

"I don't know what's going on here, but... let's go, Kasuga!"

Localisation of Humor in the Game *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* - A Transcreative Approach

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Abstract

Yakuza, domestically known as *Ryū Ga Gotoku* (龍が如く), has become a globally beloved roleplaying action game series, heralded by many as some of Japan's most entertaining video game storytelling. This study aims to provide a further look into the latest release in the series, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (2020), to showcase how the game localises its humor to Western audiences in English. The localisation is examined through a comparative analysis of a selection of the game's dialogues, where the Japanese dub, the English subtitles that accompany the Japanese dub, as well as the fully English dub are compared to find and analyse differences. Due to humor being the focus of the study, the examples chosen for closer analysis have been selected based on humorous content and context. As the method of analysis, a translation approach known as transcreation is used, where the translator not only translates the source text but utilizes completely new solutions to best communicate the original intent of the source language in the target language. The study proposes that the transcreation of humor appears in the dialogues of *Like a Dragon* through three separate categories: transcreated spoken language forms, transcreated swearing, and transcreated delivery of humor.

Yakuza, kotimaassaan Japanissa *Ryū Ga Gotoku*-nimellä tunnettu pelisarja, on viime vuosina saavuttanut globaalia suosiota ja ylistystä, niin uusilta pelaajilta kuin myös roolipelien pitkäaikaisilta ystäviltä. Tämä opinnäytetyö pyrkii tarkastelemaan pelisarjan uusinta julkaisua, *Yakuza: Like a Dragonia* (2020), ja määrittelemään, millä tavoin peli lokalisoi dialogeissaan esiintyvää huumoria länsimaisille yleisöille englanninkielisten käännöstensä kautta. Tutkimuksen keskeisenä teoriana käytetään ns. uudelleenkirjoittamisen käsitettä (engl. transcreation) jossa kääntäjä sekä kääntää tekstiä että luo uutta sisältöä. *Like a Dragonin* lokalisaatiota tarkastellaan vertailevan analyysin avulla, jossa alkuperäinen japaninkielinen dubbaus, japaninkielistä dubbausta edustavat englanninkieliset tekstitykset sekä täysin englanninkielinen pelin dubbaus asetetaan rinnakkain eroavaisuuksien poimimista varten. Koska tutkimuksen painopisteenä on huumori, analysoitava sisältö ja tutkimuksessa käytetyt esimerkit on valittu pelin erinäisistä kohdista, joissa huumoria esiintyy. Vertaileva analyysi osoittaa, että uudelleenkirjoittamista esiintyy pelin lokalisoiduissa dialogeissa eri tavoin huumorin viestimiseksi. Tavot, joilla uudelleenkirjoitus esiintyy, on jaoteltu analyysissä kolmeen eri kategoriaan: uudelleenkirjoitettu puhuttu kieli, uudelleenkirjoitettu kiroilu, sekä uudelleenkirjoitettu huumorin välitys.

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1. Introduction

Video games as an entertainment form and a genre of media have taken over the world with a tidal wave over the past few decades. What started with machines built distinctly for singular video games, such as *Nimrod* (1951) or *Tennis for Two* (1958), games have now found their way onto the devices of approximately 3 billion people worldwide (Statista). Due to this rise in popularity, video games have begun to be studied from various perspectives, although not as much as one would perhaps expect from such an interactive everyday phenomenon. Studies investigating into the effect that video games have on behaviour, critical thinking or language acquisition have been conducted at a growing rate, especially from the viewpoint of child and adolescent development, yet the study of video game content itself has been quite scarce to this day. This ties into the attitudes surrounding video games as an entertainment form, which often leave the medium to be regarded as “trivial”, particularly when it comes to scientific outlooks (Bernal-Merino, 2015). Despite these attitudes, there is a lot to take in and research in video game content, even when tied to aspects such as culture and language alone.

When video games started to gain popularity as a pastime, the United States and Canada were the cream of the crop when it came to developers and English was the reigning language in which games were made, played, and enjoyed. In the retro period of 80s and early 90s, there was not much consideration of other locales or cultures in the development or spreading of games, as the focus was on local audiences and computing was in its early stages. However, as time went on, Asia and especially the Japanese game development sphere began to grow and take part in the market, which meant that games could no longer be made only in their respective source languages or cultural contexts and needed a new international mindset, referred to as *internationalization* (Mangiron, 2021). This showed especially in Japanese game development, when companies opted for a “flavourless” approach in terms of including culture in their products (Consalvo, 2016). It was a conscious strategy to avoid shunning away international markets and their audiences. The games developed in this time period, however, still carried something that made them specifically appeal to some players despite the attempt at eradicating “cultural odors” (O’Hagan, 2013), to the point where players began seeking out more games of similar style and feel. Eventually, a good portion of Japanese video games began explicitly embracing their source culture, intentionally appealing to the niche of what Consalvo (2016) refers to as “Japaneseness” and the audience thereof.

Nowadays, Japanese influence on video game content is not only seen in games developed in its country of origin, but also on a multitude of Western games, from bigger productions such as *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020) to smaller indie titles like *Paradise Killer* (2020). In the book by Consalvo (2016), several individuals who play a range of Japanese games were interviewed to gain perspective into what exactly constitutes or plays a part in making a “Japanese” video game. The responses included general elements from interesting stories and characters to stylistic and visual appeal, but also quite specific impressions, for example the emphasis of being “a part of a team” or Japanese games embodying a sense of “silliness” and not taking

oneself too seriously (p. 32). Humor is quite often a big part of Japanese video games, especially in character interactions and situations in which the characters find themselves.

This study will be focusing on the localisation of humor in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (2020), the seventh title in the popular Japanese action role-playing series *Yakuza*. First, there will be an introduction to the materials and the game itself in terms of story, main character and game features. Second, applied theory and the analytical framework of the study will be introduced and explained. The analysis section will then take a deeper dive into how the game localises and familiarizes humor to its English-speaking target audiences in the West, both through its English subtitles and dubbed version. The aim of this study is to explore comparatively how the different scripts of Japanese dub, English subtitles and English dub in one sense mingle with each other and in another diverge and create different meanings in humor through localisation and the applied translation strategy of transcreation. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) How does the transcreation of humor appear in the English localisations of *Like a Dragon* when compared with the Japanese script?
- 2) What kinds of elements have been created when compared with the source language?
- 3) Are there any patterns in transcreation?

With even a small-scale study such as this, I hope to add to an ever-expanding field of video game studies from both a cultural viewpoint and the perspective of translation theory.

2. Description of materials – Yakuza: Like a Dragon

Yakuza: Like a Dragon (2020) is a Japanese action-roleplaying game developed by Ryū Ga Gotoku Studio and published by SEGA. It is the seventh title in the long-running series of *Yakuza*, spanning nearly 20 years of published titles. The series introduces the player to the criminal underworld of Japan, featuring a charismatic cast of characters placed into grand cinematic storylines with dire situations. Deviating from previous titles, *Like a Dragon* features a brand new protagonist and core changes to gameplay, for example in the switch from real time combat to turn-based and featuring a party of characters. Despite being quite popular domestically, the *Yakuza* series began gathering a wider audience in the West only somewhat recently due to the great reception of one of its remakes, *Yakuza 0* (2015). Overall, the series is known and praised for its good quality localisation and translation, both from the perspective of the fanbase as well as critics.

In *Like a Dragon*, the player controls Ichiban Kasuga, an up-and-running member of the Arakawa family operating in the fictional Japanese setting of Kamurocho. Ichiban's daily tasks include collecting money from those who owe it to the family, running errands and looking after the son of his boss Masumi Arakawa, Masato, who has been bound to a wheelchair since birth. Due to an unfortunate chain of events on New Year's Eve, Ichiban is asked to go to prison on behalf of the Arakawa family's second captain, Sawashiro, who allegedly killed a member of a fellow Tojo clan family. Ichiban accepts, willing to go to any lengths for his boss and father figure.

After sitting in prison for 18 years, the world around Ichiban has changed, and not quite for the better. His boss has seemingly betrayed the entire Tojo clan by hitching in with the infamous Omi alliance, and despite Ichiban's pleas, shoots him in the chest and dumps his body in Yokohama despite once treating him like his own son. Ichiban survives the ordeal thanks to a homeless nurse called Nanba who tends to his wounds. Having now lost both his role model and goals in life, Ichiban must figure out a way to move on. Nonetheless, as he meets new friends and encounters some familiar faces, it seems his past is intent on not letting him off the hook; when Ichiban delves further into the lives of the people of Ijincho, the road seems to be leading him closer and closer to his old life, and back to Arakawa.

Like a Dragon deals with a multitude of themes, ranging from moral greyness of society and its people to finding strength in one's bleakest moments. Ichiban's character is a walking reminder of how you can never be too late or too old to do something good with your life, be it helping others, making friends, or becoming a hero of your own. Aside from a grand, dramatic main storyline with its numerous twists and turns, the game features the *Yakuza*-series staple of levity and moments of often absurd humor throughout its side quests referred to as substories. These quests may range from helping a man whose baby formula is about to be stolen by a yakuza to saving a business from the brink of bankruptcy, or helping a local shady scientist collect data on the violent lowlifes of the city.

The rationale for choosing *Like a Dragon* for this study is multifaceted. First, a game that was made in Japan was required for this particular research. The effects of game localisation tend

to be more noticeable and hold differences between versions the further apart the target and source cultures are from each other. Combined with a personal interest and knowledge of Japanese language and culture, as well as the fact that Japan is one of the largest and most prominent countries for game development, the choice was set. *Like a Dragon* not only is a game developed in Japan, but also features elements of Japanese culture, a full Japanese audio track for comparison, and a Japanese setting.

Second, a game with a substantial amount of dialogue and spoken text was needed due to the focus in comparing translated scripts and textual assets from a cultural and linguistic point of view. Roleplaying games tend to be rich with text due to the emphasis on story and characters, and *Like a Dragon* is no exception to the tendency.

Third, a game with both English audio and Japanese audio was preferable to have a wider perspective into a full localisation of a game as opposed to only a partial localisation. The rarer form of in-house “dual localisation” (Mangiron, 2021) of *Like a Dragon* is an excellent point of analysis due to its range and different target audiences. Finally, the analyzed game required a good amount of levity and humorous content. As *Like a Dragon* and the entire *Yakuza* series is seen in an all-around positive light when it comes to player amusement, it was safe to assume that the game would have multiple points of interest in terms of analysis.

3. Analytical framework

3.1 Video game localisation – what, why, how

As video games are created all around the world by bigger and smaller studios in a variety of languages, it is evident that the culture that is innate to the developers will seep into the game they are developing through one effect or another, whether it be story, use of language, visuals, or setting. At times, it is a purposeful, conscious choice to include a certain culture or its elements in a game in different ways. This combined with the fact that games have become much more demanding of player agency and engagement (Costales, 2012), bridging game content from its source culture and language to its target audiences has grown increasingly important. Thus, in order to make video game content understandable, relatable and engaging, a node of processes known as *localisation* is undertaken. The term localisation refers to the concept of locale, which according to Bernal-Merino (2015) consists of the “language and culture variety natural of a particular geographic region” (p.51). Localisation, then, is the transferring of content from one locale to another so that it retains its original purpose, for example to be informative, or in the case of video games, to be entertaining (Hevia, 2007) among other objectives.

Inside the umbrella term of game localisation exist a variety of procedures that are applied in varying capacities, such as internationalization, culturalization and naturally, translation. *Internationalization* refers to the process of localisation that is applied at the very early stages of game development, where target audiences and the process of localising is kept in mind during the creation of different game assets. This ensures that the later task of localising and translating will proceed as smoothly as possible (Mangiron, 2021) and that, ideally, no substantial changes to the game will have to be made afterwards. The internationalization process also contains the different levels of culture that are to be included in the game, ranging from a source culturally “neutral” approach to fully embracing elements and settings thereof (Mangiron, 2021). *Culturalization*, on the other hand, indicates the process of adaptation to target audiences in a way that yields a culturally suitable product and ensures that the game is appropriate to be released inside a certain locale. Edwards (2011) presents a striking example where the release of the game *Fallout 3* (2008) was unsuccessful in India due to the appearance of a creature named “brahmin”, a cow with two heads: the Hindu traditions and the regard of the cow as a sacred animal led to the game not selling well in the Indian target locale, all because of its cultural neglect.

A practical dimension of localisation is the extent that game developers are willing to invest in it. The process in its entirety may happen through an in-house model or an outsourced agency. An in-house model is usually a sign of good quality, as localizers work closely together with the developers of the game to work out context and different solutions to game assets as they are being developed. An outsourced option, on the other hand, refers to a separate agency to the developer that receives a localisation kit (Hevia, 2007) to work out the process. An outsourced option is not an immediate sign of lower quality, but it presents its own set of challenges due to a lack of context and often not having access to the game itself.

From these two models, different levels of localisation are available and chosen from by the developers. Ranging from most affordable to most expensive, the three most common options are “box and docs” localisation, partial localisation, and a full localisation (Chandler, 2011). *Like a Dragon* utilizes a full localisation, where everything from localising the game box and documents, translating subtitles, and even dubbing the dialogues in English have been done. What makes *Like a Dragon*’s localisation special, however, is the way how even in its English localisation, elements of the original source culture and language remain – it is not a case of, say, the *Ace Attorney* games (Mangiron, 2021) where the localised version goes so far as to completely change the game’s setting or create new names for characters and locations.

To sum up, as Consalvo (2016) states, localizers act as “culture brokers” to target audiences. In addition to matters of cultural appropriateness and clarity, localizers must look at the game product itself and find answers to questions such as what makes the original game appealing and enjoyable, how to carry over the appealing elements so that the experience of enjoyment is equal to those who play in other languages, and how to keep the “spirit” of the source media intact. As the bulk of localisation lies in the preservation of the game experience inside different languages and target cultures, the role of translation and its quality becomes apparent. In a game such as *Like a Dragon* with its emphasis on narrative, character interactions and storyline, engaging translation is paramount to deliver its core experience from one language to another.

3.2 Translation studies relating to localisation

As is the case with video game localisation, video game translation is a fellow area of study with great potential that has not yet been explored to its fullest. Contrary to some assumptions that are often made of game localisation, translation does not equal the entire practice thereof. Rather, translation can be seen as a practice that follows and adapts to the type of target audience and localisation that is required, with its own set of strategies that are applied. As Bernal-Merino (2015) states, game translation is more than its “framework” of sentences, words and utterances, and the “real focus” is set on the intercultural communication that happens underneath that framework (pp. 50-51). Thus, video game translation is a crucial part of the processes of localisation, especially in games where story and narrative take spotlight. The player’s engagement with language is of deep importance in story-based games (Consalvo 2016; Mangiron 2021) for reasons ranging from decision making to immersion and overall enjoyment. Due to this interlink, aspects from the field of Translation Studies are more than applicable to this study.

As Mangiron (2021) states, at the core of video game translation is user-centeredness and functionality, “where priority is given to the players and their gameplay experience” (p.3). This in mind, a direct translation from source text or media is often completely insufficient, even more so when taking into consideration the possible technical limitations (subtitle space in text box, lip-sync) or other cultural challenges (Edwards, 2011) that may not carry over as intended without some creative input. The game translator faces a series of challenges due

to these limitations, which may, on the other hand, lead to incredibly creative solutions seen in no other field (O'Hagan, 2013). The concept known as *transcreation* is useful in understanding the display of humor in *Like a Dragon*.

Transcreation refers to the translator's role as a creative actor in the localisation of a game, and the figurative "carte blanche" or "blank paper" that the translator is free to interact with in the creation of localised text (Hevia, 2007). Due to the series of limitations and expectations of quality that need to be considered in the translation of a game, creative input is a must. Not only does the translated text need to adhere to technical requirements, such as character limits or matching the speed of dialogue to dubbing, it also needs to retain what makes the original script entertaining as a priority. Therefore, the translator has considerable freedom in adapting the text linguistically and stylistically to meet the target culture's expectations while keeping intact the elements of what made the original version appealing. In practice, this is often recognizable in both smaller and bigger units of game text, such as in character dialogues or in the names of assets such as locations or weapons. For example, in *Like a Dragon's* substory titled "Who's that Sujimon?!", the player encounters an exhibitionist in a trench coat that attacks Ichiban and the rest. After defeating the lowlife, a scientist appears to record data of the defeated thug. He introduces himself as Sujimon-sensei and invites the party to his laboratory, where he explains his research and pits them against three more thugs to record more data. There is an intertextualized transcreation at play, where some of the utterances of the scientist are translated to directly refer to the localised version of the animated Pokémon TV show. For instance, at the end of the substory, Sujimon-sensei praises Ichiban and his friends for defeating his hired goons, stating: "Sono jitsuryoku nara, kitto kiken jinbutsu wo yamahodo touroku dekiru hazu da", which directly translated to English means "With that capability, you should be able to record data of heaps of dangerous individuals". In the localised versions of both the subtitles and dub, the utterance is translated to "Keep that up and you'll be the best, like no one ever was", as a throwback to the opening song of *Pokémon: Indigo League* (1997).

Although concepts such as invisibility (Venuti, 1995) in the role of a translator working in the field have been much discussed, video game localisation differs in its practices and creates a unique mixture of creativeness and audience-centered perspectives for the translator that are unlikely to be found in any other corner of translation (Mangiron & O'Hagan 2013).

3.3 Translating Humor

"Humor mirrors society", as is stated by Oshima (2013, p.107), and what is understood as humorous is inevitably in some ways tied to the surrounding environment and locale, be it through language, culture, or societal aspects – this alone makes humor one of the most difficult elements to translate so that equivalence remains the same across languages. However, despite the fact that humor is inevitably tied to certain contexts, there are still elements of humor that may be considered universal due to their global emergence. By demonstrating a series of jokes he received across the world, Berger (2020) showcases that

while the content and narratives of humor differ and encounter various expectations depending on the locale, the themes are often remarkably alike. Among the jokes he collected from countries such as Vietnam, Argentina or Japan, Berger points out a group of techniques that are present even if the delivery and contents vary significantly. These techniques involved, among others, satire, disappointment and defeated expectations, mistakes, ridicule and stereotypes.

Berger goes on to suggest that humor that is based on language, such as wordplays, puns or different definitions, is overall “most difficult for people all over the world to grasp” (p.44) even though people with understanding of the language and culture may find it relatable and amusing. This is often the case with Japanese humor, as Oshima states in her study, *Japan’s Funniest Story Project* (2013). The study in question went on to collect several hundred stories from a wide range of Japanese people, in search of the one people considered to be the funniest. Out of all the stories submitted for the project, most were related to the use of language, such as mis-said or mis-heard words, puns and wordplays or foreign language related experiences. While the stories are amusing among the Japanese locale, the context that is required to understand them, from language to social customs and norms, is demanding. Taking into notion that having to explain humor often dilutes the experienced amusement (Oshima), translating humor often asks for creative solutions.

Considering this study’s viewpoint of *Like a Dragon’s* Japanese source language, context and setting that are brought over to English-speaking audiences, the question of translating humor becomes not only intriguing but important. As humor and amusing content are central to the *Yakuza* franchise as a whole, ensuring quality in its localization is crucial. Recounting Oshima’s study of Japan’s funniest story, similar popular elements of humor can be found in *Like a Dragon’s* dialogues and side quests, where the use of language, characterization and wordplay are often highlighted. Through the examples presented, the three different scripts of the Japanese dub, English subtitles and English dub will be comparatively analyzed to find and compare solutions in translating and localizing humor within the perspective of transcreation.

4. Data Analysis

The data collection of this study occurred between the first 8 chapters of *Like a Dragon*, the total playtime exceeding 23 hours. For the scope of this thesis, it was seen as sufficient to focus on these chapters and their humorous content, particularly when considering that a wide range of the game's humorous content is accessible therein. I played the game by myself, switching between the Japanese dubbing with English subtitles and the fully English dub. For transcribing purposes, I streamed the gameplay on Twitch and saved the VODs (Video on Demand) privately. Both main story events and side quests, substories, were played with an emphasis on the latter, as most of the directly humorous moments were found in the optional side content of the game. Most of the examples chosen for transcribing and further analysis come from substories, explained further as they are presented in the analysis. Although it is difficult to define or capture *Like a Dragon's* sense of humor in shorter samples, the examples that were chosen to be further analyzed represent the game's overall sense and direction of humor on the level of language.

In each example, the three scripts are divided into three columns for comparative analysis of their contents. The Japanese script can be found on the left, the English subtitles that accompany the Japanese script in the middle and the English dubbing on the right. Below the Japanese script, I have added a translation that would be the most direct solution to English, for the sake of clarifying the differences between each language option. An online Japanese dictionary *Takoboto* was used to check the accuracy of some translated phrases and words.

The study seeks to answer how transcreation of humor in the English localisations of *Like a Dragon*, both subtitles and dub, appear when compared with the Japanese script. What kinds of elements have been created or changed from the original? Are there any patterns to when transcreation is frequently used and in what ways? Indeed, from the collected data, several patterns of transcreation in the translation of humor began to emerge. On a linguistic level, elements such as colloquialisms, idioms and differing intonation appear and go through a variety of transcreative changes. The added element of swearing in the English versions is a major transcreative choice, occurring across the entire game and its characters. In addition, transcreation also appears to have an effect on the characterization and the overall delivery of humor, for example in the creation of sarcasm in the English subtitles and dubbing. These patterns led to separating these phenomena into their own groups, as can be seen in the analysis sections below.

4.1. Spoken language: Colloquialism, idioms, intonation

Keeping in mind how important written and spoken language are for player engagement and immersion in video games, having characters sound natural and relatable to the player is necessary, especially when it comes to amusement and finding something funny. In *Like a Dragon's* localisation, this is done through transcreative translation where both the English subtitles and dub are made to sound closer to everyday English as opposed to a direct translation from Japanese. Were the translations based on staying entirely faithful to the Japanese script of the game, the consequence would quite likely be the player feeling distant and partly unrelated to the overall flow of language. Both the subtitles and dub take apparent creative freedom in interpreting the characteristics of the game's cast through dialogue. Elements and nuances that pertain to customs of English language specifically are found more frequently in the English dubbing, as the English subtitles aim to preserve more of the context and "flavor" of the Japanese script. At times, however, the English subtitles and dub are incredibly close to one another in word choices and structure, if not completely mirroring each other. Nevertheless, there are some patterns and intriguing differences, even on a micro-level, that influence the humor of utterances in differing ways.

The exchange in the following example is an extract from the substory "Fast Times at Ounabara", which occurs during chapter 4. Ichiban, the game's protagonist, is talking to Ikari, a regular in Ounabara Vocational School who has gathered quite the number of educational certifications. The two meet when Ikari saves Ichiban from an awkward situation with a foreign man, after which they end up discussing education – and Ikari's certifications.

EXAMPLE 1.

Japanese Dub	English Subtitles	English Dub
<p>1. IKARI: そう。僕はこの学校にずっと通っていてね。今までにしとくしてきた資格は、ざっと、五十以上にも上るんだ。</p> <p>[That's right. I've been going here for a good while now, and the certifications I've gotten so far? More or less over fifty.]</p>	<p>IKARI: Yup, I've been going here a while now. And guess how many certs I've racked up? That would be <i>fifty</i>.</p>	<p>IKARI: Yup. Been going here a while now. And guess how many certs I've racked up. Fifty.</p>
<p>2. ICHIBAN: 五十?! マジかよ、スゲーなあ！資格なんて、俺、一つも持ってねえぜ。</p> <p>[Fifty? Seriously?! That's incredible! I don't have a single one.]</p>	<p>ICHIBAN: Fifty? For real?! That's crazy! I have, like, none.</p>	<p>ICHIBAN: Fifty? For real?! That's crazy... I have, like, none.</p>

<p>3. IKARI: それはいけない！今はこの力がじゅうじされる時代。資格をとって人間力を磨かないと一流の社会人になれないししょうらいくいっばぐれるよ。</p> <p>[That's no good! Now's the time to invest in yourself! If you don't get certificates of your skills, you won't become a first-class citizen and you'll miss out on your future.]</p>	<p>IKARI: Wha?! You gotta change that, man! The time to build yourself up as an individual is now! If you're the only one without certifiable skills, you'll get left in the dust!</p>	<p>IKARI: You gotta change that, man! Now's the time to build yourself as an individual. If you're the only one without certifiable skills, I'm afraid you'll get left behind.</p>
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Interestingly, both of the localised versions shape Ikari into a different character from how he comes across in the Japanese dub. His Japanese version sounds like a walking dictionary, throwing around sophisticated words while carrying a mannerism of speaking that is immediately recognizable as nerdy and pretentious. The English subtitles and dub employ humorous forms of language, but not in a way that is directly comparable to the Japanese dubbing. The usage of colloquial expressions in his utterances during lines 1 and 3 create a different feeling for the character. Instead of the more neutral expression on line 1, 「しとくしてきた資格」 [shitokushitekita shikaku; gathered certifications], he states how he has “racked up certs” in the localisations. A similar phenomenon repeats on line 3, where the beginning of his utterance 「それはいけない」 [sore wa ikenai; that's no good] has been transcreated into “You gotta change that, man!”. The end of line 3 has him state “you’ll get left in the dust” in the English subtitles, possibly to accommodate for the unavailable fluid translation of 「くいっばぐれる」 [kuippagureru; “missing a meal”, miss out on one’s livelihood]. Interestingly, the English dub opts for a more considerate, caring Ikari through the expression “I’m afraid you’ll get left behind”.

In Japanese, the humor of the scene overall depends on Ikari’s excessive characteristics and how Ichiban balances his over-the-top behavior. Through Ikari’s way of speaking and at times absurd mannerisms, it could be suggested that he comes across as a caricature. This seems to get diluted or lost in the English dub, as his utterances are dialed down heavily and his bluntness transforms into friendliness.

Example 2 takes place in the short substory titled “Trip to Pound Town”. Ichiban and his friend Adachi are walking along the streets of Ijincho when a bystander hands over a flyer of some sort. Adachi, immediately curious as to what the flyer entails, begins inquiring about it.

EXAMPLE 2.

Japanese Dub	English Subtitles	English Dub
1. ADACHI: おや、何もらったんだ。 [Hey, what'd [you] get?]	ADACHI: Hey, what do we got here?	ADACHI: Hey, whatcha got there?
2. ICHIBAN: さあ…ふうぞくかなんかのチラシだろう。金のねえ俺たちには縁のねえ話さ。 [No idea. Probably a flyer for some sex service. Not a tale for moneyless folks like us.]	ICHIBAN: Who knows? Probably some sex service or something. Nothing for broke fools like us, that's for sure.	ICHIBAN: Who knows? An ad for a sex shop or something. Nothing a couple of penniless mooks like us need to worry about.
3. ADACHI: おいおい、これせんちゃく一名様むりょうって書いてあるぜ。 [Hey! It's written here that the first person to call gets [it] for free!]	ADACHI: Oh, whoa! Hey, this says the first person to call gets it for free!	ADACHI: Whoa-ho-ho... Hold the phone, it says the first person to call gets free service!

Adachi's way of asking about the flyer in the Japanese dub is simply curious. His intonation in Japanese seems to reflect this curiosity, whereas the English dub has him sounding as though he has some ulterior motives. To Adachi's inquiry, Ichiban responds how the flyer is most likely an advert for a sex service, and that it is nothing for the two of them to be concerned over. Ichiban defines the subject 「俺たち」 [oretachi; us] with 「金のねえ」 [kane no nee; moneyless, without money]. There is a tone of irony in his voice that carries over just how small or non-existent their supply of money is, and there is a level of spoken Japanese at play that colloquializes the word 「ない」 [nai; is not] to 「ねえ」 [nee; ain't]. Considering this, the English subtitles and dub choose to transcreate a colorful expression to match the tone of the original: the subtitles opt for “broke fools” whereas the dub utilizes “penniless mooks”.

Ignoring Ichiban's input, or perhaps fueled by Ichiban's statement, Adachi turns his attention to the flyer and the promise of free service for first caller. His exclamation turns into a playful chuckle in the English dub, as he states “Whoa-ho-ho, hold the phone”. The Japanese dub does not match the localised utterance with its simple 「おいおい」 [oi oi; whoa, hey], but

considering Adachi’s overall character, the English dub chooses to further emphasize his obvious liking for women through exaggerated voicing.

The extract in Example 3 takes place during the beginning of the first chapter of *Like a Dragon*. Ichiban, who has just had a fistfight with an old friend from middle school, asks his oath brother Mitsuo whether his hair got messy in the skirmish. Mitsuo confirms that there is indeed a bump on his head, but Ichiban gets agitated over his punch perm instead, leading to his exclamation below.

EXAMPLE 3.

Japanese Dub	English Subtitles	English Dub
ICHIBAN: パンチ立て直した ばっかなんだ。せっかくい い形もできたのによ。 [I just got my perm redone. And it was shaped so nicely, too!]	ICHIBAN: I just got it redone, too! And it was looking fresh!	ICHIBAN: I just got it done! And it was lookin’ real fresh, too! I can’t believe this shit. Stupid Ushio...

This example highlights how Ichiban’s informal style of speaking is generally treated in the translation from Japanese to English, especially in the English dubbing. A relatively simple utterance such as 3’s seems to gain a lot of flavor and new content in the translation process to best convey Ichiban’s emotions and characteristics. The Japanese script relies a lot on intonation, stresses on words and colloquial, informal language to characterize Ichiban and the rest of the cast. These informal elements of language can be spotted across the utterance in the example, in the usage of certain particles such as 「よ」 [yo] or transforming certain words such as 「ばかり」 [bakari; only] to 「ばっか」 [bakka].

The localisation relies on a level of spoken English that would match these language level variations as closely as possible, for example in colloquializing “looking” to “lookin’” or using the spoken form “real” instead of the adverb “really”. On top of this, the English dub frequently decides to transcreate new spoken expressions that would fit Ichiban’s character. In example 3, this manifests at the end of the utterance as “I can’t believe this shit. Stupid Ushio...”, which was not in any way part of the original Japanese script.

4.2. Swearing

Another interesting transcultural element in the localised versions of *Like a Dragon*, both in the English subtitles and dub, is the addition of swearing. Swearing and swear word culture in Japanese language is quite detached from a Western understanding of the phenomenon – it could be argued that linguistically, only a single word in Japanese acts similarly to what is considered a swear word, the word being “kuso”. The word in itself does not quite carry the same type of emotional load that its English counterpart, “shit”, does, and depends on circumstance on how it is interpreted as it may be used to emphasize both positive and negative emotions. What makes it act similarly to a swear word is the context and other linguistic building blocks that emphasize it, such as intonation or accentuation. Japanese language may express emotion similar to swearing on different levels such as intonation, stresses on words or levels of politeness, directness, or colloquial language for example.

As the spoken language and humor is familiarized to a Western audience with the goal of natural sounding English, including swearing in the localisation of *Like a Dragon* was a deliberate transcreative choice of the translators to make the setting and characters feel more believable and relatable. Seeing how for example Ichiban is an ex-yakuza from the streets and still has ties to the criminal underworld, it would only make sense for him to adhere to a lingo that exists in that environment.

Example 4 is an extract from the previously included substory “Fast Times at Ounabara”, where a foreign man approaches Ichiban with the intent of finding out where the nearest bus station is. Ichiban, quite taken aback by a foreign language, tries to then figure out what to put out of his mouth.

EXAMPLE 4.

Japanese Dub	English Subtitles	English Dub
1. FOREIGN MAN: [Can you tell me how to get to the station?]	FOREIGN MAN: [Can you tell me how to get to the station?]	FOREIGN MAN: [Would you tell me how to get to the station?]
2. ICHIBAN: ほっほお。英語か。 [Oh-ho. English, huh?]	ICHIBAN: Oh, shit... it's English!	ICHIBAN: Oh, shit... it's English!

Ichiban first reacts to the English-speaking foreigner with 「ほっほお」 [Hohhoo], which is pronounced and accentuated in a way where it sounds as if he is paying respects to a formidable foe of some kind. The humor of the situation varies interestingly between the different language options. In Japanese, the humor comes from the cultural understanding that English is not much spoken in Japan and can feel intimidating for Japanese people to converse in. The level of English competence can also often be quite low, which applies to

Ichiban in this case and results in his reaction of bemusement. In the English subtitles, Ichiban’s emotions are transcreated into the swearword ‘shit’, where the word alone carries an emotional load. The tone undergoes a small transformation, as the subtitles present an Ichiban who is more intimidated by the challenge instead of sounding as collected as he does in Japanese.

The tonal shift in the English dub is much more significant, however, as it makes the transcreative choice to preserve English as a foreign language, despite both Ichiban and the foreign man being seemingly proficient in it. The circumstance creates a feeling of absurdism for the player, differing entirely from the original humorous intent of the scene. Ichiban seems to somewhat break the fourth wall to affirm the player’s feelings of absurdism towards the dub though, as at the end of his utterance he looks at the camera and gestures at the player – an action that is not present in the other scripts. The swearing in the dubbed version seems to emphasize the ridiculousness of what is happening instead of merely conveying Ichiban’s feelings on the matter.

In Example 5 that follows, the substory “Fast Times at Ounabara” continues, as Ichiban converses with Ikari who saves him from the confrontation with the foreigner.

EXAMPLE 5.

Japanese Dub	English Subtitles	English Dub
<p>1. IKARI: ん～、イングリッシュしかくけんていの賜物だな。 [Ahh, this is the profit of getting that English certificate.]</p>	<p>IKARI: Ahh, that English certificate really paid off!</p>	<p>IKARI: Not bad, huh? Guess that English certificate really paid off.</p>
<p>2. ICHIBAN: ありがとよ。すまない、英語なんてからっきしで。 [Hey, thanks. Sorry, my English is completely useless.]</p>	<p>ICHIBAN: Yeah, man, thanks. My English sucks ass.</p>	<p>ICHIBAN: Yeah, guess so. My English sucks ass.</p>

After the eventful exchange with the foreign man, Ikari exclaims how his English certificate really paid off. Responding to this, the Japanese script has Ichiban thanking him and apologizing for his completely useless English during the situation. The /r/ in 「からっきし」 [karakkishi; useless, bad] is accentuated, making the word emotionally expressive. To accommodate for this, the English subtitles and dub both opt for swearing to communicate as close a feel to the original as possible. In addition, Ichiban accentuates the swear word in the English dub while also putting vocal emphasis on “my”. The scene is still playing with the absurdity of an English-speaking character expressing how their English is dreadful.

Example 6 is an extract from the substory “Old Cinema Paradiso”, where Ichiban visits an old movie theatre and faces the challenge of almost falling asleep during a movie screening. Due

to the kindness that the director of the theatre shows him by letting him see a movie for free, Ichiban is determined to stay awake against all the comforts of the dim movie hall. The scene in its entirety has most of its humor rely on the subversion of expectations: as Ichiban unexpectedly appreciates the movie and holds it in high praises, the curator, who has been watching the movie at his side, is the one who falls asleep. On a linguistic level, much of the humor is tied to the phrasing of utterances and in the case of the English translations, the addition of swearwords.

EXAMPLE 6.

Japanese Dub	English Subtitles	English Dub
<p>ICHIBAN: やべえ。とは言い つつこの空間が妙にいごこ ちが良くて、何だか眠たく なってきしまった。 [Oh no. Despite all that, this place has a weirdly comfy feel to it. I'm getting sleepy.]</p>	<p>ICHIBAN: Oh, shit. Such a comfy aura here... Damn, now I'm sleepy as hell.</p>	<p>ICHIBAN: Oh, shit. This place is weirdly comfy... Damn, now I'm sleepy as hell.</p>

The Japanese script has Ichiban state 「やべえ」 [yabee], which is a colloquialized form of the word 「やばい」 [yabai]. It is typically used as a reaction when something happens unexpectedly, most often in a negative sense. This in mind, it makes sense that the English counterpart was translated as “Oh, shit” to convey meaning, even if there is no actual swearing involved in Japanese.

The end of Ichiban’s localised utterance involves a quite loaded statement with “damn, now I’m sleepy as hell” to emphasize his conflicted feelings. The original Japanese utterance merely mentions the atmosphere as oddly comfortable, leading to Ichiban stating how he has somehow gotten quite sleepy. The intonation and voice acting of the Japanese dub carries most of the emotional and humorous effect the player experiences, which is not necessarily lost in the English dub, but somewhat diluted. Perhaps due to this, the addition of swearing was seen as a natural extension of feeling to the localised script.

4.3. Characterization: Styles and Delivery of Humor

While *Like a Dragon's* translation of humor includes localised forms of language such as colloquialisms and swearing as an emphasis and element of humor, another notable change occurs in the very ways in which humor is delivered to the player. As has been stated throughout this study, the relatability of humorous content is incredibly important for player engagement and immersion. This section of the study examines how a transcreative approach is used to change the style of humor through reorganizing, rephrasing and adapting humorous utterances and exchanges between characters. Similar to previous categories, three examples will be comparatively examined to reveal these strategies in effect.

In Example 7, Ichiban is discussing his style of fighting with an old friend, Mitsuo. Mitsuo suggests that Ichiban seems to let his opponents “pummeled” him before he reveals his full strength and takes them down, calling him a masochist. The delivery of this exchange between the two varies quite a bit across the scripts, with the English dub taking a different approach altogether to Mitsuo’s style of suggestion.

EXAMPLE 7.

Japanese Dub	English Subtitles	English Dub
1. MITSUO: いつものことじゃないっすか。あにき、ドエムですから。 [This always happens. Since you're a masochist and all, Aniki.]	MITSUO: Like it's ever been different? Aniki, you're a masochist.	MITSUO: You're always getting pummeled there. I think you like it.
2. ICHIBAN: ドエム!?俺が!? [A masochist? Me?!]	ICHIBAN: A masochist? Me!?	ICHIBAN: You calling me a masochist?
3. MITSUO: そうっすよ。 [That's right.]	MITSUO: Damn right.	MITSUO: Hell yeah.

While the Japanese dub and English subtitles have Mitsuo outright call Ichiban a masochist, the English dub frames him as more subtle with him stating “You’re always getting pummeled there. I think you like it”. To this, Ichiban responds with “You calling me a masochist?”, bringing out the joke of the exchange himself, whereas the Japanese version has him repeat after Mitsuo with a bewildered tone. Mitsuo confirms his accusation on the third line, which is emphasized with swearing in both English translations.

Example 8 occurs during the same cutscene as 7, albeit a bit later. Ichiban explains how merely knocking his opponents down cold does not feel like something a “hero” would do, to which Mitsuo responds with an unsurprised jab at his *Dragon Quest* obsession. *Dragon Quest* is a popular Japanese roleplaying game, especially beloved among youth, where the player controls a character that eventually becomes a hero.

EXAMPLE 8.

Japanese Dub	English Subtitles	English Dub
1. ICHIBAN: けんかになると、頭の中でしぜんに回っちゃうんだよ、ドラクエの世界が。 [When it gets to fighting, the world of Dragon Quest just naturally enters my brain.]	ICHIBAN: When I have to throw down, I start thinking about everything in Dragon Quest terms.	ICHIBAN: When it’s time to throw down, my brain just starts thinking in Dragon Quest terms.
2. MITSUO: うあ、またドラクエっすか。あにき、どんだけ好きなんっすか。 [Sheesh, Dragon Quest again? Aniki, just how much do you like this game?]	MITSUO: Ugh, again with the Dragon Quest? What’s so great about it, Aniki?	MITSUO: Ugh, again with the Dragon Quest? What’s so great about it?
3. ICHIBAN: 悪いかよ！いいだろう、そっちのほうがあドレナリンでるし、全力だせんだよ。 [So what if I do! It gets my adrenaline pumping and I’m able to give it my all.]	ICHIBAN: Everything! It rules! It gets me pumped up and ready to kick ass!	ICHIBAN: Everything! It’s an epic and dangerous journey, and that’s exactly how I see real life!
4. MITSUO: ゆうしゃって、俺たちはやくざですよ。 [But a hero.. Aren’t we yakuza?]	MITSUO: A hero. Really. You know you’re a yakuza, right?	MITSUO: You do know you’re a freakin’ yakuza, right?

The example is particularly good at demonstrating both stylistic and characteristic differences between the three scripts. Tonally, the English dub has Mitsuo play a role that is more taunting and straightforward, sarcastic, whereas the Japanese dub presents a friendlier Mitsuo. When Ichiban states his love for *Dragon Quest*, something he seems to do quite often, Mitsuo is quick with his rebuttal on line 2. His Japanese reaction is good spirited and well-meaning, complete with a laughing animation, while his English dub counterpart has a judgemental, tired tone. The same difference in tone is evident in Ichiban’s response on line

3, as the Japanese version has him rebuke Mitsuo’s reaction with a passionate “so what!”, followed by him defending the game and its effects on him. The English dub on the other hand has Ichiban explain what he likes about the game, not so much his interest in it, with the transcreation of Ichiban stating how he sees real life as he sees the world of *Dragon Quest*. Finally, Mitsuo reminds Ichiban of his current livelihood as a yakuza, as a contrast to his heroic tendencies. The Japanese dub has him refer to both himself and Ichiban, whereas the English subtitles and dubbing have him point out Ichiban only, both with hints of irony.

The final example of the group, 9, is extracted from the familiar substory “Fast times at Ounabara”, seen in the previously included examples from sections 1 and 2. Due to a series of events, Ichiban is introduced to Ounabara Vocational School by the young man called Ikari. It turns out that Ikari’s overall enthusiasm to introduce Ichiban to Ounabara has a fairly clear motive, as he greets the school receptionist, Miyakoshi, seen in the example.

EXAMPLE 9.

Japanese Dub	English Subtitles	English Dub
IKARI: あ、ど、ど、どうも、みやこしさん！今日も素敵ですね、なんちゃって！あは、あはは。 [Oh, h-h-hello there, Miyakoshi-san! [It’s] beautiful today, isn’t it? Just kidding! Ahaha.]	IKARI: Uh, h-h-hi there, Miyakoshi-san! N-Nice weather today, huh? I mean, what?! Ahaha!	IKARI: Uh, hey there, Miyakoshi-san. Pretty nice weather, huh? I mean, not like it affects us indoors, but... Ahaha.

Ikari’s nervous clumsiness is delivered in various ways across the different scripts. The stuttering is translated and brought over to the English subtitles, but the dub refrains from it totally. Ikari’s Japanese statement is multifaceted and difficult to translate in a way that would convey it completely, as he utters 「今日も素敵ですね」 [kyou mo suteki desu ne; today lovely as well]. His line could be interpreted in at least two major ways, as it has no direct subject. One interpretation refers to the day being lovely and the other refers to Miyakoshi, the receptionist, being lovely. Ikari quickly realizes this, adding 「なんちゃって」 [nanchatte], which translates quite directly to “just kidding”. The English subtitles opt for Ikari complimenting the weather, which loses the nuance of the statement in Japanese, but follow up with adding to Ikari’s clumsiness by transcreating “I mean, what?!”. The English dub on the other hand has Ikari refer to the weather with the transcreated “I mean, not like it affects us indoors”. The delivery of a single line such as the one presented has a tremendous effect on how Ikari’s character is perceived by the player – so much so that the Japanese and English

dub versions feel like two different Ikaris, the Japanese version being frantic and the English being awkward but collected.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the localisation of humor in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* was examined through a comparative analysis of its three scripts: the Japanese dub, the English subtitles that accompany the Japanese language option, and the full English dub. The scripts were studied from the perspective of transcreation, a practice referring to a translator's creative freedom to interact with the source text to come up with relatable and engaging solutions in the target language, all while prioritizing the needs and competences of the target audience. The dual localisation of *Like a Dragon* proved to have intriguing translation solutions and differences that were utilized according to their target playerbases. The research questions that the study set out to explore were:

- 1) How does the transcreation of humor appear in the English localisations of *Like a Dragon* when compared with the Japanese script?
- 2) What kinds of elements have been created when compared with the source language?
- 3) Are there any patterns in transcreation?

The study showcased a division of the transcreation of humor in *Like a Dragon* to three separate categories based on the type of data that was extracted. The first section examined localised language level variations. The study found that in order to communicate as close an experience to the Japanese dub, the localised versions transcreate spoken language phenomena in English that seek to correspond with the tone of various expressions in Japanese. These included slangified or shortened words, colloquialisms and differing deliveries in intonation and voicing. In addition, culturally and linguistically tied expressions such as proverbs and idioms were changed to be understandable according to target audience.

The transcreated swearing in the localisation of *Like a Dragon* formed the second section of analysis. The study examined that although swearing was not directly present in the Japanese script of the game, it was included in both the English subtitles and English dub. As to why this transcreative approach was taken, the answer has quite likely to do with the relatability and setting of the game, and the expressive nature of its characters. Swearing was not only used during moments where the English localisation needed emphasis to fully convey humor through emotion, but swear words were also included to act as humorous elements of their own.

The third section of analysis was formed on the basis of delivery and overall styles of humor. This section included elements such as sarcasm, the structure and organisation of humor, as well as the phrasing of humor. The third section discussed how the English dub in particular utilizes transcreation in the delivery of humorous content. The result of using a transcreative approach in this way shows to increase the relatability of humor, but at the expense of changing humor from what it originally implied. For example, creating a sarcastic approach to an utterance may mean sacrificing some of the original nuance of a joke, statement or other type of expression.

Overall, the study found that the English subtitles that accompany the Japanese audio track are much more faithful to the original tone, jokes and phrasing of utterances in dialogue. Creative freedom was noted to be taken in instances where corresponding expressions did not exist in English, or clumsy direct translations would have been the result. The English dub, however, exercised much more creative freedom and transcreation in its tones, phrasing and structures, as its main goal is to appeal to and engage a more “mainstream” English-speaking playerbase.

The effects of transcreation in the localisation of *Like a Dragon*'s humor ranged from minimal to clearly noticeable to very altering. Minimal effects could be considered changes such as the changing of a word or light changes of structure that did not cause a big variation in terms of overall tone or meaning. Clearly noticeable changes included elements like added swear words, where they emphasized emotion or acted as their own humorous components. Very altering effects changed or helped change the course of humor or its way of delivery. Quite often transcreation was found in punchlines and moments where it was important for humor to land or get a reaction. In addition, highly language dependant forms of humor, such as word plays, puns and so on, required the use of transcreation.

Although the study is of a smaller scope, it quickly became evident that there was an abundance of material to analyse and discuss – even a single line of dialogue prompted many thoughts, and it took conscious effort to keep analysis to a tighter length. This in mind, it was difficult to include a wider range of data as examples. Thus, there are several things that could be taken into consideration in future studies of similar topics. They could include more varied and expansive in-game content, presented with counter arguments and perspectives to the theory, in this case transcreation. I found myself wanting to seek answers to various questions, such as: What can be truly counted as transcreation? Are “traditional” means of translation from source language to target language separate from transcreation, and to what extent? Can transcreative choices still be read as translation rather than transcreation? In addition, an aspect that became evident during the phase of analysis is the subjective perception of humor. Considering how people and audiences do not necessarily consider the same jokes or same punchlines funny, some expansion and theory into contextual humor would be important for future studies to tackle.

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