

First off, how did the purchasing of the license occur?

STU: at that time, TOKYOPOP distributed manga, anime, even music but manga was certainly our core. We chose certain anime series but never did the amount of anime that other companies then (for instance, ADV, Funimation, Viz, CPM) were releasing. One of our philosophies was to try our best to get behind both the manga and the anime. For example, we did that with GTO, Rave Master, Real Bout High School / Samurai Girl, as well as of course Initial D. So, we had made a proposal to the manga licensor, and the anime licensor, to get behind Initial D and really give it a big push, including merchandise. It cost quite a lot of money but we loved the series and wanted to really aim high with it. I still remember that feeling of excitement from licensing it and working on it - there was so much potential and I loved it!

I know the show was DVD exclusive but were there any plans to air it on TV? I remember asking Jason DeMarco on Twitter who recalls that it was considered for Toonami.

With that being said, do you think the dub could have been adjusted for a Y7 rating? What network did you ideally see it on if not Toonami?

STU: So, I don't know if this is actually public knowledge in the fandom, but we actually sold the TV rights. That was a big part of our plans - having TV as a center to launching Initial D as a franchise. This was way before the current era where streaming is core (Crunchy, Funimation, Netflix, Hulu, etc.) and really it was mainly Cartoon Network that aired the most anime (as you mention, Toonami was their big block at the time, although they also did Adult Swim). We had also partnered with Showtime on GTO so it wasn't only Cartoon, but they were the main one. But when we packaged Initial D, made our presentation reel and show bible, we ended up actually selling it - to MTV! That was very exciting for us, and we had big plans based on the MTV launch. Then, the bad news - MTV later decided not to air it! Not even to do a pilot at all - even though they paid us for the show. So, we couldn't get the TV rights back since they paid, and they didn't air it. So, all our plans to go for a wide audience were killed at that point. And that affected the way the dub came out - which we'll discuss more.

This isn't related to Initial D, but a Tokyopop property that DID get onto Toonami was Rave Master. I simply have to ask as a huge Ska fan, how the heck did you guys get Reel Big Fish to do an opening song for the dub?

STU: Hey, a fellow ska fan, awesome! I grew up loving ska (and mod) back in the 80's and actually saw a number of amazing bands live - Bad Manners, Untouchables, Madness, English Beat. I never got to see the Specials though since they had already broken up. Anyways, Reel Big Fish was great - and I'm trying to remember how I called them. I think I just sent them an email and asked if they wanted to do an anime theme song and they said yes! And those guys were super nice. Oh, and I wrote the song (I'm a huge music fan and for a number of years was really into making music, more as a hobby but sometimes professionally). Glad you noticed that song :-)

Who was mostly in charge of the writing direction? I noted that it felt similar to Digimon's

first couple of seasons with its approach to localization. The shortened or changed names and the American music come to mind, and having a writer from that dub here Makes it more apparent.

STU: I'm trying to remember who did the actual writing but it was so long ago. I was the main producer so I set the show bible, the look, the approach to localization etc. The shortening and changing of names was my decision - as well as using local music. Back at that time, my goal was to really get Initial D accepted by the "import scene" crowd (the auto tuning and after parts market) and move into pop culture in that direction, but of course provide this great show to anime fans too. My solution was to "localize" the dub aggressively - since my thought was most of the car fans and MTV crowd who would watch it wouldn't be familiar or comfortable with aspects of the show that I felt weren't easily accessible to non-anime fans, while at the same time providing the sub to anime fans. That means of course original writing and music for the sub version but more Westernized localization for the dub. It was a balance between keeping the original names and coming up with compromises for names I thought would be too hard to pronounce (I'm fluent in Japanese so for me the names were fine - I was just concerned about losing the MTV crowd). That's why Takumi became Tak and Itsuki became Iggy, etc. Anime wasn't such a core part of American culture at the time, and once MTV made their decision not to air it, obviously those name changes were irrelevant at that point - but it was too late since we had already done the recordings (and didn't really think to re-record it since we were still hoping MTV would air it in the future). Regarding the music, I have to be honest - I wasn't a big fan of the original Avex Eurobeat music. As I mentioned, I'm a huge music fan, and while I know that fans now really love and appreciate that music, I couldn't get into it. Most of that music was low-level Eurobeat that Avex (the Japanese music company) had licensed from Italy and other places and I didn't think Americans would go for it - and at the time electronic dance music was not popular at all in the US. I felt more urban street music (of which I was a big fan) like hip-hop, R&B, etc. would move Initial D closer to the import scene (ala Fast & Furious). Again, to compromise, the original music was included in the sub version.

Oh, one more localization aspect which I'm not sure you realized - we actually went in and redid the CGI on the cars to create our DVD covers. We received permission from Japan since the first couple of seasons were done when CGI techniques were less advanced, and my girlfriend at the time was an amazing CGI artist so I had her re-render all the cars. They're amazing - and in fact I was pretty proud when I visited Hong Kong and discovered the pirated versions of Initial D DVD's used our TOKYOPOP covers and not the original Japanese ones lol.

I know Initial D only had Mountain Vengeance as a western game, but were there ever any plans to localize the Arcade Stage games for home consoles? I know at the time of the dub a PS2 version was already released.

STU: the game wasn't actually our project - we simply supplied the style guide, logos and other key design info since we had the merch rights. Sega handled the game release - so I can't really speak to that.

Was the choice of changing the soundtrack solely for appealing to American audiences? Not many people have seen the dub so many assumed it was because of licensing, not knowing that you guys actually included the Japanese audio.

STU: oops I answered that one above already...

What was the thought process behind all the Tokyopop dub music albums?

STU: we had found a number of local LA artists (and used a network to reach out to non-LA artists too) and our goal was to provide them with some exposure to fans. We couldn't afford famous artists but we thought there were great indie artists out there we could work with (I like to do that a lot at TOKYOPOP - work with undiscovered talent), and since the music albums in Japan were such a big part of the franchise, we decided to try our version of that. Looking back, I do think it would have been interesting to have tried the Japanese albums too but since a lot of the music was actually European licenses, as you mention, the licensing aspect would have been difficult.

How did you approach the bands who wanted to do music for the dub? Like Drop Logic?

STU: we put the word out locally and had indie artists sent in their music and we filtered through to see which artists we liked. Most were licenses from indie artists who had songs we felt would fit the show, but Drop Logic came into the studio and we recorded the song from scratch. That was great fun! If there had been YouTube and other social media back then we really could have released lots of great videos and content. I wonder if we have video from those sessions somewhere - I should try to dig it up! Oh, and I did the remix of Initialize, which is a very strange remix but I'm pretty proud of it :-)

Are you surprised most of the music from the dub is on Spotify?

STU: that actually comes from TOKYOPOP's distribution so we're very happy about that!

I've collected 2nd and Extra Stage and noticed the dub did get better over time, were there plans to go beyond? Maybe do Third Stage or Fourth?

STU: we were seriously considering Third Stage but financially we couldn't handle it back then so we had to let it go. It's a shame - but I'm glad Funimation picked up the show, updated it for modern fans, and ran with it (at least for awhile). Initial D is a classic and should always be available for anime fans to discover.

Are you still proud of the dub? Were there things you would change with the knowledge you have now? Do you think you'd be more faithful with your changes or stick with your own vision?

STU: I think the dub accomplished what we were aiming for back then, but since MTV was the core driver of our Initial D plans, we ended up off the mark since it never aired. I have positive memories of everything related to Initial D even though I'm aware that some fans rejected our approach. It feels like now our dub is considered "kitsch" to a certain degree (which I suppose it is) but certainly if we were in today's market and licensing the title from the beginning we would have done a much more authentic dub, sticking to the original approach. That dub was for that particular point in pop culture time - and it will forever remain so.

Have you seen the Funimation dub? Any thoughts on it?

STU: I actually have not seen it but I assumed their approach would be much more traditional anime adaptation - sticking to the original, especially since many fans wanted that. How was it? I should go check it out :-). Did anyone do a side-by-side or scene-by-scene comparison of the two?

Initial D's final stage currently isn't dubbed. I don't even think it's licensed at all. Would you like to see this series finished, and would you like to be involved if that were the case?

STU: oh, man, don't tempt me! lol Someone should definitely do it - I wonder why Funi doesn't...

Finally, I want to say currently Initial D is a cult hit in the anime community, and is still very much relevant thanks to internet meme culture. Are there any misconceptions people may have about the Tokyopop dub that you may want to clear up?

STU: more or less what I said above - I guess the key thing for everyone to know is how deeply we dove into the world of Initial D. I lived and breathed Initial D back then. The passion and love that I had - and the creative team had - was serious. I miss the feeling Initial D gave me. Do you know that one time I drove to Mount Haruna in Gunma, Japan (which was the model for Akina), and drove down those mountain roads where the racing was? I filmed that and I think it's a bonus clip on one of the DVDs - did anyone ever discover that? I didn't have an 86 Trueno unfortunately but ah, the memories! And Dice who was my main editor at TOKYOPOP back in the day actually fixed up his own 86. We were pretty hardcore :-). So, I'm thrilled that Initial D is a cult hit - and hopefully many fans appreciate the love we put into our version back in the day - even if they don't agree with all the decisions we made. Adapting anime isn't easy but it sure is fun!!