Ninja Gaiden 4's gory combat hides a goofy center

Ninja Gaiden 4 was one of several games that Xbox showed off in its games showcase over the weekend. And during its Summer Game Fest-adjacent in-person preview event, I got the chance to play it for myself. I've never played *Ninja Gaiden* before and was skeptical that the game's generic dark aesthetic, which feels straight out of 2012, could capture my interest. But after a short hands-on demo and an interview with the game's developers, I'm less wary and powerfully intrigued.

Despite the "4" in the title, *Ninja Gaiden 4* represents a soft reset for the franchise. You play as Yakumo, a ninja of the Raven Clan, who must save Tokyo from corruption. The game feels like a hack-and-slash beat 'em up with extreme emphasis on the hacking and slashing. Yakumo uses a number of weapons and abilities at his disposal, including swords, throwing knives, and an ability that briefly transforms him into a demonic raven for an extra burst of power.

My time with the demo was short, consisting of Yakumo ninja-flipping through ruined city streets, fighting packs of cybernetic demons. In combat, you can string together attacks, producing visually impressive combos. One of the things that I most appreciated about the combat system was that it included one of my favorite moves in any action game — an air recovery ability. If you're hit into the air, you can quickly tap a button to right yourself and get back into the fight rather than get knocked away. Whoever at Team Ninja / PlatinumGames is a *Kingdom Hearts* fan, I see you.

Also, along the way, I encountered a number of Yakumo's allies (including one voiced by Brandon "Garrus Vakarian" Keener, whose voice I'd know anywhere) who introduced me to the world, giving me power-ups and combat advice.

This game is bloody, cartoonishly so. Once I've whittled down my enemies' health, I can dismember them in a number of increasingly brutal ways. It was so over the top that it veered into absurd territory, and I found myself laughing out loud in an otherwise quiet demo room. I wondered if the tension between the hardcore seriousness of Yakumo and his friends versus the goofy violence was intentional, but according to the developers, the game is working as intended.

"*Ninja Gaiden* has always been known as a very violent game, but we didn't want to just make it grotesque," says Yuji Nakao, game producer and director at PlatinumGames, speaking through a translator. "Because if we did that, you'd get tired of it."

Don't worry, you'll be able to play as Ryu Hayabusa in addition to the new protagonist, Yakumo.
Image: Team Ninja

Team Ninja partnered with PlatinumGames to develop the title, and the inclusion of the studio that made *Bayonetta* informs a bit of that tonal dissonance. *Bayonetta* is campy and fun, and I can see elements of that camp in *Ninja Gaiden 4*.

"When we were working with PlatinumGames," says Masakazu Hirayama, the producer and director at Team Ninja. "We wanted to bring their unique style approach to the action genre and inject that into the series."

Unless you count ports, remasters, or spinoffs, it's been more than 12 years since the last original title in the *Ninja Gaiden* series. In that time, a new crop of gamers, who are probably more familiar with *Bayonetta*, have come up. Meanwhile, there's still an older generation running around with memories of Ryu Hayabusa and *Ninja Gaiden Black*. The result of the partnership between PlatinumGames and Team Ninja

is a game that has elements that’ll appeal to different generations of players.

“*Ninja Gaiden* is about having a very diverse tool set that allows you to feel like that ultimate super ninja,” says Hirayama. “And I think you’ll see that the new protagonist and his new tool set opens up a lot of new possibilities.”

The new game may not seem like the most exciting of titles if you’re not a long-time fan of the series. But my skepticism of the game was slashed away in the face of an over-the-top gorefest that seems to take itself seriously but is hiding a soft, goofy center that wound up being really fun to play. *Ninja Gaiden 4* comes out on Xbox, PlayStation, and PC on October 21st.

https://www.theverge.com/games/684438/ninja-gaiden-4-hands-on-xbox-showcase-2025