



The Yakuza series tackles masculinity in a way few games can

Opinion

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by Harry Mackin

Many action games focus on combat and physical strength, but the *Yakuza* series shows us emotional intelligence is heroic too.

Content Warning: This article includes some major late-game spoilers for *Yakuza 0*, as well as discussions of violence,

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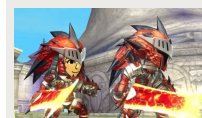
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#	YAKUZA (SERIES)
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misogyny, transphobia, and sexual assault.

Criticizing depictions of violence in games often feels incomplete, because it ignores the context of that violence.

Videogame violence isn't disturbing simply because of its severity or its prevalence; it's disturbing because of the point that

violence often serves. Videogames do have a violence problem, but it's vestigial to a deeper issue: how we depict masculinity.

We like to defend violent videogame genres such as action games and shooters by calling them a "power fantasy." In these, the player takes on the role of a (usually male, usually antiheroic) protagonist who's really good at violence. These games try to make the player feel like a badass, and nearly as often to make the player feel righteous. Not only is the protagonist overcoming challenges with violence, he's doing so in order to prove his own moral superiority. Might makes right, after all.

The *Yakuza* series is just about the last videogame franchise you would expect to subvert this tradition. These are games in which buff professional criminals beat the snot out of each other using their bare hands, baseball bats, and sometimes motorized scooters. In other words, *Yakuza* looks exactly like the sort of one-note violence that's so common in videogames.

But then you get to know some of the main characters, like series lead Kazuma Kiryu and his friend/rival Goro Majima. The good boys. Not only do these guys represent the most emotionally nuanced, non-toxic, and positive takes on masculinity I've seen in a triple-A game, the series uses them to make an important point about masculinity and honor, thoroughly subverting some of games' worst impulses in the process.

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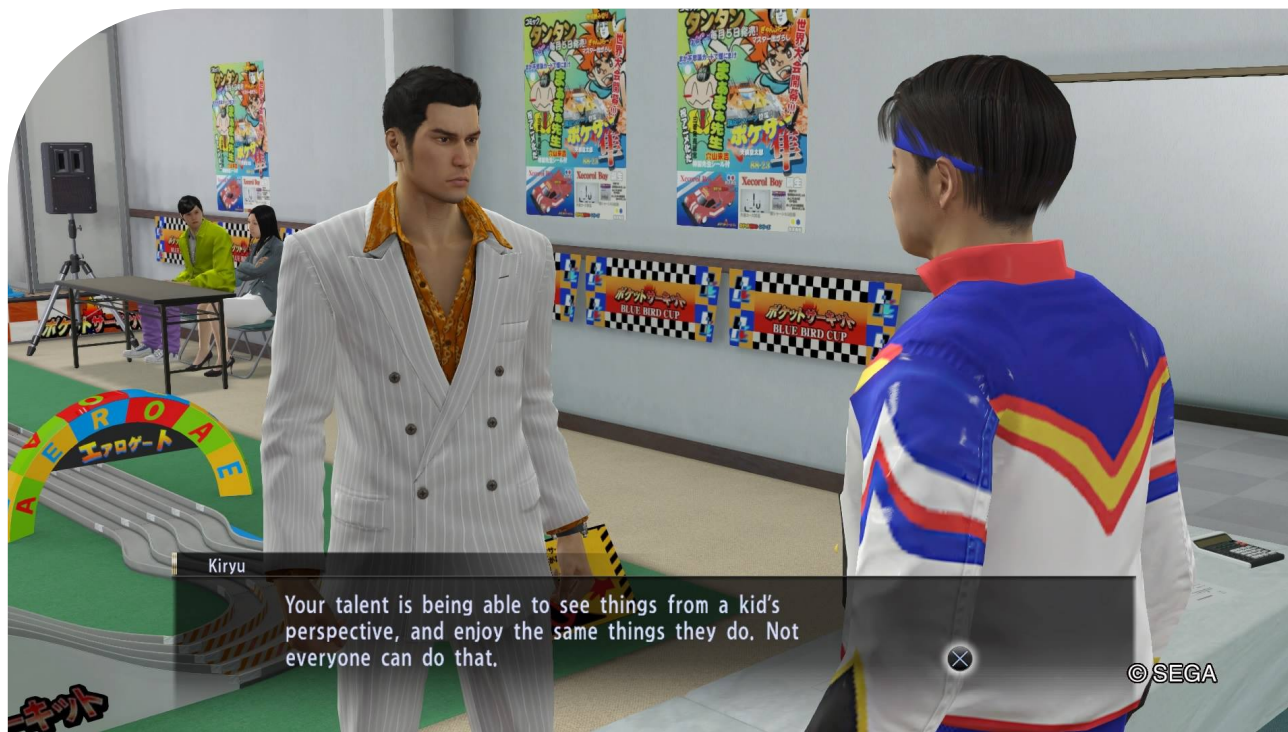
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I would do anything for this man. LOOK AT HIM.

Kiryu, the central protagonist throughout *Yakuza*'s main installments, frequently grapples with two seemingly antithetical identities: a good man who protects the weak, and a fearsome crime lord. Goro Majima, aka "The Mad Dog of Shimano," is more of a wild card, all about living life according to his own rules. Both Kiryu and Majima are devoted, hypermasculine yakuza. They rip their shirts off in a fiery passion before fighting. They literally can't walk down a street without somehow getting into fights with armies of "hooligans." They always win these fights. Explosively. Sometimes with bowling balls.

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Both the main narrative and side quests of each game thrust the characters into absurd situations. In *Yakuza 0* alone, Kiryu teaches a shy dominatrix how to get better at her job, helps a beleaguered film team appease their director, and even helps a grown man accept that there's nothing wrong with being a virgin and enjoying children's games. In each case, Kiryu's passionate encouragement helps these strangers reignite their own passions and drives them to newfound confidence. Majima, meanwhile, makes it his (literal) job to validate and support the women in his employ, defending sex work as a profession and shutting down men who try to trivialize it. Both Kiryu and Majima have a powerful, positive impact on virtually everyone they meet. They're *also* two of the sweetest, kindest, most genuine protagonists in videogames. Whether they're singing karaoke, disco dancing, managing cabaret clubs, or playing games with children, Kiryu and Majima engage with the same intensity that they unleash when fighting armies of professional hitmen. More importantly, they apply it to all their interactions with other people, too. Kiryu and Majima are relentlessly kind, even to an (often hilarious) fault.



Moments before this conversation, Kiryu slammed a man's head into a car door.

The *Yakuza* series is often very funny, but the way it's funny is important. Kiryu and Majima are adorably dorky, kind men living lives as badass professional criminals, but that in itself isn't the joke. *Yakuza* never even considers it. Instead, much of the humor comes from the two having to solve other people's increasingly specific interpersonal problems. Not only are Kiryu and Majima's personalities important to their respective characterizations, they're integral to the themes of the games themselves.

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Kiryu and Majima's sincerity is not incidental or insignificant. Kiryu was orphaned at an early age and idolizes the kind yakuza boss who raised him, to the point where he makes it his life's goal to live just like him. Kiryu builds his way of life according to an impossible ideal, and consequently still possesses a childish kindheartedness. He acts the honorable yakuza because in his mind, that's what an ideal man is. Even when Kiryu learns that his father figure wasn't the man Kiryu believed him to be, it doesn't matter. Kiryu has an image of what it means to live a fulfilling life, and no matter how naive or misguided that understanding may seem, he remains committed to it.

Majima's tale is a little more pessimistic, but no less nuanced. *Yakuza 0* chronicles how the criminal underworld stripped Majima of the same youthful idealism Kiryu still possesses. As a young yakuza, Majima disobeyed his boss Shimano to attempt to save someone he loved. Shimano responded by torturing him *for a year*. If the experience broke Majima, however, it also imbued him with a deeply-felt empathy for anyone victimized by corrupt institutions. He'll stop at nothing to protect the victims of men in power because he knows what those victims have been through--and he doesn't want them to lose what he lost. Kiryu and Majima's kindness never feels forced, because their respective narratives put in the work to make it earned. We believe that Kiryu and Majima could be the good men they are, even in a world as bleak and corrupt as *Yakuza's*.



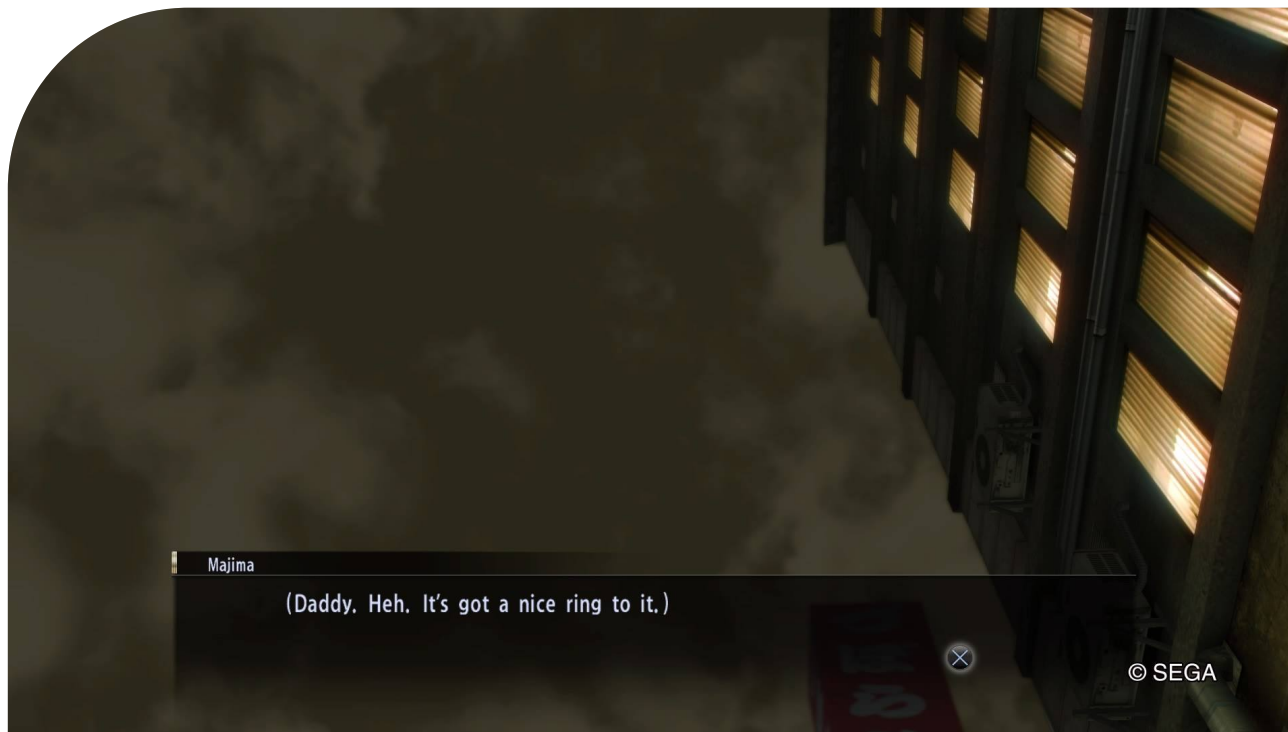
Majima knows that labor should always be properly valued.

That *earned* goodness is at the heart of what *Yakuza* says about masculinity. Kiryu is, in the end, a hopeless romantic. When he meets someone else who's struggling to live up to an image of themselves, or who wants the world to be something other than it is, he supports them with all the ferocity and passion with which he pursues his own ideals. When Kiryu winds up looking after Haruka, a young girl who has suffered greatly, he will move heaven and earth to show her that a child-like, optimistic understanding of people doesn't have to be wrong.

Instead of using masculine strength to overpower and invalidate others, Majima and Kiryu use it to affirm and protect the kind of goodness they want to be real.

Majima is much less of an idealist. By the end of *Yakuza 0*, Majima adopts a nihilistic “mad dog” persona, declaring that there is no right or wrong in the criminal underworld, so he may as well act according to his impulses. Despite his cynicism, however, Majima is still an innately kind person who makes it his life’s mission to protect others. This is made explicit in *Yakuza Kiwami*, where he swears to see Kiryu’s ideals through to the end, but it’s no less evident in *Yakuza 0*. Majima continues to watch over Makoto Makimura, another victim of cruel men in power, from afar to ensure she enjoys a peaceful, normal life. Majima and Makoto’s relationship in *Yakuza 0* works better than most male/female relationships in videogames, largely because of Majima’s real respect for who Makoto is as a person. Majima’s motivation to protect Makoto doesn’t come from the paternalistic, agency-erasing place we’re so familiar with thanks to games like *The Last of Us* and *Bioshock Infinite*. Instead, it’s rooted in genuine empathy.

In many ways, Kiryu and Majima couldn’t be more different. Kiryu is the ultimate optimist, while Majima hides his kindness beneath a veneer of cynicism. The commonality between them, however, is how their independent paths lead both of them to use their resolve in the service of others. Instead of using masculine strength to overpower and invalidate others, Majima and Kiryu use it to affirm and protect the kind of goodness they want to be real. Majima and Kiryu express their ideals by helping others express theirs. Unlike virtually every other depiction of masculinity in videogames, the masculinity of *Yakuza* is fundamentally constructive, not destructive.



Foreshadowing? Or... FORESHADOWING?

Most power fantasies depict idealism as naive, something for a character to “get over” on their way toward maturity. Consider Zack Snyder’s DC “Murderverse” films and their “dark” renditions of highly principled characters like Superman. *Yakuza* doesn’t just reject that misguided understanding of maturity; it subverts it. Kiryu and Majima aren’t powerful in spite of their ideals; they’re powerful *because of them*.

For a game that’s all about subverting and expanding on what it really means to be a man, it’s inexcusable that the series depicts

women (including trans women) in such ridiculously regressive ways.

Fighting in *Yakuza* series is an extended metaphor for this outlook. Each game establishes that a character's prowess is directly proportionate to his strength of convictions. When one dude pummels another, it isn't just because he's stronger; it's because his beliefs are stronger. Kiryu and Majima only come close to failure when they question their own convictions. When Kiryu loses sight of what's important or Majima doubts himself, *that's* when they become mortal. When the two characters inevitably recommit to their beliefs, they're reborn stronger than ever. The *Yakuza* games aren't about a dirty world corrupting pure, honest individuals; it's about those pure, honest people purifying a dirty world.

Unfortunately, however, the *Yakuza* games themselves aren't always consistent with these themes. The series has a serious problem with how it depicts women and transgender people, for instance. For a game that's all about subverting and expanding on what it really means to be a man, it's inexcusable that the series depicts women (including trans women) in such ridiculously regressive ways.

Where men in the *Yakuza* universe have the power to make their dreams reality with their fists, women are usually depicted as weak or childish. When a female character is introduced at any point in the story, you can bet it's a matter of time before she's taken hostage or murdered. Whereas the silly dreams of male characters are idealized and made beautiful, women's aspirations are often either ignored or mocked outright. Majima's love interest Makoto is repeatedly physically, sexually, and emotionally abused, usually for no purpose except to cast her as a victim. Although Majima treats Makoto with compassion and respect, the game itself often does not.



Makoto Makimura is a great character who deserved better than what she got in Yakuza 0.

Majima's quest to save Makoto is, if anything, even more quixotic than Makoto's own quest to avenge her brother, but you wouldn't get that based on how the game depicts them. Majima is always highly capable, while Makoto is out of her depth. The one time Makoto brilliantly outmaneuvers her enemies in order to come close to achieving her goals, she's shot. Majima, meanwhile, rushes in with no plan and successfully fights a literal *army* in order to come to her rescue. In *Yakuza*, women are often punished for seizing the same kind of agency we take for granted out of our male heroes.

Unfortunately, the series' depiction of queer characters is even worse. Though *Kiwami* does feature a surprisingly progressive story about a gay hostess, by and large people of queer sexual identities are treated as freakish or silly. Trans women in particular are something of a recurring joke in the *Yakuza* series, even in the recent *Yakuza 0* and *Yakuza Kiwami*. The "joke" is so strangely pervasive that it even pops up in the *Yakuza Kiwami 2* trailer--as if making fun of trans women were a game feature.

Ironically, *Yakuza* could learn from its own main characters.

Yakuza's hypocritical depiction of women and queer people shouldn't be overlooked. Not only are these depictions gross, they're also a blatant contradiction of the series' themes. The *Yakuza* series is about how the power of sincere commitment can transform even the darkest world into a more hopeful, just place. The games cannot send that message while treating women and queer people the way they do, full stop.

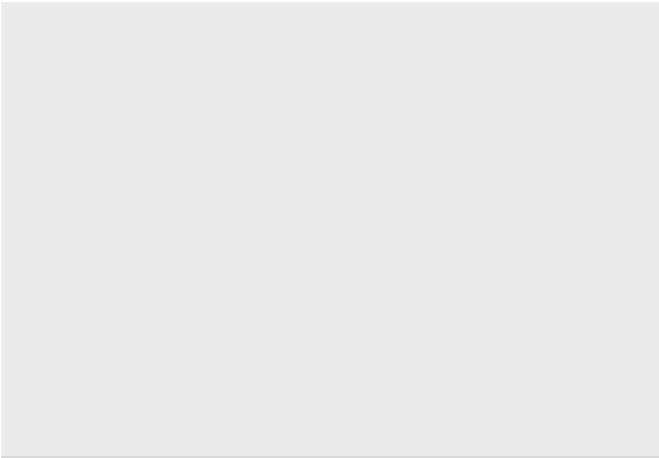
Ironically, *Yakuza* could learn from its own main characters. Kiryu and Majima are normally so respectful that when the game depicts them treating women and trans folk poorly, it reads as grossly out-of-character. The *Yakuza* game series fails Kiryu and Majima when it fails to hold itself up to their standard.



What's better than this? Just guys being dudes.

Even now, playing *Yakuza* is unlike playing any other power fantasy. Kiryu and Majima definitely use their physical strength to dominate their enemies and win over allies, just like other power fantasy protagonists do. However, this power comes from their conviction to affirm and grant power to the downtrodden. Every conflict settled with violence isn't just about proving you're better, it's about proving *why* you're better. And in *Yakuza*, you're better because you believe in something, and you're willing to stand up for it.

Like most power fantasy characters, Kiryu and Majima are meant to be aspirational. The difference is, we don't want to be like Kiryu and Majima because of what they can do; we want to be like them because of *who they are*. In a world where contemporary masculinity is often conflated with cynicism, irony, and nihilism, Majima and Kiryu's commitment to optimism, sincerity, and standing for something is exactly what we need. If the *Yakuza* series can catch up to its own protagonists, it can become the better violent game we need, and the ones Kiryu and Majima deserve.



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