide to industry. While Gill and Pratt (2008) and Terranova (2000) see this unpaid work of fans underpinning today's information economy, others such as Lee (2011) see the continual fan-translation and distribution work fans do as far more efficient and global than the cultural industry distribution models. Lee (2011) argues the success of fan communities to provide a user base with what they want in the form they want it points to a significant gap between the success of the fan model and the slower, lumbering movements of the cultural industries. These fan practices show how some consumers now directly participate in the circulation and expression of popular culture forms in ways that demand some degree of collaboration with industry and rewards them with some involvement in the circulation and expression of their favourite texts [5] (Banks and Deuze, 2009; Cova and Dalli, 2009; Deuze, 2007).

Downloadable Content

A unique aspect of the *Yakuza 3* case is that it concerns the localising of existing content that was highly successful in another cultural context. This presents a very different set of production issues as opposed to the creation of new original content. The expectations of fans are also quite different in each case. While fans may appreciate the reluctance of a company to create new content from scratch for a completed game, they will not feel as generous towards a company perceived to be holding back on existing content made available for other markets. When it was announced that content had been cut from the game, some posters expressed their hope that the game could be restored to its full state through a patch or with downloadable content (DLC) seeing that the content had already been produced for the original Japanese version and may even be sitting there somewhere on the Western game version hidden from view. A number of comments were devoted to tracking down possibilities that the content may still be on the disc but locked on the Western version:

I'm just speculating actually. The bars for example are grayed out on the map and the name of the bars also appear when you push the triangle button on the map. With that said, I'm just assuming that the content is still in the game just locked. I know Capcom did this with street fighter 4. The SF4 disk contained costumes that were locked on the disk and later released via DLC.

The idea that the game could be patched or an additional purchase made to buy the ‘full’ game was controversial because of previous examples, such as *Street Fighter IV*, where content on the game’s disc had been locked and required gamers to spend further money to unlock this content. Critics of this practice argue that if consumers have paid for a disc they should be able to access all the content on that disc. This was a concern suggested in the following post:

Even if everything was on the disc (I hope it's not though - knowing all that stuff is just sitting on the disc is just painful) I just don't see them translating it all for us. IF they do, I'm interested in seeing if they charge us for it - they probably will... which will, of course, start another huge uproar.

While most felt it was unlikely that the problem could be as easily fixed as unlocking content or downloading the removed content, nevertheless the new ways content was being provided to gamers led many to ask what new media fixes might be available to resolve this problem.

However, as Austin et al.’s (2006) argue, moral economy concerns also emerge when:

... powerful economic players try to shift from existing practices and towards some new economic regime. As they do so, these players seem to take away ‘rights’ or rework relationships that were taken for granted by others involved in those transactions. (Austin et al., 2006: 12)

For some gamers, these new methods of delivery fostered concerns that a shift in buying video game content could be used by industry to exploit gamers. While having the content restored via DLC would be welcomed, as the above comment acknowledges it would ‘start another huge uproar’ in the community around costs and the manner of its delivery. The debate around DLC has two implications. Firstly it reveals the major changes occurring in the relations between media makers and their audience, particularly when the audience is a technically savvy, vocal community who see themselves more in a partnership with content creators than passive consumers. Indeed, there is a current debate among fans on the forum as to whether they should collectively invest in localizing the latest *Yakuza* game through encouraging Sega to crowd fund its production or even buying shares in Sega Sammy Holdings Inc. in order to have more control over the handling of the *Yakuza* game franchise. [6] Secondly, there are implications concerning the way in which cultural capital is transferred from one culture to another. In the case of the *Yakuza* game, while Sega may

have felt there was a need to slightly westernise the game content, many in the fan community demanded that the distinctively Japanese cultural content of the game remain untouched.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article has explored the changing relationship between media industries and consumers through the localization of the Japanese video game *Yakuza 3* for the western market and the resulting online fan response. To a large degree the concerns and debates raised by this online community of vocal fans over the translation of *Yakuza 3* is ultimately an argument about ownership. That is, they are concerned with defining what the *Yakuza* game is and how it should be translated into the Western market, or more broadly who can participate in the *Yakuza* phenomenon. By ownership, I'm referring to something beyond legal, proprietary rights; owning something in popular culture also includes 'owning' the debate around how the game makes you feel, what its core elements are, and how it should develop or be handled in the future. In other words, ownership includes moral or cultural custodianship over the media property and what it means. While both Sega and the *Yakuza* fans share an interest in ensuring the success and popularity of the *Yakuza 3* game they differed on the best way to achieve this. This type of conflict is not uncommon, as Green and Jenkins point out, even examples of companies attempting to collaborate with fans inevitably involves 'potential conflicts since fan and corporate interests are never perfectly aligned' (2009: 219). And with fans able to voice concerns and alternatives in online forums it is becoming increasingly common to see public conflict and negotiation between industry and audience when expectations are denied or misled. However, in the case of the debate around *Yakuza 3*'s localisation, the fact that Sega went on to localise a version of *Yakuza 4* and *Yakuza: Dead Souls* with minimal cuts suggests that Sega may be moving towards giving this vocal community of fans the type of *Yakuza* game they wished *Yakuza 3* had been. Clearly a single forum on a company's website does not represent a magical public sphere through which to bridge industry and audience power struggles, but it does at least offer a new way of negotiating and making more transparent questions of media power, cultural politics and economics – moral or otherwise – in relation to modern media creation.

Biographical Note

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Notes

[1] The full URL for this forum is <http://forums.sega.com/showthread.php?322120-Full-list-of-cut-content>

[2] The open world genre of video games refers to those games that allow players to have a large degree of freedom in choosing where their character goes, the actions they perform and the sequence of missions.

[3] This is literally the case, as merchandise surrounding recent *Yakuza* releases has featured prominently in the Japanese chain store Don Quijote. In an interesting act of cross-promotion Don Quijote stores were also part of the *Yakuza* game world, appearing as one of the in-game stores players could shop in.

[4] Only the historically based *Yakuza Kenzan* game and the PlayStation Portable system have not being localised.

[5] While this was a sentiment expressed on the *Yakuza* forums, it should be noted that a fan-subtitled or patched version of the *Yakuza 3* game was never made. On the forum many fans cited the difficulties of coding and manipulating data on the PlayStation 3 console. However, there are examples of fans subtitled games such as the Japanese-only release of *Fatal Frame 4 (Zero: Tsukihami no Kamen)* for the Nintendo Wii, which received an unofficial English-subtitle patch produced by fans once Nintendo decided not to publish the game in the West.

[6] For further details see the forum threads *Yakuza 5 crowd funded translation* <http://forums.sega.com/showthread.php?515198-Yakuza-5-crowd-funded-translation> and *yakuza 5 localization master plan* <http://forums.sega.com/showthread.php?513437-yakuza-5-localization-master-plan>

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