

Game Narrative Review

=====

Your name: Tianze Wu
Your school: Southern Methodist University
Your email: tianzew@smu.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: 11/2022

=====

Game Title: Yakuza: Like a Dragon
Platform: PlayStation 4, Microsoft Windows, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 5
Genre: JRPG
Release Date: January 16, 2020
Developer: Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio
Publisher: Sega
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Masayoshi Yokoyama

Overview

A middle-aged man with a botched punch perm haircut and an immense passion for *Dragon Quest*, Ichiban Kasuga found no one waiting for him outside the jail after spending nearly 18 years imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. From daily communication technology to the very existence of the yakuza, a Japanese equivalent of the mafia, everything in society has changed. With his home destroyed and his friends gone, the always optimistic Ichiban is then forced to face the cruel realization that he was betrayed by his own yakuza family that he joined as a teenager and was shot by his father figure, Masumi Arakawa, the patriarch of the Arakawa Family.

Yakuza: Like a Dragon [1] is a JRPG that is not about a group of teenagers fighting evil monsters to save the world but rather a cast of middle-aged underclass people attempting to survive the struggle against the uncaring systems in contemporary Japanese society. To uncover the corrupted nature of the system and discover the truth about the betrayal of his father figure, the now homeless Ichiban forms new friendships and finds new jobs to better the lives of the people in the legal grey zone.

While topics about yakuza and societal issues always invite certain gravity, the game is also complemented with loads of zany and hilarious moments. The seemingly unfeasible harmony of two contrasting tones is only possible with the charming and imaginative protagonist. The player sees Yokohama, the main stage of the story, through the lens of Ichiban: street encounters become epic battles, gangsters transform into a variety of zany monsters, allies gain superpowers and help Ichiban in battles with a comical representation of real-life job skills, and Ichiban, himself, becomes the hero in *Dragon Quest*. Only through Ichiban's point of view, the player is invited to experience and

examine the Japanese societal system through a well-crafted character-driven narrative with an emotional rollercoaster during the 50-hour journey.

Yakuza: Like a Dragon is a masterpiece in video game characterization. Using traditional JRPG conceits, such as The Hero's Journey, turn-based combat, and a band of companions, the game wonderfully portrays an atypical, yet well-rounded JRPG protagonist that enables the player to empathize with.

Characters

Arakawa Family – a subsidiary of the Tojo Clan in Kamurocho. Found and led by Masumi Arakawa. Later became a subsidiary of the Omi Alliance.

- **Ichiban Kasuga** – The protagonist. The **Hero** Archetype. An imaginative man who always dreams himself to be the hero in *Dragon Quest*. Meanwhile, he is a deeply compassionate person who is not only loyal to his family and friends but also willing to help anyone in trouble and offer a chance for the wrongdoers to redeem themselves.

In his teenage year, after getting into trouble with local gangsters, he is saved by Masumi Arakawa, the patriarch of Arakawa. Since then, he joined the patriarch and strived to become a hero like Arakawa, his new father figure.

On New Year's Eve of 2000, learning that the second hand of the Arakawa family committed a murder, which would result in the disbandment of the family, Ichiban willingly shoulders the blame to repay for what Arakawa did to save him.

After 18 years of imprisonment, Ichiban is released and found out the world he knew no longer, and when he tries to contact Arakawa, he is shot by his “father” in the chest and left in Ijincho to die. Surviving the bullet wound, despite all the misfortunes, he kept his faith and decided to find out the truth with his new companions met along the way.

- **Masumi Arakawa** – The **Mentor** Archetype. Leader of the Arakawa family. Ichiban's father figure. Reserved but charming. In his family, he is considerate towards his followers and treated Ichiban as another son. He is the one who guides strayed Ichiban in the Yakuza world and how to be a righteous person. To Ichiban, he is not only a hero but also a caring and loving father that teaches him life lessons.
- **Masato Arakawa** – The **Shadow** Archetype. The only child of Masumi Arakawa. Due to his chronic illness, he is unable to walk and has to live in a wheelchair and is taken care of by Ichiban every day. While Masato is close with Ichiban and is the successor of the family, he nonetheless felt inferior to others, especially in comparison with Ichiban. His diffidence and envy lead to his morbid desire for power and control. After studying abroad in the U.S., he cured his

disease and started an organization called Bleach Japan in the name of Ryo Aoki, attempting to grab more political power with the new identity.

Ichiban's Companions

- **Yu Nanba** – The **Ally** Archetype. A middle-aged homeless man living with other homeless near a garbage collection place. He is a smart fellow who cares about his friends. He saved Ichiban after Ichiban is shot and transferred to Ijincho. He is a former nurse whose license is suspended after shouldering the blame for his fellow worker.
- **Koichi Adachi** – The **Ally** Archetype. A former policeman. A righteous and kindhearted man who cares about his friends as well as an alcoholic that lives on a paycheck. He is excused from his job right before his retirement due to a false arrest issued by his superior, Horinouchi, followed by the arrestee's suicide.

Ijin Three – the secret group of the leaders of the three most powerful organizations in Ijincho. While to the outsiders, the three factions are consistently fighting against each other, secretly the three leaders have been working together. Decades ago, a politician proposes to the leaders a secret scheme of using counterfeit money production to keep the balance of Ijincho, preventing war and invasion from outside forces. With the attack of Bleach Japanese, Ijin Three decides to work with Ichiban to take the organization down.

Bleach Japan - An organization founded by Ryo Aoki and Hajime Ogasawara. The goal is to eliminate all legal grey zones in Japan such as illegal immigrants, homeless, sex workers, and yakuza members. Supports protest across Japan to advocate the movement. Contrary to the noble appearance, the organization is supported by Omi Alliance, a Yakuza organization, a scheme for the aspiring Aoki to grab more political power.

- **Ryo Aoki** – Masato Arakawa's new identity. An ambitious politician hungry for power to deny his childhood inferiority and prove his superiority over everyone else. He founded Bleach Japan to gain political influence in Japan so that he could obtain more power and control, which he never had in his youth. In secret, Aoki sends orders to eliminate anyone that obstructs his agenda. However, as the governor of Tokyo, he keeps a clean figure, cuts ties with his criminal family, and pretends to be a neighbor-friendly politician.
- **Sota Kume** – A loyal yet somewhat fanatic member of Bleach Japan. He deeply believes that grey zones should be eliminated and has no compassion or respect for anyone in the zones. With his firm belief, he would do anything to make sure that grey zones will be erased from Japan. In the end, as Aoki's truth is revealed to all of Japan by Ichiban's party, Kume stabs Aoki, his former idol, to death as his faith shatters.

Breakdown

Unlike the previous seven entries in the series, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* ditched its adrenaline-filled fast-paced action combat and instead transformed into a JRPG with turn-based combat with a new protagonist. This is an unexpected change by long-time fans of the series, but, after completing the game, many welcomed the shift in genre. The crucial reason for its success is that the classical JRPG elements, such as The Hero's Journey, turn-based combat, and companions, are so integral to the narrative and the characterization, which strongly supports the former, that the story could not be told nearly as well in any other genre.

The Hero and His Journey

The Hero

Switching to a different genre, the developers intentionally embrace certain tropes while subverting others to come up with a unique but recognizable JRPG protagonist. In classic JRPG games, the protagonist is generally a blank-slate boy in his teenage years which fits the general player population. Often the protagonist does not talk much and has a limited personality so that the player can reflect on their dispositions in the game. The game brings itself to the player. Ichiban, on the other hand, is a middle-aged man rifling with goofiness, which is more akin to a joke character than a protagonist in most RPGs. In another word, the game must have done something special in its characterization and story for the player to empathize with such a quirky protagonist.

However, that is not to say that Ichiban is completely different from the traditional protagonists of that genre. In fact, despite the apparent distinctions in age, appearance, and temperament, Ichiban almost follows all the tropes. Like many JRPG protagonists, Ichiban suffers the loss of his parents. Similarly, Ichiban possesses an undying loyalty towards family and friends and unparalleled optimism over life and struggles during the adventure.

A touch that makes the link even more interesting is that Ichiban is introduced as a superfan of *Dragon Quest*, one of the most classic JRPGs of all time. The series is largely about the player character, "Hero", defeating monsters to save the world. It is not a simple easter egg in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, but rather the origin of Ichiban's desire to be a hero as well as the theme that is repeated and showcased throughout his hero's journey.

The Journey

The monomyth or The Hero's Journey is a concept proposed by Joseph Campbell, stating that most stories follow a hero going through different stages in a certain pattern. Many JRPGs narratives also fit well into the journey, and sometimes patterns become cliché that players may predict what comes next. Following the JRPG trope, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* does something similar but with its unique twists to showcase the characteristics of Ichiban, our hero in the story.

First Arc

From the flashback in the early chapters, we learned that Ichiban lives as a delinquent teenager in his **ordinary life** until he pissed off gangsters and got kidnapped. On that day, Ichiban, with his life threatened, is dragged into an extraordinary situation, a **call to adventure**.

In the emergency, he claimed to be a member of the Arakawa family, so that the gangsters would not dare to touch him. Unlike typical heroes, who try to **refuse** or **run away** from the **extraordinary world** at the beginning of the story, young Ichiban, to some extent, embraces it. As a superfan of Dragon Quest, Ichiban always wanted to be a hero and defeat the “evil dragon”.

When the gangsters called the family to blackmail, to everyone’s surprise, Masumi came and saved the teen. When Masumi is moved and finally accepted Ichiban as a family member after months of refusal, Masumi becomes not only Ichiban’s **mentor** but also his father figure. Under Masumi’s influence, Ichiban learned what it meant to be a hero: not by being powerful but by helping those in need.

Ichiban’s **testimony** arrived when one day Arakawa wanted him to shoulder the murder blame for the family. Again, Ichiban accepted without a second thought. To him, it is the moment he has been waiting for, a chance to repay for what Arakawa has done for him.

After 18 years in prison, an **ordeal** too long for anyone, there are no **rewards**, but more **ordeals**.

Returning to Kamurocho, Ichiban’s home has been destroyed, the Arakawa family is gone, and his acquaintances have left. Everything the player sees in the city and anyone the player interacts with as Ichiban in the first 2 hours of the game are no longer there and are, instead, replaced with something completely different. Standing under the iconic landmark of Kamurocho, Ichiban is deeply confused about people talking with their smartphones and smoking e-cigarettes. He is out of time.

When he finally locates Arakawa during a meeting with the enemy clan, he finds out that his father has betrayed his family and is greeted with a bullet in the chest by Masumi. He is betrayed by his father.

While Ichiban managed to survive, he woke up in a dump field surrounded by strange vagrants and found himself in Ijincho, an unfamiliar location. He has lost his space.

Like Ichiban, the player also faces those unfamiliar things for the first time. Akin to the player who is controlling the hero and knows that the game will be beaten, Ichiban, despite all those misfortunes, remained optimistic and is also just excited to explore new places, greet new people, and discover the truth - both the player and Ichiban are playing as the hero.

While the tragic first arc is somewhat atypical for many adventure stories, it does a great job of highlighting Ichiban's optimism, a type of optimism that is almost "gamey". At the bottom of his life, Ichiban does not refuse any **call of adventure**, knowing things can only get better, he jumps into the adventure right away as the second arc starts.

"Once you're at rock bottom, the one way forward is up." – Ichiban [1]

Second Arc

While the first arc is more of an establishment of the context of the story from the game's perspective, the second arc is where the player spends the most time experiencing the adventure as Ichiban.

Although Ichiban is ready for any adventure, he still needs to make a living by getting a job. After a temporary return to **ordinary life** with his newly met friends, Ichiban steps into the **adventure** once again after the mysterious murder of the soapland manager who offered jobs to Ichiban and his companions.

The majority of the midgame features Ichiban's party dealing with three different organizations in Ijincho. While enemies of each other, by getting to know each group of people, Ichiban learns that those so-called grey area workers and criminals are underclass people simply trying to survive. With Ichiban's attitude of everyone deserves a chance for a better life and the actions of helping anyone in need, he passed the **trials** of trust and turn **enemies** into **allies**. Learning the truth of the three organizations secretly working together to keep Ijincho's balance, Ichiban decided to lend a hand to protect this land of outcasts against the common enemy, Bleach Japan, an organization led by Aoki who threatens to "cleanse" those dwellers.

While steady progress has been made towards the fight against Bleach Japan, the murder of Masumi Arakawa, his father figure, whose plan turned out to be protecting Ichiban rather than betraying him, Ichiban once again fell to the bottom of the pit. Although the hero did not back down, this time he is blinded by rage until Kiryu, the protagonist of previous Yakuza entries, acts as a **threshold guardian** to test if Ichiban is ready for the final battle and provide key information for the showdown against Aoki after the trial is passed.

The final battle takes place in the millennium tower. Ichiban's party fights their way up to the top. However, when Aoki, the **shadow**, the final boss, first enters the building, the camera cuts back to the party and everyone is lying on the ground, defeated. When Aoki decides to kill them off so that "nothing can ever come crawling back out the gutter again", a bolt of lightning strikes, and Ichiban's eyes suddenly open, staring at Aoki. A twist of fate, a literal **resurrection**.

In the end, our hero overcame the challenges and defeated the "evil dragon" and brought good to the people with some positive societal change. While most heroes **return** to the place where the journey begins, Ichiban, in the last scene of the story, chooses to stay in Ijincho rather than Kamurocho where he grew up and spent time with his two fathers.

Different from the heroes who became kings or were rewarded with treasure, Ichiban chooses to return to the pit where he and his friends met and strived for a better tomorrow for the underclasses. He may still be a nobody, but he is no longer alone. There is no treasure but the friends he made along the way. While this all sound extremely cliché, it is in the end a hero's journey with deliberation, the structure helps to build the character in its unique way and the details in its delivery make the journey nonetheless heartfelt and enjoyable to experience.

Combat

While classic JRPG usually takes place in a fantasy world where the hero fighting against evil monsters is easily justified, Kamurocho and Ijincho are realistic city districts in contemporary Japanese in the game. The developers made a great trick to give grounds for the seemingly unfit turn-based combat against monsters – they provided the player a lens to see through the eyes of Ichiban, the imaginative *Dragon Quest* nerd who is playing the hero in the real life. When the player encounters combat, a literal transformation takes place where real-life gangsters become wacky enemies wearing exaggerated outfits with purple flame aura. Their weapons turn into something absurd, a trash can lip, a swimming ring, or even a bed sheet, whereas Ichiban and his party also gained ridiculous abilities like calling pigeons to attack, throwing business cards like Kunai, or popping champagne to damage enemies. While silliness is over the top, it manages to recreate the combat system with a different flavor that is unique to Ichiban, building up his goofy yet uplifting character and letting the player understand him better.

In addition, there are some deeper social commentaries beneath the combat system's superficial appearance. While *Dragon Quest's* vocation features things like warriors, mages, and priests, in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, the jobs are literal, featuring a variety of different occupations, like bodyguard, musician, and chef, with their unique skillsets. To earn or change jobs, the player needs to visit Hello Work, a work agency in the town.

In the early stage of the game, Ichiban is left in Ijincho alone without a way to make a living. Ichiban knows as much about the strange place as the player does. With the map covered in “mist”, every step of the player may lead to a potential encounter with the local gangsters. Some are even over-leveled, a classic JRPG move to gate the player off certain areas as mysteries to the player and Ichiban.

While it might just be a flaw of the combat system, the player may find the job becoming bored after experimenting with all the skill sets available to the job, which is the way many people feel after spending many years with the same job. An inherent trait of JRPG combat is the heavy reliance on stats, which requires the player to grind over and over again, like how a worker repeated the same work over and over again throughout the years without the initial passion. When choosing to switch characters to a new job, the player will find that all the experience earned through the combat corresponding to the job no longer applies to the new job, creating a dilemma mirrored in real society, especially those grey zone workers depicted in the story.

Companions

One of the most iconic features of JRPG is its focus on player companions. They offer combat aids in battle as well as moral support throughout the journey. Differed from high-school-age teenagers or folklore legends, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* features six distinct middle-aged underclasses in Ijincho.

When they first joined the party, none of them have the same goal as Ichiban, but they are, to a certain extent, forced to cooperate as there is nothing else left for them. Each of them has its agenda and reasons to keep certain things secret. However, throughout the journey, after some disagreements and distrusts, they nonetheless managed to build up their relationship as families.

One unique gameplay mechanic tied to the companions is a bond system. Similar to the social link/confidant system in *Persona* Series, the player can build up their relationship with party members by hanging out with them in the city, doing things like watching movies, singing karaoke, or enjoying meals. Alternatively, the bond also increases by having them in the party during the combat. Besides having unique dialogues to showcase various chemistry in the party, when the bond reaches the next level, the player may unlock unique bond combat moves or gain a chance to sit with the companion at a bar to gradually delve into their personal stories. These sequences of combats and stories not only form an engaging gameplay loop for the player but also allows the player to truly explore each character in depth.

For example, from Adachi's earlier scenes, the player learned that, while being earnest, Adachi is a man who cannot help himself to squander all his money earned every month. However, through the bonding process, we learned that he sends money secretly to do good for a falsely accused man's son that he once failed to achieve. Throughout the side story, his bad habit of wasting money, one of the first traits we learned about him, only strengthens his character of being genuine and responsible to others.

In addition, Ichiban's friends are not only limited to his companions. When exploring the city with his party, Ichiban may meet strangers in need, and completing those quirky side quests unlocks new abilities, along with wild animation. During the combat, Ichiban may give those who he has helped a phone call to summon them for additional combat support – a showcase that the battle is not won alone but with the help of people and a heart to help others. Beneath the superficial absurdity of the side stories, it is about social minorities and a man disregarding all social prejudices to reach out to those people whose appearance may keep others away and to hug them to warm their authentic hearts.

With the emphasis on friends and companions, Ichiban's characterization is also strengthened. Besides his people-person nature, after all, his loyalty and care to friends are the keys to his success against Aoki – It is not done alone like Kiryu in previous *Yakuza* entries, but with the help of friends in a classic JRPG fashion.

Strongest Element

Besides thriving at using ludonarrative for great characterization, the game incorporates great use of symbolism for characterization, one of the strongest aspects of the narrative. Most of those metaphors are all tied together by a single theme: **top** and **bottom**. It does not only function as a way to raise questions about social classes in contemporary society, but also as a way to characterize Ichiban, our hero, in contrast with Aoki, the shadow.

While being completely different in almost every aspect, Ichiban and Masato, Aoki's original identity, has striking similarities. At the end of the game, it was revealed that both of them are babies abandoned in public lockers. They both have a close relationship with Masumi Arakawa, and they grow up together in their teenage years in the Arakawa family.

Ichiban is picked up by a lower-class person, adopted, and raised in a soapland, which was generally considered as the **bottom** of society. Whereas Masato is picked up as the biological son of Masumi Arakawa, the **head** of a notable yakuza family, which guarantees him to have enough wealth to squander in his teen years.

However, unlike Ichiban with an everlasting desire to help **underclasses** like him, Masato's congenital illness, the **inability to stand up** without external help, left him with a scar on his heart, resulting in an unhappy childhood. When his becoming girlfriend cut off their relationship to hook up with a man with political power, his desire for being on **top** of everyone else becomes more and more unhealthy.

While Ichiban always **looks up** to others to learn and become better, Masato's desire for power roots in the need to **look down** on everyone else. Unlike Ichiban who sees the good in Masumi Arakawa and **admires** him as a father figure, Masato **hates** his own father and blames him and his Yakuza family as the cause of his misery in his childhood, and even ordered the murder of his father later in the game as a way to eliminate anyone **above** him.

When Ichiban spent 18 years in prison and came out as a misfit in society, Masato went abroad to the U.S., had his disease cured, entered the upper class as Aoki, and eventually the governor of Tokyo, the **top** position. When Aoki is first introduced in the cutscene, he is **standing** with his darkened heart inside a clean suit in an office at a **high** building, **looking down** at the whole city. He speaks about his grand plan of Bleach Japan, an organization dedicated to exterminating people like the homeless, illegal immigrants, sex workers, and ex-criminals, what he thought of as **low** lives. Ichiban with his unkempt punch perm and heart of gold, however, throughout the story, **crawls** out of the "**gutter**" with his friends and strives for a better life for those people in the grey zones.

A similar metaphor is used in the final "dungeon", the millennium tower, the **highest** skyscraper in Kamurocho. The building is a literal and metaphorical process of Ichiban climbing up from the **bottom** to the **top** along with his friends to confront Aiko.

Whereas Aiko, starting at the **top**, after being defeated, used a policeman as a hostage to flee to the **bottom** of the tower. Their opposite direction of movement perfectly captures the trajectories of their lives. The striking difference lies in that Ichiban considers everyone as an equal human being whereas Aoki uses people as steppingstones for his ultimate power.

Failing to achieve his master plan, Aoki fled out of the tower and finally stumbled into the public lockers where both Ichiban and he were abandoned as babies. In his final moment, Aoki made peace with Ichiban and looked to him as a **peer**. After being stabbed by Kume out of distrust and rage, Aoki fell in front of the lockers. Locker 99, the **highest** two-digit number, where he was picked up from as a baby. Next to the locker is number 101, the second smallest three-digit number. Although every digit is much smaller than 9 but together greater than 99. The single digit 1 also signifies great room for growth with a step in the right direction, from the **bottom** to the **top**.

Like his dragonfish tattoo on the back, when it swims against the current to the **top** of the waterfall, it will become a dragon. “Like a dragon”, as the title suggests, is a perfect metaphor for Ichiban’s growth in the journey.

In the last scene of the game, Ichiban returns to Ijincho. **Standing** on a bridge, he **looks up** to the sky, and, with his classic optimism, comments:

“Once you’re at rock bottom, the only way forward is up. But the bottom doesn’t have to be all dark and gloomy. If you can stand and look up, you’ll see the light of hope up there. [1]

Unsuccessful Element

One major problem with the narrative is its pacing related to gameplay near the end of the story. After a scene playing out showing all party members with their battle speech and determination to enter the final “dungeon”, Millennium Tower, the player can now march for the final battle. However, most players are unlikely to have enough levels or are not well-equipped enough to win the battle.

While the problem may appear to be about gameplay, it hurts the narrative immensely. For a well-structured narrative, near the climax, the story needs to speed up and offers more intensity in content. While the cutscenes and dialogues near the end of the story do suggest the acceleration in pace, the gameplay suggests otherwise. For an average skilled player to conquer the Millennium Tower, the player needs to grind for levels and equipment, which means the player may need to spend another 3 to 5 hours to meet the requirement. Although grinding could be a narrative device to simulate the experience of struggle or tedium of “jobs”, the players are likely to have already experienced the feeling through some overly grindy “dungeon” in earlier parts of the game.

Indeed, the player can access a special “dungeon” to grind faster at any time in the late game, but the player did not have enough incentive to do so as they may not know how powerful the enemies in the final “dungeon” are beforehand.

Another ramification is that, since the player never knows how strong the enemies in the final “dungeon” are and the fact that JRPG combat often requires hard stats to win, it is nearly impossible that the player can have a thrilling experience of the final “dungeon” as they will struggle and unavoidably fails in combat.

To add to the problem, the final “dungeon” takes around 2 hours of continuous combat to complete with extremely limited checkpoints in between, which forces the defeated player to replay a huge portion of the combats and cutscenes that the player has already experienced. In the worst scenario, the player, who might have struggled but managed to advance quite a long way in the tower through trial and error, finds out enemies in the later part of the slog can one-shot the player’s party, leaving the player no choice but to reload the save file before entering the tower, grind for 3-5 hours, and then reenter the tower to experience the same combats and cutscenes again.

When the players expect a thrilling finale for the journey that has been great so far, they are instead greeted with more grinds, which may leave them disappointed even though the end story is quite satisfying. While other JRPGs may use the excuse that it is how JRPG works, when the narrative itself is so integral to the genre, it is hard to find a reason to justify the abrupt drag of the pace.

A potential fix to the problem is to add a threshold guardian at the early stage of the tower. When the player is much under-leveled for the final challenge, the player will realize the problem at the beginning stage and choose to grind or not. In addition, some areas and encounters could be made optional but provide extra items and experience for the under-leveled player to increase their stats or gain much-needed items whereas the

more experienced layer could simply ignore the side path and go through the critical path to reach the top of the tower faster. In either case, the players, once enter the tower, are no longer forced to break the pacing by exiting the “dungeon” to grind, meanwhile the grinding process will be shorter and less tedious. An additional advantage is that the player will now face the final boss at similar levels, avoiding a trivial or impossible boss combat experience.

Highlight

One of the best scenes happens in the early game, depicting Ichiban pulling a baseball bat out of the ground - a scene that marks a turning point in the hero’s journey. In addition, it manages to introduce Ichiban’s wild imagination to the player and to establish the game’s self-referential humor to set the tone of the game.

The scene takes place after Ichiban shortly after Nanba and Adachi joined him in Ijincho. Ichiban and his friends went to look for a job at a work agency. Halfway there, the party notices something bizarre on the street - a baseball bat is stuck into the middle of a concrete sidewalk. After some quips, both Nanba and Adachi tried to pull the baseball bat out of the ground but failed to do so. As Ichiban reaches out to the bat, the handle starts sparking. The earth begins shaking and a blue gleam emits out of the crack in the ground. Blue flames form around the bat as Ichiban, after a cry, finally pulls the bat out of the ground.

“You know how in RPGs, there’s always some holy sword only the hero can pick up?” – Nanba [1]

The scene, immediately followed by Ichiban’s successful attempt, is not simply a parody of the classical Excalibur trope common in video games as commented by the characters, but it also signifies an important narrative moment for Ichiban. While the players may find that the protagonist is a fan of video games, especially *Dragon Quest*, its narrative importance should not be overlooked.

Before the scene, enemies are simply real-life gangsters, and during the battle scripted to immediately follow the scene, with Ichiban’s perspective, the player sees those human enemies transform into zany half-monsters in front of the eyes. During the combat, things become wild as well - Nanba acquires the ability to breathe fire while the enemies grow in size and weapons are enchanted with a purple aura.

Followed by the stylish turn-based combat, UI texts appear.

“Kasuga’s job changed to Hero.” [1]

“Enemies throughout the city will change their appearance according to Kasuga’s wild imagination.”

UI text’s general purpose is to display gameplay-related information specifically for the player, but those lines provide significant weight narratively. Being the hero signifies a turning point in Ichiban’s hero journey. After his first failed arc where he ended up losing

everything, his optimism brings him a second chance. With the “aid of the supernatural”, Ichiban is now an actual hero ready for the next adventure with his friends.

Where other heroes are, to some extent, forced to their duties, for Ichiban, it is a job, the thing people do to make a living. For Ichiban, being the hero – being able to help the people in need, is not just for fun or for hobbies, but an actual necessity. He may find an actual job after this encounter, but it is the desire of helping others rather than the payment that drives him, a great display of Ichiban’s personality.

The UI text about imagination not only tells the player that there will be all kinds of weird “monsters” in the city, but also that the player now experiences through the eyes of Ichiban. The game makes the point obvious as Ichiban is first surprised by this sudden change, whereas Namba and Adachi are completely unaware of the scene seen by Ichiban.

“Huh? What are you raving about? You know this isn’t a video game, right?” Adachi questioned. [1]

“Well, whatever. Hehehe. At least it’s more fun for me.” Ichiban responded.

A clear contrast between a more down-to-earth character with our “fantasy” hero.

However, this is just the introduction to Ichiban’s imaginative world, and things only get crazier afterward. From that scene onward, every time the players see something wacky, they can experience it, knowing that it might not be what happened in reality, but it is what Ichiban felt like. The empathy with Ichiban through visuals and gameplay is crucial to the game’s deep characterization of the protagonist.

Critical Reception

Tristan Ogilvie from IGN gives the game a 7.0/10. He commends that the game maintains a sense of humor and plot-twisting narrative about crime conspiracy throughout the series. In addition, he points out that the companions in the game make exploring the city even more interesting – “especially when their lighthearted bant offers insight into each location as you wander around”. [2]

Tony Polanco from PCMag gives the game a 4.5/10. He applauds the protagonist to be a more dynamic character compared to previous games in the installment. He also acknowledges that the fact Ichiban is “an avid gamer, ... breaks the fourth wall when he (correctly) states that meals provide boosts and that fighting bad guys increases his levels”. Hence, he comments that the transition from an action game to a JRPG makes more sense. [3]

Michael Higham from GameSpot gives the game a 9.0/10. He acclaims that the transition from an action game to a JRPG “enables a new kind of storytelling that the series hasn't explored before, one that focuses on the power of embracing friendship and fighting together every step of the way”. He also compliments the companion system that those characters in Ichiban's party are not just extra hands for the battle but friends that can drink together, help each other, and even cause trouble at times. In addition, while the motivation of the main villain is somewhat cliché, the narrative takes time to examine politics against certain social minorities without sacrificing its “captivating drama”, “strong characterization”, and “4D chess” level of an engaging plot. [4]

Lessons

- **Characterization should not be limited to dialogues and actions.** Subtle things like how a camera is angled in a cutscene or how the UI texts are displayed can also reflect personalities. However, the most effective way to characterize an individual in a video game is through gameplay. When the player shares the same feeling through the same experience with the character, the player can empathize and become emotionally attached to the character.
- **Genre could be a metanarrative element to enhance the story and characterization.** If the game remained an action game, the tropes of JRPG would no longer work, and the story would be less engaging because of it. It is the fact that JRPGs are so commonly associated with certain elements, such as a hero protagonist and a party of friends, that the gameplay becomes coherent with the tone, and characterization is more appreciated as a result. Meanwhile, removing or modifying some of the established elements in a certain genre may lead to a brand-new experience.
- **Metaphors are important to create a compelling story.** While the players may not recognize or appreciate all the symbolism and visual languages in the game at first, it may affect the player subconsciously, so that they are more likely to consider the plot makes sense as certain events are foreshadowed and have an “aha” moment when fully comprehend the depth of the story and the characters.

Summation

Yakuza: Like a Dragon tells a compelling story about underclasses in contemporary Japan. Instead of sticking with the action game genre, the new entry shifts itself into a JRPG and introduces a *Dragon Quest* fan as the new hero. The game manages to use the genre itself to support its narrative and characterization by welcoming some iconic elements, such as The Hero's Journey, turn-based combat, and companions, but with its unique twists at the same time. Its heavy exploration of ludonarrative manages to unify different elements of the game to craft a well-rounded protagonist and a genuine story, letting the player truly embrace Ichiban's character and experience the thrilling journey through his perspective.

References

- [1] *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, Sega, 2020.
- [2] Ogilvie, Tristan. “Yakuza: Like a Dragon Review.” IGN, Nov 20, 2020.
<https://www.ign.com/articles/yakuza-like-a-dragon-review>
- [3] Polanco, Tony. “Yakuza: Like a Dragon (for PC) Review.” PCMag, March 30, 2021.
<https://www.pcmag.com/reviews/yakuza-like-a-dragon-for-pc>
- [4] Higham, Michael. “Yakuza: Like a Dragon Review – The Power of Friendship.” GameSpot, Nov 10, 2020. <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/yakuza-like-a-dragon-review-the-power-of-friendship/1900-6417603/>