

Restoration, Reflection, and Nostalgia for the New in Yakuza Kiwami and Final Fantasy VII Remake

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ABSTRACT:

This study applies concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia to 'remake' titles for eighth-generation consoles (here, PlayStation and PlayStation 2 titles remade for the PlayStation 4). Retro-game scholarship has considered 8 and 16-bit titles and fan practices through the concept of nostalgia since the mid-2000s. However, increasingly AAA game publishers have begun to remake and remaster more recent games. Given the potential for nostalgia to be either an oppressive or resistive set of interactions between object-game and subject-player, this paper analyses how restorative and reflective nostalgia is manifested throughout the narrative and gameplay mechanics of *Yakuza Kiwami* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, alongside players' and digital game journalists reactions to the titles. This study utilizes a qualitative analysis of the remade titles, user comments from the E3 trailers posted to YouTube for each game, and digital game popular press articles to approach nostalgic reactions. Ultimately, the potential for both modes of nostalgia coexist as each of these titles are consumed and exist alongside other consumer goods.

KEY WORDS:

digital games, *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, nostalgia, remade games, remastered games, retro games, *Yakuza Kiwami*.

Retro and Remade Possibilities

Nostalgia is an often-cited concept through which digital game scholars explicate retro-games,¹ 'neo'-retro game development,² and retrogamers' community of practice.³ Much of retro-gaming nostalgia literature builds upon the work of F. Jameson, in that reconstructions of the past are oriented towards understanding the present and are consistently linked to commodification.⁴ Similarly, S. Boym describes nostalgia as "lateral.

1 Remark by the author: Preservation activities revolving around older games, typically from the 1970s and 1980s, sometimes in their original format and sometimes in a lightly "restored" format that makes them playable on modern computers and consoles. For more information, see: PAYNE, M. T.: *Playing the Deja-new: "Plug in and Play TV Games" and the Cultural Politics of Classic Gaming*. In WHALEN, Z., TAYLOR, L. (eds.): *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*. Nashville : Vanderbilt University Press, 2008, p. 51-68.; SUOMINEN, J.: *The Past as the Future? Nostalgia and Retrogaming in Digital Culture*. In *The Fibreculture Journal*, 2008, Vol. 6, No. 11. [online]. [2021-10-15]. Available at: <<https://eleven.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-075-the-past-as-the-future-nostalgia-and-retrogaming-in-digital-culture/>>.

2 Remark by the author: Games that deliberately incorporate the aesthetic and/or mechanic conventions of the retro-games mentioned above into newly produced games. See also: GARDA, M. B.: *Nostalgia in Retro Game Design*. In PEARCE, C., KENNEDY, H., SHARP, J. (eds.): *DiGRA '13 – Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*. Atlanta : DiGRA, 2013, p. 1-13. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/nostalgia-in-retro-game-design/>>; SLOAN, R.: *Nostalgia Videogames as Playable Game Criticism*. In *G|A|M|E Games as Art, Media, Entertainment*, 2016, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 35-45.

3 For more information, see: HEINEMAN, D. S.: *Public Memory and Gamer Identity: Retrogaming as Nostalgia*. In *Journal of Games Criticism*, 2014, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1-24.; SWALWELL, M.: *The Remembering and the Forgetting of Early Digital Games: From Novelty to Detritus and Back Again*. In *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2007, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 255-273.

4 See: JAMESON, F.: *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham : Duke University Press, 1991.

It looks sideways”.⁵ While for S. Boym nostalgia and consumerism can overlap, there are also potential ethical implications for collective and individual memory, depending on the contours nostalgia takes. Understanding games and gamer reactions seeped in nostalgia serves to help us better understand the present moment, rather than offering insight into the past. Considering that the origin of digital gaming is traditionally placed in the 1970s, we now share almost fifty years of digital games as part of our digitally mediated lives. While ‘retro-gaming’ as a nomenclature still invokes the foundational years of arcade cabinets and the earliest consumer electronics iterations, it increasingly also includes hardware and software from the 8- and 16-bit eras.⁶ Academic scholarship has attended to the linkages between ‘old’ digital games and nostalgia since the mid-2000s. It follows, then, that fifteen additional years of games should now be included in what is considered ‘old’, and if not ‘retro’.

The fifth-generation 32- and 64-bit consoles (Sony PlayStation and Nintendo 64, among others) came to market starting in 1993 and most scholarship on gaming and nostalgia has not yet attended to fifth-generation and later titles in a substantial way. Though, there has been work on how contemporary games invoke nostalgia for the historical and aesthetic past in a manner deeply influenced by the ‘authenticity’ of film depictions corresponding genres.⁷ Yet, AAA game publishers have begun to mine the fifth, sixth, and now even seventh generations for titles and profit. In this paper we consider *Yakuza Kiwami*⁸ (YK; Y1 for the 2005 PlayStation 2 title and Yakuza for the series) and *Final Fantasy VII Remake*⁹ (FFVII-R; FFVII for the 1997 PlayStation title) as objects of nostalgia within the context of fifth- and sixth-generation digital game ‘remakes’. While a remastered game may include updated graphics and performance adjustments, but largely retains the underlying engine and mechanics of the original game (F. Mäyrä’s *core*¹⁰). Remakes may retain the bulk of the narrative content and characters design of the original game (F. Mäyrä’s *shell*¹¹) but fully replace the core with a new engine.

In 2017 developer Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio (“Like a Dragon” in Japan) released *Yakuza Kiwami* worldwide, a remake of their 2005 title *Yakuza*¹². Rather than remaster the game, which was later done for their PS3 titles *Yakuza 3*, *4* and *5*¹³ (Y3, etc.), the studio instead opted to remake *Yakuza* in the engine used for *Yakuza 0*¹⁴ and *Yakuza 6*¹⁵. Rather than preserve the original game engine and mechanics, the decision was made to modernize both. While the in-game world maintained its mid 2000s cultural references, social expectations, and fashions, the game itself was firmly brought into the late 2010s. Perhaps the most anticipated of these remade titles, FFVII-R from Square Enix was released in April 2020. FFVII-R, however, does not remake the entire plot of the original game, but only the early-game sequences set in the city of Midgar. Future games will continue the plot and

5 BOYM, S.: *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York : Basic Books, 2003, p. 454.

6 For more information, see: WULF, T. et al.: Video Games as Time Machines: Video Game Nostalgia and the Success of Retro Gaming. In *Media and Communication*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 60-68.

7 See also: CRUZ, T.: It’s Almost too Intense: Nostalgia and Authenticity in Call of Duty 2. In *Loading: The Journal of Canadian Game Studies*, 2007, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1-8. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/7/13>; HODSON, J.: When I’m Sixty-Four: Beatles Rock Band and the Commodification of Nostalgia. In *Loading: The Journal of Canadian Game Studies*, 2012, Vol. 6, No. 10, p. 71-90. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/110/130>; SLOAN, R.: Videogames as Remediated Memories: Commodified Nostalgia and Hyperreality in Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon and Gone Home. In *Games and Culture*, 2015, Vol. 10, No. 6, p. 525-550.

8 RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIO: *Yakuza Kiwami*. [digital game]. Tokyo, Höfen : Sega, Deep Silver, 2016.

9 SQUARE ENIX BUSINESS DIVISION 1: *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Square Enix, 2020.

10 MÄYRÄ, F.: *An Introduction to Game Studies*. London : Sage, 2008, p. 17.

11 Ibidem.

12 SEGA NE R&D: *Yakuza*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2005.

13 SEGA CS1 R&D: *Yakuza 3*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2009.; SEGA CS1 R&D: *Yakuza 4*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2010.; RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIO: *Yakuza 5*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2012.

14 RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIO: *Yakuza 0*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2015.

15 RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIO: *Yakuza 6: The Song of Life*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2016.

Square Enix has yet to confirm how many games players will need to purchase in order to complete FFVII-R which will continue to be released episodically. Players will need to purchase multiple FFVII-R titles in order to complete the series.

Unlike *FFVII*,¹⁶ *Yakuza* titles did not experience wide success outside of Japan upon their initial launch in 2005. The first game's North American release was marred by a trailer with poor quality voice acting that resulted in future titles in the series only being released with subtitles overseas.¹⁷ The differences in reception of the original games make for a compelling comparison as they follow different trajectories in terms of fan engagement. Furthermore, the remakes were both initially released as PlayStation 4 exclusive titles and were developed in Japan with the intention of distribution to global audiences. Finally, each of the games' narratives are set in a single urban environment; YK in the fictional district of Kamurocho, in an otherwise realistic Tokyo and FFVII-R in the industrial science-fiction city of Midgar.

Utilizing qualitative analysis of each game's shell and core content, user comments posted on the official pre-release trailers of both games from the verified PlayStation YouTube channel, and digital game popular press articles, we address each game in light of M. B. Garda's nostalgia continuum for retro and neo-retro games¹⁸ based on S. Boym's discussion of restorative and reflective nostalgia¹⁹ as a way of testing the possibilities and limitations of 'nostalgia' as a framework for understanding interactions between games, gamers, and consumerism in AAA remakes.

Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia

S. Boym differentiates between restorative and reflective nostalgia, drawing examples particularly from urban landscapes and literature with roots in regions previously under Soviet administration. She explains that restorative nostalgia "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home", while reflective nostalgia "thrives in [...] the longing itself, and delays the homecoming".²⁰ More importantly, restorative nostalgia in fact does not admit to being nostalgia at all, but rather a preservation of truth and tradition, while reflective nostalgia is much more ambivalent regarding the nature of truth itself. Ultimately S. Boym draws an ethical distinction between the two, writing that reflective nostalgia "resists both the total reconstruction of the local culture and the triumphant indifference of technocratic globalism".²¹ While it is important to remember that as commercial, global products, both YK and FVII-R should be treated with care when it comes to discussing any potentially resistive properties, it is also unfair to also attribute the creative effort of the human beings who worked on the games' development to solely profit seeking motives. And equally it is a disservice to suggest that a consumer-fan's enjoyment of these games should be dismissed as only naïve consumerism.

16 SQUARE: *Final Fantasy VII*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Squaresoft, 1997.

17 CONSTANTINE, J.: *Tokyo Beat Down: The Story of Yakuza*. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160525140414/http://www.lup.com/features/story-yakuza-franchise/>>.

18 For more information, see: GARDA, M. B.: Nostalgia in Retro Game Design. In PEARCE, C., KENNEDY, H., SHARP, J. (eds.): *DiGRA '13 – Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*. Atlanta : DiGRA, 2013, p. 1-13. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/nostalgia-in-retro-game-design/>>.

19 See: BOYM, S.: *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York : Basic Books, 2003.

20 Ibidem, p. 18.

21 Ibidem, p. 342.

Working from S. Boym, M. B. Garda constructs a nostalgia continuum for retro games ranging from restorative 'classic' practices which seek to preserve 'original' hardware and software, to reflective 'neo' games that look back upon "1980's-ness, 8-bitness and 16-bitness".²² Neo-games or as R. Sloan names them, "playable game criticism", are a pastiche of an era, rather than an attempt at reproduction.²³ The neo-game designer's nostalgia is one that fosters "creativity and artistic erudition".²⁴ But the remade game does not necessarily fit neatly into this nostalgia continuum. Nor should it, as M. B. Garda intended for its use in understanding practices focusing on very early gaming history, rather than the 32- and 64-bit eras. However, beginning from M. B. Garda's premise, and S. Boym's broader analysis, productive avenues for understanding how nostalgia develops between and interacts with games and players in a media landscape that increasingly includes remade titles open up.

Nostalgic Potentials and Perspectives

In addition to qualitative analysis of the games themselves, we draw from two additional bodies of commentary: YouTube comments and articles from digital game popular press outlets. User comments from the official E3 trailers for each game (YK in 2017, FFVII-R in 2019) posted to the official PlayStation YouTube channel were collected and analyzed qualitatively. Both games launched exclusively for the PS4 initially, though YK has since been released for additional platforms and exclusivity for FFVII-R is eventually expected to end. In total, the Yakuza Kiwami trailer had amassed 238 comments by June 2, 2021, the vast majority of which were posted within the first few weeks of the trailer's release on YouTube. The complete population of comments were collected and assessed for this study. The FFVII-R trailer received over 9,000 comments by the same date. Given the large number of comments, top level comments plus the first 10 replies were collected and assessed until the entire sample reached 250 comments.

A total of twelve digital game popular press articles from five outlets were assessed to provide additional context regarding how the games were discussed online. Six articles for each game were collected for use in analysis. Two articles, a game review, and an additional commentary article, were drawn from each IGN, Kotaku, and Polygon. No author repeated across articles, and the YK review from Kotaku is the work of two authors writing in dialogue. S. Boym importantly explains that nostalgia is not something inherent in an object. While popular culture objects may wish to invoke a particular romantic connection to the past, nostalgia itself is "an interaction between subjects and objects".²⁵ Nostalgia can be either/both collective and/or individual, and when considering the ethical possibilities of reflective nostalgia in particular, nostalgia plays an important role in mediating between official national-level memory and collective memory that play upon individual memory.²⁶

22 For more information, see: GARDA, M. B.: Nostalgia in Retro Game Design. In PEARCE, C., KENNEDY, H., SHARP, J. (eds.): *DiGRA '13 – Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*. Atlanta : DiGRA, 2013, p. 1-13. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/nostalgia-in-retro-game-design/>>.

23 SLOAN, R.: Nostalgia Videogames as Playable Game Criticism. In *G|A|M|E Games as Art, Media, Entertainment*, 2016, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 36.

24 See also: GARDA, M. B.: Nostalgia in Retro Game Design. In PEARCE, C., KENNEDY, H., SHARP, J. (eds.): *DiGRA '13 – Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*. Atlanta : DiGRA, 2013, p. 1-13. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/nostalgia-in-retro-game-design/>>.

25 BOYM, S.: *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York : Basic Books, 2003, p. 354.

26 Ibidem, p. 18.

By setting the reactions of consumer-fans, digital game journalists, and analysis of the games by the researcher against one another, we hope to draw from both collective and individual memory of the games under consideration. Furthermore, it means the only interaction between object-game and subject-player represented here is not our own.

Yakuza Kiwami: Rapid Releases and the Ruin of Restoration

Yakuza Kiwami's narrative follows protagonist Kiryu Kazama after his release from a prison term beginning in 1995 and ending in 2005. Both the Kotaku and Polygon reviews²⁷ highlight the fact that YK, by virtue of being released more than ten years after the original game on which it is based, creates feelings of nostalgia not necessarily for the game itself, but for 2005 Tokyo, and by extension Japanese popular culture of the time. While Cooper-Chen in her interviews with Japanese artists and media professionals found that their intentions towards their works were largely, if not exclusively, aimed towards the domestic audience, nonetheless exports of Japanese pop-culture products tripled between 1993 and 2003.²⁸ Mainline Yakuza titles (with the exception of YO, a prequel) are generally temporally set roughly within the year of their original release. Hawkins, reviewing the game for Polygon writes that Kiryu is released from prison and into a world that is fundamentally changed, and confronting that change serves as the player's (re)introduction to the character and the setting he will navigate. "[H]e has to figure out how to use a cellphone, and all the schoolgirls are wearing those huge baggy socks that they have to glue on because it's 2005".²⁹

The player thus can potentially experience nostalgia for a particular place and time, regardless of any connections to digital game-specific nostalgia found in typical retro-gaming practice. The memories invoked by Kiryu's aforementioned phone, a small flip model, are much more temporally than spatially situated. Many people, all over the world, may have owned a similar phone in 2005. Aspects of place-based nostalgia can be culturally and spatially specific to Tokyo, but not necessarily limited to locals. Oh, writing for Polygon, and focusing on how YK changed her expectations for remasters, vividly invokes the nightlife scene of the game writing, "I left the arcade and ran past izakayas and ramen shops boasting bowls of colorful plastic in the windows. I started remembering my own experience with Japan, and I kept running".³⁰

27 PLUNKETT, L., ALEXANDRA, H.: *Yakuza Kiwami: The Kotaku Review*. Released on 19th February 2019. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/yakuza-kiwami-the-kotaku-review-1798372092>>; HAWKINS, J.: *Yakuza Kiwami Review*. Released on 21st August 2017. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/2017/8/21/16177600/yakuza-kiwami-ps4-playstation-4-remake-review>>.

28 COOPER-CHEN, A.: *Cartoon Cultures: The Globalization of Japanese Popular Media*. New York : Peter Lang, 2010, p. 20.; For how initially Japan sought to use media as a soft power mechanism across Asia, see also: IWABUCHI, K.: Marketing 'Japan': Japanese Cultural Presence Under a Global Gaze. In *Japanese Studies*, 1998, Vol. 18, No. 20, p. 165-180.; For expansion of this soft power approach to the rest of the world, particularly after 2005, see also: VALASKIVI, K.: A Brand New Future? Cool Japan and the Social Imaginary of the Branded Nation. In *Japan Forum*, 2013, Vol. 25, No. 4, p. 485-504.; 2009 for the beginnings of a shift in the gaming industry towards overseas markets, as Square Enix in particular began to see international consumers replacing domestic sales as Japan's population continued to age, see: CONSALVO, M.: Convergence and Globalization in the Japanese Videogame Industry. In *Cinema Journal*, 2009, Vol. 48, No. 3, p. 135-141.

29 HAWKINS, J.: *Yakuza Kiwami Review*. Released on 21st August 2017. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/2017/8/21/16177600/yakuza-kiwami-ps4-playstation-4-remake-review>>.

30 OH, A.: *The Yakuza Series Changed the Way I Look at Remastered Games*. Released on 2nd August 2018. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/2018/8/2/17630668/yakuza-0-kiwami-remaster-backlog-week>>.

Indeed, much of S. Boym's original analysis of nostalgia focuses on urban settings, how cities and the people that inhabit them, particularly those formerly under Soviet administration, grapple with nostalgia through architecture, public works projects, memorials, and history. Similarly, L. Plunkett at Kotaku identifies the district of Kamurocho as "maybe the real star of the [Yakuza] series".³¹ Both Plunkett and Alexandra, who complete their review as a dialogue, comment upon the fact that the series moves the player through the development of Tokyo over some 30 years as they progress from game to game. Kemps at IGN also notes that the true-to-lifeness of the setting is key to the Yakuza series; Kamurocho is filled with real-life Japanese brands and stores.³² And the improved remake graphics only makes the details of these products and packaging more legible. This focus on the realness of Kamurocho, which despite being fictional as a district takes place in a Tokyo that is otherwise near-reality, suggests a nostalgia that is more restorative than reflective. YK depicts a more vibrant, lively, detailed setting, with more subtle facial animations and a handful of largely well-regarded scenes that flesh out the antagonist's evolution from Kiryu's best friend to rival, but the game in isolation presents a restoration of the setting and characters, improving upon their aesthetic qualities and smoothing out how the player controls Kiryu, rather than a transforming the game in a way that compels one to question their memory of the original.

And, perhaps, for a game where the Western audience was originally quite small, where for many audiences outside of Japan there was no memory of the original, generating nostalgia of a more reflective type in fans would be unlikely through a single game. But as becomes apparent from YouTube comments and the game's discussion in the digital game press, playing YK is rarely about a single game. Among YouTube commenters, expressions of excitement for YK were frequent, with many comments simply containing enthusiastic exclamations with little additional content. Other Yakuza titles were discussed with regularity among the comments. Twenty-six comments, or nearly 11% of the total population, referenced other Yakuza titles. Y0 was the most frequently mentioned game. Y0 was released less than six months before the YK trailer, and arguably the game that actually introduced the Yakuza series to western audiences in a meaningful way. Several commenters cited the incredibly recent experience of playing Y0 as their motivation for interest in YK. One commenter writes that they "[n]ever heard of the series until Yakuza 0. Goddamn, I mean that game was amazing".³³ While another explained "Yakuza 0 was my favorite game of 2017, I know this'll top it". There were those who also expressed that the impending remaking/remastering of all the Yakuza games for the PS4 would motivate them to play the entire series. "as someone who joined on Yakuza 0. i wanna wait till they are all released, get em all at once".

When commenters did reflect on their experiences of the original PlayStation 2 Y1 title, their remarks tended to either focus on the niche nature of the game or the serendipity of having purchased the title at all. Combining both these threads, one commenter shared "i need to pre order this, i was lucky to get the last yz one in the 'Game' shop in the uk, haven't seen one since". This comment in particular captures the memory of browsing the shelves in a brick-and-mortar game store in order to actually locate the title. Equally

31 PLUNKETT, L., ALEXANDRA, H.: *Yakuza Kiyami: The Kotaku Review*. Released on 19th February 2019. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/yakuza-kiyami-the-kotaku-review-1798372092>>.

32 KEMPS, H.: *Yakuza Kiyami Review*. Released on 21st August 2017. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.ign.com/articles/2017/08/21/yakuza-kiyami-review>>.

33 Remark by the author: All directly quoted YouTube users' comments concerning Yakuza Kiyami (here and further) have been left unedited, i.e. cited with original grammatical and spelling errors. Square brackets with ellipses indicate the intentional reduction of comments in length from the original, maintaining the meaning value. Source of comments: *Yakuza Kiyami – PS4 Trailer | E3 2017*. Released on 13th June 2017. [online]. [2021-06-02]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8mrKxZRDCQ>>.

descriptive of the actual discovery of the physical disk, another commenter explains “[...] I discovered this on the PS2. Found it in a bargain bin. Played all the games that followed since [...]”. Notable in both these comments is at least some of the nostalgic impulse is explicitly tied to the act of purchasing the game disk, rather than playing it. While the second commenter does go on to say that they played the games, the first does actually not mention the experience of playing Y1 at all, only purchasing it, and anticipating purchasing YK.

S. Boym considers the merchandising of nostalgia as being a particularly American phenomenon, owing at least in part to its domination in the global media landscape. The easy availability of souvenirs results in a place where “the past eagerly cohabits with the present [...] a marketing strategy that tricks consumers into missing what they haven’t lost”.³⁴ While YK is a Japanese title, the comments on the PlayStation channel’s trailer are overwhelmingly in English and take place within a global media setting. Furthermore, the increased globalization of Japanese media through the 1990s and 2000s has been discussed above. The experiences described by commenters, while not exclusively American, are set against a backdrop of American media practice, and are tied to games localized and released for English-speaking consumers.

The past and present being always mutually available through consumer goods is vividly realized in Yakuza’s remake/remaster distribution schedule. Seven mainline Yakuza titles would be released for the PlayStation 4 in English (and additional Western languages) within three years (2017-2020). Spanning 1988 to 2020 in diegetic years, and 2005 to 2020 in initial release years, these seven titles collapse the timeline of Kamurocho and by extension, near-reality Tokyo. Cellphone technology, building developments, and social realities become a kaleidoscope of overlapping visual and aural experience. Plunkett jokes that YK may be the only game of the series where Kiryu dresses in a way that is fashionable, as he retains the same suit through the rest of the games that follow.³⁵ He, like the player, remain out of time as they race through thirty years of settings, shifting social expectations, and narratives. The streets stay the same, but the shops and fashions (of everyone but Kiryu) change. Even as Kiryu, the player, and the half a dozen or so additional playable protagonists who come and go throughout the series move through other urban settings scattered across Japan, they always begin and end in Kamurocho.

While Kiryu is always roughly the man of 2005 (excepting Y0), the player, if indulging in the games in quick succession, is always really situated in the late 2010s. Perhaps then it is most fitting that Kiryu finally changes his suit in 2020’s *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*³⁶, when he is replaced by a new protagonist and the player no longer experiences the world through him. This collapsing of time is so accelerated, so obvious, that it undoes much of the initially restorative potential of YK. While early in the string of *Yakuza* releases that would follow, the quick succession of titles allows for immediate, and sometimes less than flattering comparisons between titles. A commenter on YouTube writes “I frankly don’t see why I should buy this with 0 still providing me with tons of content and the vastly superior Yakuza 6 being right around the corner”. While multiple users reply to disagree with them, insisting that they should still play YK for the story and the relatively inexpensive price tag, digital game press reviewers did ultimately find YK to be less satisfying than Y0. Hawkins begins her review by stating that while YK was undoubtedly improved by development of other *Yakuza* titles, “that doesn’t mean it surpasses them”.³⁷

34 BOYM, S.: *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York : Basic Books, 2003, p. 38.

35 PLUNKETT, L., ALEXANDRA, H.: *Yakuza Kiwami: The Kotaku Review*. Released on 19th February 2019. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/yakuza-kiwami-the-kotaku-review-1798372092>>.

36 RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIO: *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2020.

37 HAWKINS, J.: *Yakuza Kiwami Review*. Released on 21st August 2017. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/2017/8/21/16177600/yakuza-kiwami-ps4-playstation-4-remake-review>>.

In an example cited by multiple reviewers, the *Majima Everywhere* system added to YK made the experience of the game disjointed and the merging of old and new content obvious. Majima, a playable protagonist in YO, but otherwise a sometimes-friend-sometimes-rival in other Yakuza titles, finds his role in YK expanded compared to the original Y1 through the Majima Everywhere mechanic. At any given moment, Kiryu and by extension, the player, might be thrust into an impromptu boss battle against Majima, disconnected from the game's plot but required to advance one of Kiryu's skill trees. Reviewers noted that such interruptions frequently took away from the experience of playing the game. Plunkett and Alexandra disagreed on the system, while Alexandra enjoyed additional interactions with Majima, Plunkett felt that it distracted too much from the story.³⁸ Both agreed that Majima's characterization was jarring in the light of YO and later games, where the character was portrayed as far more nuanced. Hawkins at Polygon also highlighted the interruption Majima posed, as "core-plot Majima and street-stalking Majima are two different characters doing completely different things at different times".³⁹ Such interruptions arrest the restorative potential of the game, highlighting how the Majima of YK is not the Majima of YO or titles set narratively later in time. Majima within YK is not even always the same Majima. Sometimes he is the character from the original game in 2005, and sometimes he is the character of 2017, newly inserted into the game where he otherwise would not belong.

Comparison between the Yakuza PS4 remakes, remasters, and new games breaks the potential of restorative nostalgia, the idea of returning the game to its original, or better than original form in any sort of faithful way. The seams of the game become visible in a way they would not otherwise be. The ready availability of past and present, instead of facilitating restorative nostalgia, may actually serve to break it. It matters little that players may have not experienced the original game (for S. Boym, American nostalgia is best summarized by a fascination with literal dinosaurs), and Yakuza Kiwami's reviews in the digital game press readily describe how the restoration is far from seamless. In presenting the Yakuza series to potentially old fans, but perhaps more often newly developed fans of the series, with rapid back-to-back releases, the potential of constructing a cohesive, restorative experience proves impossible to achieve. Back-and-forth comparisons are easy for fans and reviewers too make, there exist within the characterizations and narratives too many obvious inconsistencies, and too few opportunities to forget the unnatural flow of time.

Final Fantasy VII Remake: Reflective Excess and Reinstating Restoration

FFVII-R had been long-anticipated by fans of the original role-playing game, and numerous fans created after-the-fact. Seemingly every time a new "Compilation of FFVII" (the designation given to various media products set in the FFVII world, including spin-off games and movies) property was teased, fans hoped that it would be the long-awaited

38 PLUNKETT, L., ALEXANDRA, H.: *Yakuza Kiwami: The Kotaku Review*. Released on 19th February 2019. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/yakuza-kiwami-the-kotaku-review-1798372092>>.

39 HAWKINS, J.: *Yakuza Kiwami Review*. Released on 21st August 2017. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/2017/8/21/16177600/yakuza-kiwami-ps4-playstation-4-remake-review>>.

remake or remaster of FFVII. What exactly that title would look and play like was contentious, with some fans advocating for a faithful, restorative remake that would enhance the game's graphics while leaving the plot and mechanics wholly intact, while others conceded that there was perhaps more updating and refinements that could be afforded to the game's ludic core, plus the opportunity for expanded side quests to contribute to additional world building.⁴⁰

Writing in 2021, it is impossible to accurately identify what exactly FFVII-R will be in the end. Releasing episodically, it is unclear how much of FFVII-R's plot, in its completed form, will deviate from the original game. Set industrial fantasy world where massive power reactors, sucking up lifeforce from the planet, co-exist alongside magic and fantastic creatures, FFVII-R expands the first six to seven hours of the 1997 title into a standalone 30+ hour game. FFVII-R, excluding a handful of flashbacks, takes place entirely within the two-tiered city of Midgar, and does not explore the world beyond its walls. The graphics have been brought up to 2020's standards. Additional side quests have been added, though many reviewers find that they drag down the plot of the game, and too frequently resemble tedious fetch quests or focus on tangential characters.⁴¹ The battle mechanics have been completely redesigned, in what might be the most contentious change to the game among fans.⁴² And none of this touches the potential deviations from the original plot that have been suggested throughout the first episode. These transformative alterations suggest that FFVII-R participates more fully in notions of reflective nostalgia than restorative. It creates a game that follows the narrative highlights of the original, sometimes recreating original scenes nearly frame-for-frame, while also introducing new elements, characters, and potentialities as the familiar characters traverse a Midgar that manages to be both familiar and strange to those who played (and did not play, as we will see) the original.

The top comment on the YouTube trailer invokes a temporal and affective connection between 1997 and 2020, reading "I skipped school on launch day in 1997. I'm skipping work on launch day in 2020".⁴³ This comment generated predominantly positive responses, with several users commenting that they did, and plan on doing, the same. This initial comment succinctly connects the memory of a moment in time back to the present day, and the desire to replicate a particular feeling that is invoked on launch day. Another comment pointing towards this temporal collapse and the associated memories reads "Me in 1997 wow these graphics are amazing 🤩 Me in 2019 wow these graphics are amazing 🤩". These user comments, made prior to the launch of the game, invoke a desire to remember and recreate the same feelings that they recall having as children.

Another comment is suggestive of fans casting a nostalgic lens over the game, in a way that actually brings the remake closer to the game of memory. "Pretty sure this is how everyone imagined it looking on the original Playstation". Replies to this comment

40 Remark by the author: None of these, ultimately, describes what Square Enix released in 2020.

41 MARKS, T.: *Final Fantasy 7 Remake Review*. Released on 6th April 2020. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.ign.com/articles/final-fantasy-7-remake-review>>; PETIT, C.: *Final Fantasy 7 Remake Is a Flawed, but Fascinating Reimagining of a Classic*. Released on 6th April 2020. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2020/4/6/21208806/final-fantasy-7-remake-review-playstation-4>>; SCHREIER, J.: *Final Fantasy VII Remake: The Kotaku Review*. Released on 6th April 2020. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/final-fantasy-vii-remake-the-kotaku-review-1842697312>>.

42 For more information, see: NEILL HOCH, I.: "Action Combat Trash:" Final Fantasy VII Remake, Control, and Combat Nostalgia. In CASH, J., OLSEN, C. (eds.): *Final Fantasy VII at 25*. Jefferson, NC : McFarland & Company, 2022. (In press).

43 Remark by the author: All directly quoted YouTube users' comments concerning Final Fantasy VII Remake (here and further) have been left unedited, i.e. cited with original grammatical and spelling errors. Square brackets with ellipses indicate the intentional reduction of comments in length from the original, maintaining the meaning value. Source of comments: *Final Fantasy VII Remake – E3 2019 Trailer | PS4*. Released on 11th June 2019. [online]. [2021-06-02]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3xSGv3Hfio&t=91s>>.

largely concur that this is the game they imagined in their childhood while playing with boxy polygons. “Wait, you’re telling me this isn’t what I played in 97?!? LIES!!!” and “People are complaining about this yet this is how i imagined them when i played the game”. Both of these reactions are emblematic of this style of comment, expressing the excitement that they felt as their imaginary Midgar was brought to life in the FFVII-R trailer. In a separate top-level comment, another user writes “It’s looking exactly like how I imagined it in my 9 year old brain”.

J. Schreier, reviewing the game for Kotaku goes so far as to write: “Sometimes, abstraction is better than reality. It’s always tough for a game developer to surpass what’s been locked into a player’s brain after years of imagination. But Final Fantasy VII Remake’s Midgar is truly something to behold – a spectacle at which I could spend many hours marveling”.⁴⁴ The realized Midgar is here touted as better than imagination, better than any possible memory. The game seemed almost a challenge to review, with Petit at Polygon conceding that one’s understanding and appraisal of the remake cannot be separated from how one understands the original game.⁴⁵ Even if one had not played the original game, it is difficult to approach FFVII-R without preconceptions, given the influence the original 1997 game had on the role-playing game genre. Memory itself is not a singular encoding of an event, but rather is a composite of information stored during the original event, emotional states both at the time of the event and the time of memory recall, and relevant information stored both prior to the original experience and occurring after the experience but prior to recall.⁴⁶ Comments left by users prove how influential this composite really is when ‘remembering’ FFVII.

In a particularly vivid comment that succinctly categorizes the collapsing of time, place, and memory, a user writes, “This remake is so well done that those scenes gave me *deja vu*, even though I had never actually seen them before”. However, it is not as if these imagined scenes and characters are untouched by the 20+ years between games. FFVII’s characters have been recreated in an endless array of products. A commenter points out “Actually, my imagination came after watched FF 7: Advent Children Complete and FF 7: Crisis Core”. These later Compilation of FFVII titles, one a CGI movie and the other a game for the PlayStation Portable, featured more detailed, higher resolution graphics than the original game and included many of the original characters. These encounters, spread out over up to 23 years, collapse when encountering the remade game. This points towards Boym’s cohabitation of past and present typical of mass media. Time collapses in FFVII-R, but in a different fashion than in the Yakuza series. There is little comparison in the YouTube comments between FFVII-R and other numbered Final Fantasy titles which, while sharing some thematic elements, exist independently of each other. However, Compilation of FFVII properties is discussed in a manner that makes obvious the number of contributing factors that have collected and transformed in players’ memories.

L. J. Lohrenz, writing for IGN before FFVII-R’s release, compares the character models from the original games to the models from available pre-release promotional materials. She notes of the game’s protagonist, “it was probably really hard to mess with this design since we’ve seen Cloud rendered in high-def so very often that every element has become iconic”.⁴⁷ Beyond the official depictions of the characters, L. J. Lohrenz acknowledges

44 SCHREIER, J.: *Final Fantasy VII Remake: The Kotaku Review*. Released on 6th April 2020. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/final-fantasy-vii-remake-the-kotaku-review-1842697312>>.

45 PETIT, C.: *Final Fantasy 7 Remake Is a Flawed, but Fascinating Reimagining of a Classic*. Released on 6th April 2020. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2020/4/6/21208806/final-fantasy-7-remake-review-playstation-4>>.

46 MOSKOWITZ, G.: *Social Cognition: Understanding Self and Others*. New York: Gilford Press, 2005, p. 22.

47 LOHRENZ, L. J.: *Comparing the FF7 Remake Character Designs vs the Original Final Fantasy VII*. Released on 31st January 2020. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/06/04/ff7-remake-vs-original-final-fantasy-vii-character-designs>>.

the contributions of cosplayers, who have over the years constructed costumes and especially wigs based on the original designs that look much more realistic, writing “thousands of cosplayers have done the work of translating the original geometric yellows [of Cloud’s hair] into feasible wigs. All the design team had to do was model it”.⁴⁸ These observations demonstrate how composite the memory of FFVII actually is, a combination of the original game, Compilation titles, imagination, and fan works.

A small number of YouTube commenters explicitly noted that they had never played the original game, yet were excited for FFVII-R. In most cases, they did express a familiarity with the world and characters built through the prevalence of Compilation content. A top-level comment reads, “Never played Final Fantasy and I’m incredibly hype. I couldn’t imagine how hype diehard fans must be”. Additional commenters follow up by replying, “Same here, never played the original, but I do love the characters when they’ve appeared in other works & I’m really looking forward to this game” and “I too didn’t play the original game but already know the characters in it [...]”. The latter commenter goes on to explain that they just bought the original (remastered version, presumably) on Steam because of the announcement.

FFVII-R’s reflective orientation permeates the game, beginning from the original iconography of the games, while suggesting there are larger, more radical departures to come. However, it is also possible that in departing from the original in such a vivid fashion, even if these departures are only occasional in the first episode, there is a restorative impulse buried in FFVII-R. It is impossible to go back to the original FFVII of 1997. It is, of course, possible to find a working PlayStation and disk in playable condition. Square Enix has also released ports of the original game, in a remastered format for mobile devices, PC, and consoles. It is thus entirely possible to play something akin to the original software. But the experience of 1997, of course, is long gone. Either someone playing the 1997 title for the first time in 2019, ‘in honour’ of the announcement of the remake, or returning to the game and trying to recapture the feeling of their youth, are not actually transported back into a time when we did not know what Cloud, Tifa, and Aerith looked like in higher resolution graphics. Indeed, even as Lohrenz tries to compare the original designs to their remake counterparts, the blocky polygons in the 1997 game would have never been the picture in many gamers’ heads, imagination notwithstanding. Even before *Advent Children* was first released in 2005, T. Nomura’s character artwork provided images of the main and supporting cast that included details in their designs and costumes difficult to render in 1997’s technology.

In making its reflective tendencies obvious, FFVII-R allows the nostalgia attached to the original 1997 game to remain intact. There is no mistaking one for the other. And indeed, this is one of the principles of reflective nostalgia emphasized by S. Boym, and what makes reflective nostalgia a potentially ethical practice. Writing of nostalgia and its connections “to be at home,” S. Boym writes that: “Restorative nostalgics don’t acknowledge the uncanny and terrifying aspects of what was once homey. Reflective nostalgics see everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home, and try to cohabit with doubles and ghosts”.⁴⁹ FFVII-R’s narrative is quite literally haunted by the ‘whispers,’ semi-corporeal spectres that visibly intercede whenever an action taken by the characters seems to deviate from the original plot of the game (a character shot through the chest and dying too early; someone living through a city infrastructure collapse they should not have; the wrong group of characters attempting to complete a mission). Aside from this literalization

48 LOHRENZ, L. J.: *Comparing the FF7 Remake Character Designs vs the Original Final Fantasy VII*. Released on 31st January 2020. [online]. [2021-06-28]. Available at: <<https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/06/04/ff7-remake-vs-original-final-fantasy-vii-character-designs>>.

49 BOYM, S.: *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York : Basic Books, 2003, p. 251.

of ghosts attempting to 'correct' the characters' actions, FFVII-R is also a mirror, though perhaps a potentially more-perfect mirror, one that anticipates the imaginations of consumer-fans and aims to do one better. But it also serves to obfuscate the aspects of the 1997 software that might prove to be *unheimlich*. It allows the remastered copies of FFVII to parade about as 'untouched', bolstered by how blatantly FFVII-R presents itself as something different.

Conclusion

Both remade titles, *Yakuza Kiwami* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* fail to fit neatly into M. B. Grada's nostalgia continuum for retro and neo-retro games. They are both simultaneously restorative and reflective, though not through identical processes. YK, in reproducing a near-reality 2005 Tokyo, complete with recognizable brand names and pop culture, should invoke restorative nostalgia. While some additional content has been added, YK much more closely adheres to Y1's original plot than FFVII-R resembles FFVII. Yet, the condensed production and release schedule of both new *Yakuza* titles and remakes/remasters allows for consumers and critics to compare titles that, while covering decades of diegetic and original production years, can now be played back-to-back. The comparisons and judgements facilitated by this production schedule induces players into more reflective patterns of nostalgia, where they are not quite settled or at home. FFVII-R, in its more pronounced departure from the original game, including not only additional narrative content, expanded character backstories, new characters, and the implication that the plot will continue to deviate in subsequent episodes, adopts an approach that more closely aligns with reflective nostalgia, closing off the possibility of return to artificially untouched memories of the original game and original experience playing. However, in deviating so drastically from the original title, FFVII-R can allow players to leave their original perceptions of the 1997 title undisturbed, to be revisited and restored through the remasters of the original or never engaging with the original material again, only the memories of the first game. In being quite obviously not the original FFVII, FFVII-R may not invoke reflection at all.

The engagement with nostalgia precipitated by both titles is furthermore contingent on the initial differences in their reception among Western audiences. YK, for all its restorative trappings, was released to an audience that largely had few memories of the original game, in effect restoring something that was never there. FFVII-R, based on a deeply beloved by many title, was released to an audience who already participated in both restorative and reflective practices through both prior remasters and a consistent stream of Compilation games, films, and other media in the intervening years. In setting FFVII-R as a potentially different continuity altogether, the remake potentially allows consumer-fans and critics to set the game aside as something else, something different.

As we have conceded earlier, these are not the titles M. B. Grada anticipated when considering how to make sense of retro game preservation practices and neo-retro game development. Nonetheless, there are processes of nostalgia at work in both YK and FFVII-R, and stepping back one layer to S. Boym's discussion of restorative and reflective nostalgia proves productive in understanding the ways in which these games as consumer objects interact with subject-players and both individual and collective memory. The games invoke elements of both restorative and reflective nostalgia in a manner that may ultimately protect their status as consumer products. Players may in fact both wish to restore their original reactions to these titles and reflect upon the intervening years and

how these games have been transformed in the light of technological improvement and shifting social context. The two remakes addressed here offers players both options, potentially appealing to ever-widening audiences, both new and old.

As a textually analytic project, investigating both user comments and digital gaming press articles, this study has several limitations. First, the practices and perceptions of game developers have not been directly considered here, and the staff working on AAA game remakes are likely to include both those who may have worked on the original titles, and individuals who were themselves fans of the originals. Understanding the perspectives of those involved in production may further complicate the processes of nostalgia perpetuated by these games. Additionally, while the methods utilized here allow for an analysis of nostalgic reactions brought on by exposure to the games' trailers rather than interaction with the researchers, there is much that can be learned through interview procedures with players discussing their affective engagement with such games, as well as their motivations for purchasing remake titles.

It remains that players not only purchase and play these titles, but as seen through their comments on YouTube, also argue the games' merits, assess their own personal experiences with the titles that predate them, and speculate on what is to come from each franchise. In mixing nostalgia, both restorative and reflective, there is the potential for AAA game remakes to engage multiple audiences who may not all expect or anticipate the same level of engagement, memory, and future expectations from the games they play.

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