

We Write in Other People's Blood: Troubling the Body Politics and Disability Representation of *Yakuza 0*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper takes *Yakuza 0*, a retrospective prequel and standalone entry to the *Yakuza* digital game franchise from Japan, as a case study for disabled feminine bodies vis-à-vis their male counterparts in game narratives. Of note is Makimura Makoto, a downtrodden Chinese-Japanese woman experiencing post-traumatic psychogenic blindness, who serves as the unwitting kingpin of the yakuza's schemes. This paper posits that a reading of the game's narrative (as supplemented by its gameplay mechanics) through the critical lens of disability studies offers a more affective and recuperative understanding of the game's treatment of its marginalised characters. This paper first seeks to intervene in the game's embodied and gendered power dynamics by attending to the body politics of its fictitious criminal underworld. Correspondingly, this paper troubles the game's presentation of disability as a gendered performance, wherein feminine bodies disproportionately experience the material consequences and trauma of their disabilities, framed as pivotal narrative movements that spur the game's male protagonists forward. Ultimately, this paper works towards a more empathetic reading of *Yakuza 0* as a roadmap for how the franchise and digital games at large can address disability as a compounding, ever-evolving relational condition in addition to its physical and/or mental dimensions.

KEY WORDS:

body politics, digital games, disability studies, game studies, gender, narrative, *Yakuza 0*.

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Introduction: Welcome to Kamarochō

Few games achieve critical success and garner an international fanbase outside of their niche like the *Yakuza* (Sega NE R&D et al., 2005-2024) digital game franchise from Japan, also known as *Ryu Ga Gotoku* or *Like a Dragon*. The franchise, published by Sega from 2005 to the present-day, features sequential instalments and spinoffs, with its eighth main instalment slated for global release in January 2024. These games primarily take on the form of narrative-driven crime dramas set within the world of the eponymous yakuza, drawing from tropes associated with Japanese organised crime syndicates. Beyond heartrending portrayals of its beloved protagonists overcoming hardship, the franchise's enduring popularity can also be attributed to its trademark sense of humour that borders on the bizarre.

Yakuza 0 (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015), a retrospective prequel released in 2015, marked a turning point for the franchise by being its first game to achieve unprecedented international attention and sales (Sakamoto & Yokoyama, 2023, as cited in Takenaka, 2023). This instalment is particularly noteworthy for explicating the backstories of two main protagonists, Kiryu Kazuma and Majima Goro, and for its employment of disability as core experiences and motivations for these characters. Of note is the game's

introduction of Makimura Makoto,¹ a downtrodden Chinese-Japanese woman experiencing post-traumatic psychogenic blindness, serving as the unwitting owner of the 'Empty Lot' – a contested lot of land required to complete the yakuza's takeover of the fictitious Kamurochō district in Tokyo, Japan – who becomes targeted by clashing factions vying to seize its ownership from her.

This paper takes up *Yakuza 0* as a case study for stereotypical representations of disability in digital games, with attention to its gendered dimensions. While a surface reading of *Yakuza 0* may raise misgivings about its seemingly gauche reliance on disability as character development and plot devices, this paper posits that a reading of the game's narrative (as supplemented by its gameplay mechanics) through the critical lens of disability studies and queer game studies offers a more affective and recuperative understanding of the game's marginalised characters that empowers players to recognise disability as a compounding, ever-evolving relational condition beyond its physical and mental dimensions.

This paper seeks to intervene in the embodied and gendered power dynamics that govern the world of *Yakuza 0*, by first attending to the body politics of the yakuza to establish how bodily harm and disability are premediated, inflicted conditions rather than individualised and medicalised conditions, divorced from their social context. Following this contextual groundwork, the paper then delves into an analysis of disability as a gendered performance in *Yakuza 0*, and how reading the game's narrative through the lens of disability studies can offer a more recuperative reading of the game that facilitates a more empathetic and sensitive understanding of disability. Finally, the paper considers the sprawling, heterogenous gameplay of *Yakuza 0* that complements its main narrative, and how queer game studies can help to elucidate the ways in which the game's structure is well-suited to a nuanced and multi-faceted presentation of disability.

The Body Politics of the *Yakuza*: Dominance and Piety

All I was told was to kill a Makimura Makoto. Didn't know it was a blind girl. But I ain't the only one gunnin' for ya. Just who the hell are you?

–Majima, *Yakuza 0*

Majima's bewildered response to finding out that his assassination target is a blind girl – ostensibly unrelated to the criminal underworld – rather than a fellow mobster running an underground prostitution ring marks the unfolding of *Yakuza 0*'s central narrative. This red herring reveals the main principle underpinning the yakuza's operations: that bodies and lives are disposable insofar as they allow the yakuza to achieve their ultimate goals. Despite Majima's desperation to successfully carry out his assigned hit as the precondition to rescind his expulsion from the Tojo Clan, he recognises the moral quandary of unquestioningly assassinating a defenceless girl who is herself clueless as to why she is being targeted.

1 Remark by the author: This paper follows in-game naming conventions whereby Kiryu and Majima are referred to by their last names, while Makoto is referred to by her first name.

A disability-centric reading of *Yakuza 0* must first begin with a robust analysis of its in-game world that is governed by a body politics distinct from that of civil society. The game presents two fundamental principles that undergird the yakuza's body politics. First, its subordinates are expected to demonstrate absolute subservience to their superiors. Second, deviance is punished by inflicting bodily harm upon the offender to uphold the organisation's status quo and ensure future compliance.

This expectation of absolute subservience operates within the broader definition of a body politics as "a web of power relations that situate, saturate, and constitute bodies differentially" (Coole, 2013, p. 167). In recognising how bodies as physical markers of differential experiences and treatments are correspondingly oriented within the specific power relations that they are bound to, the body then holds high stakes as potential agents for resistance or transgression within fields such as disability studies (Coole, 2013). If we are to understand a body politics to be an interwoven web with a fixed hierarchy that assigns particular roles to its members, then the ontological question of what constitutes a body within the power relations of *Yakuza 0* is best answered through a careful examination of its characters' subordinated bodies.

In its opening sequence, *Yakuza 0* first establishes subservience as incontrovertible fact for all yakuza members. The characters sport quintessential full-body tattoos, a long-standing tradition that identify them as yakuza members (Jacob, 2021). Just as their tattoos serve as voluntary markers of their allegiance to the yakuza's body politics, their bodies themselves are essentialised as subservient tools. For instance, Kuze, introduced as a key antagonist, must perform *yubitsume* – a yakuza stereotype in which a fingertip is cut off as a formal apology to a superior (Jacob, 2021) – as repentance for defying his superior and to reaffirm his loyalty to the organisation. Through Kuze, the game reifies the yakuza's body politics as one that directly disciplines its subordinates' bodies: should the body step out of line, it is corrected through physical punishment to ensure continued obedience and deter further wrongdoing. Here, deviance is viewed as a body failing to function as intended, that is, a subservient tool in service of the yakuza's goals, and must be corrected accordingly. Most significantly, this is an ethos that members are expected to uphold themselves, for Kuze is reminded of how "[he] love[s] this accountability shit" (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015) before he cuts off his pinky finger in chapter 1. In this manner, yakuza members often initiate their own disciplinary punishment, and enable the yakuza's body politics, structured as a web of power relations, to operate smoothly with minimal coercion required.

A more extreme example of bodily harm being inflicted as punishment is exemplified by Majima, whose backstory reveals that he lost his left eye due to a year of continuous torture in a yakuza detention facility as punishment for insubordination. Although Majima is eventually released, he becomes permanently blind in his left eye and remains hostage to the yakuza, forced to operate a yakuza-owned cabaret as he endlessly works to regain their good graces. Even as he is freed from his literal imprisonment, he remains figuratively imprisoned in Sōtenbori (a fictional district located in Osaka, Japan), where his movements are constantly surveilled by the yakuza's lackeys to ensure his full compliance in running the cabaret and to deter his possible defection (chapter 4).

These examples thus demonstrate the strict hierarchy of the yakuza's body politics that demands absolute subservience from its members. Should they fall short of expectations, dominance over their bodies is reinstated through inflicting bodily harm upon them, resulting in permanent physical disfiguration and/or disability. The game then necessarily complicates conventional understandings of disability – rather than conceptualising disability as medicalised conditions, disability within the yakuza's body politics is a state that is deliberately inflicted upon an individual to maintain order.

Following this exposition on the core body politics in *Yakuza 0* as one that sustains its own web of power relations through physical violence, I now briefly turn to Makoto, whose unique position as victim-turned-target of the yakuza's schemes further illustrates disability as an inflicted condition within the game. Unlike Majima, Makoto suffers from post-traumatic psychogenic blindness. Her blindness is notably a post-traumatic response to having been kidnapped and sold into a Korean mafia's sex trafficking ring (chapter 7). While her disability is not a direct consequence of the physical harm inflicted upon her, it is crucial to note that the yakuza's victims are held to similar expectations of absolute subservience. Makoto, made powerless in the face of overwhelming power, was physically and mentally abused in service of illicit profit, thus creating the traumatic conditions for her disability to develop.

With this understanding of the yakuza's body politics as being one that complicates typical notions of disability and self-determination, reading disability in *Yakuza 0* requires acknowledgement of the ways in which disability as an inflicted condition can be interpreted as being a calculated, Foucauldian technique of power, inscribed upon the body to control their behaviour and guarantee their deference (Foucault, 1977, as cited in Coole, 2013). Most importantly, attending to representations of disability in *Yakuza 0* presupposes the player's compliance with these in-game parameters of the yakuza's body politics as 'rule-bound systems' that define the range of choices and experiences made available to them (Domsch, 2013).

Disability as a Gendered Performance: Towards a Recuperative Reading

Having established disability as a part of a web of power relations within a body politics that is bound to *Yakuza 0*'s game world, I proceed to interrogate disability in the game as a gendered performance, wherein feminine bodies disproportionately experience the material consequences and trauma of their disabilities, framed as pivotal narrative movements that spur the male protagonists onwards towards their own goals. I specifically borrow from critical disability studies to advance a reading of the male protagonists as complementary to Makoto's reclamation of her agency, thereby empowering her even within an in-game body politics that actively seeks to subjugate her.

A brief recapitulation of the characters' disabilities immediately reveals asymmetrical gendered experiences of disability. Although Majima and Makoto are blinded through similar circumstances involving forced captivity and physical abuse, it is Majima who emerges as the triumphant, resilient protagonist, while Makoto's disability augments her victimhood by further subjecting her to the yakuza's whims, who prey on her blindness as being advantageous for capturing and killing her. Yet, for the men of *Yakuza 0*, disability is but a mere occupational hazard that causes minimal disruption to their lives. It is apt at this juncture to reference "vulnerability as an ontological condition" (Weiss, 2018, p. 30) that is associated with historical assumptions of women as being weak while men are typically assigned invulnerability. If we are to understand that "not all bodies are equally vulnerable" (Weiss, 2018, p. 29), *Yakuza 0*'s gendered presentation of disability correspondingly highlights the inequalities within the characters' experiences of vulnerability.

Yakuza 0's introduction of Makoto is also paired with new gameplay mechanics that spotlight her disability. The player, playing as Majima, is tasked with escort missions that involve guiding Makoto through several streets to escape the yakuza mobs chasing the pair. When encountering mobs that attempt to abduct Makoto, the player must ensure that they fight them off before they reach her, as shown in Picture 1. Should an enemy manage to grab Makoto, her stamina bar depletes, and fully depleting her stamina bar results in immediate failure of the mission.



Picture 1: A screen capture of *Yakuza 0*'s escort mission in chapter 4, depicting the player as Majima engaged in combat with an enemy mob while defending Makoto, who is denoted by the orange stamina bar above her head

Source: author's screenshot from the game *Yakuza 0* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015)

The player is further challenged by a decrease in Majima's movement speed while escorting Makoto (accounting for her slower movements as a blind person), adding an additional layer of difficulty in evading the attention of incoming mobs. This gameplay mechanic, premised upon Makoto's disability, serves to immerse the player in Majima's frustration from attempting to escape while restricted in his movements to ensure Makoto's safety. In this way, Makoto's disability is utilised to temporarily impede the player's progress. Yet, Majima, as a similarly disabled individual, is positioned as Makoto's protector, who, unlike Makoto, is near-invincible with a larger health bar that depletes much more slowly and can be continually restored as needed with healing items in the player's possession. Through this mission, the game presents a gendered performance of disability, wherein Makoto's blindness renders her a stereotypical damsel in distress with Majima as her saviour. Makoto's gender therefore doubly casts her as a victim in the game's narrative thus far – she is both a pitiable survivor of a sex trafficking ring and a defenceless target for the yakuza.

This game mechanic, although dubious in its implications, is arguably crucial in fostering a sense of player identification with *Yakuza 0*'s protagonists. Digital games, as interactive environments, necessarily cultivate moments in which players do not recognise playable protagonists as entities separate from themselves, and instead "experience a merging of their own self and the game protagonist" (Klimmt et al., 2009, p. 354). The escort mission, having laid the foundation for this player identification to take place, thereby invites the player to share the compassion of *Yakuza 0*'s protagonists as the game progresses. Inasmuch as

players are necessarily assigned a role in digital games (in the case of *Yakuza 0*, players alternate between playing as Kiryu or Majima), they become active participants, rather than passive observers, in game narratives (Vorderer, 2000, as cited in Klimmt et al., 2009).

By the same token, *Yakuza 0*'s evocation of player identification enables a recuperative reading of Makoto's outward vulnerability, mediated by the game's male protagonists who commit themselves to advocating for her right to live with full bodily autonomy and without fear of persecution. Players, having identified themselves with the male protagonists, are consequently more receptive to the game narrative's shift towards reconciling the gendered, unequal vulnerabilities of its characters. Following through to the game's finale, I now attend to a more recuperative reading of Makoto within an in-game body politics that actively disempowers her. Kiryu and Majima's relationships with Makoto begin with their own interests at heart – for Kiryu, the title deed to the 'Empty Lot' is required to clear his name after having been framed for murder, while Majima is under orders to assassinate Makoto. Notwithstanding these initial motivations, both Kiryu and Majima later become aligned in their shared desire to not just prevent Makoto from being killed, but also to uplift her such that she is able to live a life of autonomy and dignity.

The optics of Makoto being reliant on these male protagonists for her survival may outwardly be read as pity from the protagonists, who then protect her out of obligation. Nonetheless, analysing Makoto through the lens of critical disability studies uncovers a more sensitive reading of the ways in which the characters extend care and concern to each other that do not rely on tropes of gender and/or disability. Considering that the earlier discussion on the game's body politics has established that the game portrays disability as a "social and stigmatised condition" in addition to its physical and mental dimensions (Goffman, 1963, as cited in Gerschick, 2000, p. 1264), disability as a gendered performance becomes a destabilising force when the characters' various stigmatised identities converge (Gerschick, 2000). Even as Makoto's gender and disability operate as converging forces that compound her vulnerability, Majima's polyvalent identities as a disabled man, albeit physically fit and proficient in combat, and former yakuza member allow him to act independently on the outside of the organisation to enact justice on Makoto's behalf. The game therefore mediates its treatment of disability as a gendered performance by demonstrating how these gendered disparities can destabilise even its own assumptions of disability as a social condition that selectively victimises its characters with no recourse.

Reading disability as an inherently affective experience that remains in flux likewise offers fresh insights into the characters' dynamics. To have a disability is to "work against a normative ableist culture that pursues its happiness through a celebration of individuated autonomy" (Goodley et al., 2018, p. 211), and this becomes especially evident in reading Makoto's trajectory throughout *Yakuza 0* as one in which she continually attempts to be self-reliant, even throughout the persecution she endures. Yet, to strive for able-bodied ideals of autonomy and independence risks emotional distress when disabled individuals inevitably fail to live up to them (Goodley et al., 2018). Indeed, Makoto suffers dire consequences in attempting to negotiate a deal with the yakuza to hand over her title deed - her demands are laughed off and she is shot by the yakuza. As she lays gravely wounded while apologising to Majima, she tearfully laments her naivete and inability to exercise her own agency, instead creating more trouble for him (chapter 16). In this climactic moment, the game further explicates a body's capacities as being "contextual and relational" (Goodley et al., 2018, p. 212), wherein Makoto's inability to outwit the yakuza was not by virtue of any inherent lack of capability due to her disability, but rather that she was striving towards a violent "fantasy of autonomy" (Weiss, 2018, p. 28), premised upon unrealistic able-bodied standards of strength that would have allowed her to stand on equal footing with the yakuza's overwhelming power.

Most significantly, understanding disability to be a necessarily mutual affective experience (Goodley et al., 2018) is crucial to appreciating the protagonists' motivations vis-à-vis Makoto. For Kiryu and Majima, their concern for Makoto goes beyond mere sympathy for a helpless blind girl being unfairly targeted by the yakuza. Rather, they are personally moved by her experience of disability as a culmination of the trauma she has experienced, and actively fight to assert her right to live an autonomous and dignified life as a matter of principle. Kiryu's vow to protect Makoto at all costs (chapter 14) is rooted in his desire to empower her to reclaim her autonomy amidst her tumultuous circumstances – he tells Makoto that “[he] can get [her] as far as the starting line” in being free to choose whether to continue wallowing in her grief or to try to move forward in life (chapter 13). Critically, Kiryu is not prescriptive in his choice to protect Makoto, and affirms her right to live as she wishes, even if it means not adhering to able-bodied notions of recovery. Likewise for Majima, his dogged pursuit of the yakuza to prevent them from assassinating Makoto stems from his sense of responsibility for “lettin’ her live a real life” as a person and “not as scraps for the beasts” (chapter 11). In their unflinching commitment to Makoto's right to agency, Kiryu and Majima are galvanised into leveraging their own bodies to protect her, thus affirming their shared vulnerabilities (Weiss, 2018), overcome only by choosing to act in service of each other's best interests.

Kiryu and Majima's advocacy for Makoto go beyond lip service: they put their bodies and lives on the line while fighting off the yakuza on her behalf, thus supporting Makoto in ways that she is physically unable to do so herself. Although extreme in nature, their absolute commitment in extending their assistance and care to Makoto leans into disability studies frameworks that advance a concept of relational autonomy, wherein “neither autonomy nor care is privileged, but both are placed in service of the other” (Davy, 2019, p. 102). Inasmuch as Makoto's disability is shown to impede her autonomy, Kiryu and Majima's care empowers her to reclaim her agency through this notion of relational autonomy that affirms her individuality and personhood: Makoto's decisions and preferences are respected by the protagonists and are articulable, even if they are sometimes articulated on her behalf (Davy, 2019). Kiryu and Majima's actions ultimately lend themselves to a recuperative reading of disability in *Yakuza 0* because they help her to negotiate her hostile environments and “interven[e] in the social world to make it more accommodating” of her disability and needs (Davy, 2019, p. 109). Makoto's disability, then, goes beyond its supposed role as a plot device, and instead serves as a vehicle for a compelling portrayal of how we may extend care towards individuals with disabilities in ways that not only ensure their survival in an able-bodied world, but also promise a dignified life that is worth living.

The effects of this care from Kiryu and Majima are evident in Makoto even before the game's conclusion. She regains a little bit of her eyesight – enabling her to distinguish light from darkness – after receiving Majima's care, thus emboldening her to negotiate with the yakuza by herself (chapter 16). She is later shown in the game's epilogue to have seemingly made a full physical and mental recovery, though she is now unable to recognise Majima by sight alone, having only identified him through his voice while her vision was impaired. Makoto's recovery, owing to the relational care that Kiryu and Majima extended to her, thus resists understandings of disability as individualised conditions that occur in isolation and remain unaffected by the social circumstances surrounding them. Crucially, Majima chooses not to verbally respond to her so that she will not recognise him as her saviour. Beyond upholding his earlier commitment to her right to live a dignified life, Majima allows her to move forward in her life without any expectation of gratitude or recognition in return. His bittersweet decision encompasses the essence of relational autonomy, in which he walks the fine line between the “equally important normative poles of

relationality and autonomy, support and individuality” (Davy, 2019, p. 110). He ultimately chooses to reject re-establishing a connection with Makoto so that she can be free to live her life without any remaining ties to a member of the yakuza and to her traumatic past, at the expense of his own wish to remain a part of her life.

Finally, the delivery of this message is made doubly effective when we consider that the process of player identification has already taken place early in the game. *Yakuza 0*'s presentation of disability as a relational condition that calls upon its characters to exercise care and empathy is not just passively impressed upon the player. Rather, the player, playing as Kiryu and Majima, necessarily internalises their attitudes and conduct towards Makoto throughout their process of play. For players to maximise their enjoyment of the game, they must immerse themselves fully in Kiryu and Majima's worldviews and are accordingly steered towards a more sensitive understanding of Makoto as they, too, extend their care towards her while in the protagonists' shoes. Player identification in *Yakuza 0* can therefore be interpreted as an enabling feature that fosters a genuine sense of empathy and understanding for the complexities of disability as a real-life condition, thereby countering its presumed role as a simplistic plot device.

Substories 1-100: Of Disco Queens and Cabaret Clubs

I pivot briefly to the sprawling world of *Yakuza 0*'s eclectic mini games and side quests² that demands significant player attention, to the extent that the game narrative itself only comprises a small portion of *Yakuza 0*'s total possible playtime. Like the rest of the franchise, *Yakuza 0* balances out its narrative's serious tone with copious amounts of light-hearted gameplay, accessible even in-between critical narrative beats. As the player wanders the streets of Kamurochō and Sōtenbori, they may choose to detour into mini games including a disco rhythm game, karaoke, and a cabaret club management simulator, or are accosted by random encounters with non-playable characters that trigger new substories. These substories are overwhelmingly comedic in nature, featuring scenarios such as having to infiltrate a phony cult (substory 54) or defeating Miracle Johnson (a reference to Michael Jackson) in a dance battle (substory 23). Most importantly, there is no sense of need or urgency for the player to see the narrative through to its conclusion since the game refrains from dictating how players choose to spend their time.

If we consider *Yakuza 0*'s narrative, largely presented through cut scenes that interrupt this gameplay, as being secondary to and distinct from gameplay itself (Domsch, 2013), then we must attend to the very medium of the digital game as being a “fundamentally queer narrative” (Chess, 2016, p. 84). Digital games, read through the lens of queer game narrative theory, necessarily utilise narrative middle spaces to generate multiple moments of pleasure that go against the grain of working towards a singular plot climax (Chess, 2016). This rings especially true in *Yakuza 0* and the *Yakuza* franchise as a whole, in which detours from the main narrative are deliberate and even encouraged, to the extent that players may temporarily lose sight of the game's narrative (Domsch, 2013). Herein lies the queer potential of digital games, especially one like *Yakuza 0* tackling issues of disability and the right to self-determination, where pleasure is not derived from the decisive resolution of the narrative, but rather, from the very process of play (Chess, 2016).

2 Remark by the author: Hereafter referred to as 'substories' as per in-game titling conventions.

This queer potential therefore makes *Yakuza 0* exceptionally hospitable to this paper's recuperative reading of disability within the game as a compounding, ever-evolving relational conditional that generates care and empathy, further enabled by the game's queer structure that effectively defocalises the narrative. *Yakuza 0*'s very gameplay necessarily resists reductive readings of disability in the game as mere plot device in service of a singular, climactic pleasure. When the player does return to the game's narrative, having had their fill of the myriad wacky hijinks *Yakuza 0* has to offer, it is out of genuine care and curiosity for Makoto's story, rather than an obligation to in-game demands.

Conclusion: The Dragon of Dojima

We write in other people's blood. That's the yakuza way. And I aim to pen my title in yours.

–Shibusawa, *Yakuza 0*

Yakuza 0's narrative reaches its dramatic conclusion when Kiryu confronts Shibusawa, who is revealed to be the ringleader behind the relentless assaults on Makoto. With a comatose Makoto in a wheelchair to the side, held hostage again for the title deed, the stakes of this final fight are clearly grounded in the yakuza's body politics, as Shibusawa asserts his right to kill indiscriminately to achieve his goal to inscribe a legacy for himself. Kiryu pre-emptively rejects this reasoning, telling him to "write it in [his] own blood, not others" (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015, chapter 17). When Kiryu finally bests him in battle, his victory is an ideological triumph for both himself and the game's narrative, which fundamentally decrees that people like Makoto are owed the right to live dignified lives without being exploited for the yakuza's personal gain. In not wavering from his resolve, Kiryu – portrayed here as a junior yakuza with only a half-finished dragon tattoo on his back – rises through the ranks through this win to become the fully-fledged yakuza legend (i.e., the Dragon of Dojima) that Shibusawa strove towards using unscrupulous means. Subsequently, Kiryu, like Majima earlier choosing not to kill the hired assassin who shot Makoto, chooses not to kill Shibusawa, thereby breaking free from the cycle of revenge and violence that has burdened Makoto throughout the narrative (chapter 17).

This paper has endeavoured to put forward a reading of disability in *Yakuza 0* that borrows from both critical disability studies and queer game studies to advance a holistic understanding of disability as a relational condition that remains perpetually in flux, shaped by its surrounding social forces, and mediated by interpersonal care. This interpretation acknowledges that this is perhaps not *Yakuza 0*'s original intention as a prequel focused on Kiryu and Majima's back stories, but nevertheless argues that this interpretation is made possible through the game's own narrative and gameplay mechanics. There are, of course, limitations to reading a Japanese game, localised for a Western audience, using Anglophone theoretical frameworks. Inasmuch as the *Yakuza* franchise deals with complex themes that merit further consideration, the reality of the franchise is that it is one developed with a specific audience in mind – the Japanese, cisheterosexual male player (Nagoshi, 2016, as cited in Sato, 2016) – and consciously resists taking input from its overseas players (Sakamoto & Yokoyama, 2023, as cited in Takenaka, 2023) and growing female fanbase (Nagoshi, 2016, as cited in Sato, 2016). Where the *Yakuza* franchise succeeds in compassionate portrayals of its male protagonists that resist stereotypes of toxic

masculinity (Maher, 2022), it fails to extend the same nuance to its female characters, who are either side-lined at best or heavily sexualised for male gratification, as is the case with non-playable female characters who are modelled after real life Japanese Adult Video actresses (Ashcraft, 2010). Conversely, where the franchise fails in its uneven treatment of gender, it is self-conscious in retrospectively making amends for past missteps, such as their editorial decision to remove a series of transphobic substories in the remastered version of *Yakuza 3* (Sega CS1 R&D, 2019) (Doherty, 2019). The *Yakuza* franchise, now looking towards the future, intends to continue grappling with difficult themes: trailers for *Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2024), the franchise's eighth main instalment, reveal an aged Kiryu battling a grim cancer diagnosis (Swanson, 2023).

These contradictions will continue to persist in the *Yakuza* franchise, partly owing to the fundamentally queer structure of the digital game medium that lends itself to unexpected readings of the games' narratives. As is the case in *Yakuza 0*, players are free to inhabit the sprawling worlds of the franchise and its multiplicity of pleasurable moments to discover "formative and otherwise undiscovered modes of play which inspire more ethically-conscious behaviours" within them (Schänzel et al., 2022, p. 63). Ultimately, this paper echoes the call to action for both digital game developers and scholars to closely attend to the queer potential of digital games (Chess, 2016) – encompassing their narrative modes, play mechanics, and structures – as a roadmap for creating and interpreting games in ways that resist heteronormative (and in *Yakuza 0*'s case, ableist) hegemonies.

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