

THE ISSUE OF RUBY AND GODA: THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF NEGATIVE TRANSGENDER PORTRAYALS IN *YAKUZA KIWAMI* AND THE VIDEO GAME MEDIUM

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Abstract

Utilizing *Yakuza Kiwami's* (2016) portrayal of transgender persons as an example, this paper seeks to examine such portrayals in the video game medium at large, dedicating particular attention to the real-world effects of negative portrayals. In relation to *Yakuza Kiwami*, this paper finds that the particular portrayal in question is overtly negative, placing upon transgender persons a negative connotation and engaging with oppressive behaviors. Seeking to identify the ramifications of such a portrayal, this paper draws conclusions by comparing the video game medium with other visual media, outlining the potential for both positive and negative effects. Finding that visual media can

shape consumers' worldviews, this paper suggests that *Yakuza Kiwami's* specific negative portrayal of transgender persons could prove harmful and corrosive through the perpetuation of marginalization and stigmatization. Ultimately, video games hold the power to influence their respective audiences as a form of visual media, necessitating conscious portrayals of transgender persons and providing an opportunity for wide-ranging acceptance and understanding toward body and gender diversity at large within the video game medium. This paper suggests further research in the relationships and interactions between video games and transgender persons.



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1. Introduction

Visual media has become a powerful outlet for society in an increasingly digital age. From films and television shows to the rise of video games, people have found recreation in visual media, accepting its various forms as important tools and assets in everyday life. Reflecting various aspects of society due to its essential role, visual media acts as a sponge, consuming the positive and negative facets of human social interaction, and feeding them back to the consumer. One such negative facet is how society at large understands and treats transgender individuals. Because transgender persons' biological bodies do not match their embraced identities, society often fails to accept transgender individuals on the basis of their perceived or asserted nonconformity. This is a despicable form of discrimination that should not be replicated within media, as the societal implications for transgender persons are often severe, such as social isolation, abuse, or even death. However, due to the very nature of visual media, transphobia has been reproduced in video games, forcing players to interact with an uglier side of society in their recreation. How does this relationship impose upon the player? That is, how do portrayals of transgender persons potentially affect media consumers who play video games? Seeking to answer this question, this essay utilizes the video game *Yakuza Kiwami* (2016) as a primary source, examining a particular transphobic interaction players have within the game and assessing how this interaction could potentially impress upon said players. The essay concludes that *Yakuza Kiwami's* portrayal of transgender persons holds an overtly negative connotation toward transgender individuals, potentially having a harmful effect on the transgender community in the real world and revealing the social impact video games can have.

2. Ruby and Goda: The Portrayal in Question

Kazuma Kiryu is a rather inoffensive character as far as video game protagonists go. He identifies as a man, fulfills the strong-silent archetype, and he gets what he wants by using muscle and brawn—maintaining power through force. To be sure, Kiryu is nothing atypical for video game characters, and, for the hypermasculine *Yakuza* series, Kiryu is the perfect fit. However, as part of this over-the-

top action saga, there is one unspoken rule that Kiryu never breaks: he may punch, kick, and throw every man under the sun; he may wrestle with tigers and face Japan's most legendary fighters; but, above all else, he will not punch a woman. This rule is sacred to the *Yakuza* franchise; however, *Yakuza Kiwami*, the 2016 reboot of the original *Yakuza* game, makes an exception. Kiryu fights a transgender woman (*Yakuza Kiwami*).

Yakuza has never been known for its dynamic understanding and accommodation of diversity. Female characters are often relegated to roles of delicacy and servitude; characters who represent racial minorities are rare and often serve no significant purpose within the games' various stories; and the franchise is largely ruled over by angry patriarchy who could not solve a crossword puzzle without using violence. However, *Yakuza Kiwami's* portrayal of transgender persons is particularly offensive. In a substory (the game's equivalent to side quests) called "The Truth About Beauty," Kiryu is approached by a woman named Ruby, who flirts with him and asks Kiryu if he wants to hang out. If the player agrees, the screen cuts to black, and the two reappear in front of a hotel, where Ruby can be seen flirting with Kiryu again, now suggesting that they should have sex. At first Kiryu acts coy, but the player is given the choice whether to accompany Ruby or turn down her advances. If Kiryu resists, Ruby tries to intimidate him into coming along, and, if the player continues to resist, she calls her brother Goda to fight Kiryu. Goda arrives, revealing that Ruby is a transgender woman—although the game heinously refers to her as a "dude,"—and Kiryu and Goda fight as a result of Ruby's "trickery." Beating Goda, who is then revealed to be a transgender man—again, the game misgenders him—Kiryu then fights Ruby, whose voice switches from the game's perceived feminine voice to the game's perceived masculine voice. Once Kiryu has defeated the pair, they run off. If the player had instead chosen to have sex with Ruby earlier in the substory, Kiryu quickly realizes Ruby's genitalia as they get intimate, expresses shock, and his health bar is diminished. Ruby expresses a great deal of complacency for "tricking" Kiryu, and the rest of the substory essentially follows the same path as if Kiryu had resisted from that point on (*Yakuza Kiwami*).



3. A Negative Portrayal: Examining Ruby and Goda

This portrayal of transgender persons within *Yakuza Kiwami* holds a negative connotation for various reasons. First, this portrayal makes a grave offense that is present and predominant in many forms of media: Ruby's sexuality, as a transgender individual, trumps her humanity. As explored by Baptista and Himmel in their text about the violence of binary-gender social representation, transgender individuals are often reduced to their sexuality as a result of gender norms, which assert a "natural" gender binary. As Baptista and Himmel explain in their work addressing the news coverage of Gisberta Salce Júnior, a transgender woman who was murdered in Portugal, "Her sexuality becomes her identity, inside of which she is incarcerated" (645). With sexuality dominating identity, there is an inherent dehumanization; transgender persons are often looked upon and treated as transgender rather than human. Further judgments may then be made—and often are made—on the basis of this overwhelming identity. Such a negative social phenomenon can be seen through the hyper-sexualization of Ruby in *Yakuza Kiwami*. As a transgender woman, Ruby's identity, for the most part, is dominated by an overwhelming interest in her sexuality. Ruby is portrayed as overtly flirtatious and suggestive, and her only agenda as a character is to have sex with Kiryu. She is deemed immoral as a result, and the player is forced to fight her. Ultimately, Ruby is viewed as an enemy due to faulty assumptions made about the hypersexualized lives of transgender persons solely on the basis of their identities, which fall outside of the gender binary; the portrayal of her character and the definition of her identity derives from a place of negligence and ignorance. Because Ruby's entire identity as a transgender character is framed upon the writers' parochial understandings of transgender persons, the perspective through which the player examines the character is severely distorted and unnecessarily biased against transgender individuals. Consequently, the treatment of this character conveys a negative connotation of transgender persons (*Yakuza Kiwami*).

Second, *Yakuza Kiwami*'s portrayal of transgender persons is inherently oppressive. As defined in Frye's text

"Oppression," "The root word of 'oppression' is the element 'press' ... Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce" (2). As part of this immobilizing oppression, Frye explains, one is also oppressed when they are forced into a social group and then judged upon characteristics that are deemed "natural" for that social group, but remain beyond their control (8). This tenet of oppression relates well to Baptista and Himmel's text, which asserts that media often demonstrate a severe misunderstanding of transgender persons when they dedicate explicit focus toward defining individual aspects of transgender experiences within their social representation—for example, when media prioritize the specific organs a transgender person may or may not have (645). This tendency is another fallacy demonstrated within *Yakuza Kiwami*. In particular, special attention is drawn to Ruby's physical attributes—Ruby's genitalia, her voice, and her body more generally. If the player chooses to have sex with Ruby, Kiryu displays shock when he "discovers" Ruby's genitalia. When Kiryu fights Ruby, her voice seemingly switches from a perceived feminine voice to a perceived masculine voice. While the rest of the game holds Kiryu to the aforementioned "unspoken rule"—that is, Kiryu does not hit women—an exception is applied in the case of Ruby. Kiryu can hit Ruby because she is a transgender woman, implying that Ruby is not a real woman after all and does not deserve to be treated as such (*Yakuza Kiwami*). Ultimately, the treatment of Ruby—the focus given to her physical attributes rather than her internal being—demonstrates an oppressive tendency too often embraced by media. Heightened attention given to the physical attributes of transgender persons can suggest that their existence is abnormal or unnatural, which undermines their humanity and provides a significant social barrier on the basis of physicality alone (Baptista and Himmel 645; Frye 13). Because this portrayal meets Frye's definition of oppression, it can be applied to contexts holding a negative connotation toward transgender persons.



4. Shaping Worldviews: The Effects of Visual Media

What significance does such an overtly negative portrayal of transgender persons tangibly serve? The answer is complex, but ultimately worth diving into to better dissect the effects such representations can have on transgender persons in the real world. Regardless of one's opinion on the video game medium, it should be understood that some video games do try to have an impression on their players that is much grander than merely the entertainment factor of game mechanics and the enjoyment that comes from play. As Bogost explains in his text about video game rhetoric:

Video games are not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented—for critique, satire, education, or commentary ... video games make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate. (2655-2656)

If one accepts Bogost's thesis—that video games can in fact maintain their own rhetoric—it can be understood that some video games at least *attempt* to have an impression on their players. Using Bogost's own example, the popular video game *Animal Crossing* attempts to deliver social commentary on the monotony of the economic world by allowing players to engage in commerce, experience economic advancement or economic stagnation, and deal with the hardships of long-term debt (2653-2655). *Animal Crossing*, as a video game, *attempts* to make an impression on its players.

Consider another form of visual media that attempts to leave an impression on its viewers: television. In their text dissecting the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*, Jenney and Exner-Cortens maintain that the show is successful in delivering social commentary by exposing toxic masculinity and sexual violence as a source of mental health issues and suicide among teenage girls. Dissecting the series as a text, Jenney and Exner-Cortens elaborate how the show displays toxic masculinity and gendered violence throughout each of its episodes, how the show displays the effects that this toxic masculinity and gendered vio-

lence have on the show's protagonist, and how the show displays that these effects are ultimately harmful to the protagonist's mental health. By watching the series, one could derive a social commentary: how toxic masculinity and gendered violence can have a negative impact on the mental health of teenage girls (Jenney and Exner-Cortens 411-412, 415). There is a social commentary here which *attempts* to leave an impression on the audience and succeeds by demonstrating relevant social phenomena that exist in the real world.

As illustrated above, video games and television both attempt to leave an impression on their respective audiences, an approach which can prove successful. To begin to understand the precise effect of these impressions, consider the interactions between video games and children. In Dietz's text, "An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games," Dietz assesses the extent to which gender portrayals in video games can shape children's understandings of gender in the real world, specifically questioning the effects of negative stereotypes or the exclusion of women altogether. Finding a solution to this question, Dietz concludes:

Video games ... have become agents in the development of identities in children ... Applying the theory of Mead (1934), it is argued that [stereotypical characterizations of women portrayed within video games] may have a real effect upon the attitudes of children toward women and relationships and their expectations about behavior. As the child identifies with the traditional feminine or masculine role, she or he begins to expect certain behavior from females and males in society. (439)

Based on Dietz's study, one can see how video games may impact children, affecting their social understandings of others or even themselves. In this case, video games, much like television and other forms of visual media, are successful in affecting their players' worldviews.

Of course, *Yakuza Kiwami* is not a children's game; it received a "Mature" rating from the ESRB for "Blood, Intense Violence, Partial Nudity, Sexual Themes, Strong



Language, [and] Use of Alcohol" (*"Yakuza Kiwami"*). To say *Yakuza Kiwami* might leave an impression on its player base in the same way a game like *Super Mario 2* might shape a child's understanding of gender roles would be unreasonable and negligent of context. Nonetheless, Dietz's text demonstrates that video games do have the capability to change how their respective audiences interact with the world. In their extensive literature review of texts exploring the potential impact video games have on their players, Shliakhovchuk and Muñoz García expand upon this idea for a wider audience. In particular, Shliakhovchuk and Muñoz García's findings suggest "video games are capable of affecting players' ethical mindsets and changing their attitudes towards culturally different people" by exposing them to diversity that may exist throughout the world, but not within their localized bubbles. The repercussions of this potential effect could be both positive and negative. On one hand, Shliakhovchuk and Muñoz García suggest that video games could act as a conduit for delivering a more extensive education on cultural diversity that emulates the real world on a much smaller scale, ultimately informing gamers and helping them develop wider and more inclusive understandings of the society that exists around them (50). On the other hand, Shliakhovchuk and Muñoz García also point to a potentially problematic impression video games can have, explaining:

Considering that many video games explicitly or implicitly encourage gamers to absorb their built-in cultural messages, it requires players to be aware of the context they and their characters exist in. Otherwise, video game players with time become less critical of the stereotypic content of the games, and often show signs that their belief system is incorporating these negative beliefs. (51)

Shliakhovchuk and Muñoz García's findings suggest a desensitization that players may experience over time toward culturally insensitive or stereotypical portrayals promulgated by video games, which begin to influence how gamers understand and interact with their social surroundings. This piece of evidence further demon-

strates video games' ability to shape players' mindsets, which may promote harmful ideas through the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, such as *Yakuza Kiwami's* portrayal of transgender persons.

5. Media's Effects on Transgender Persons

Noting the power video games have to alter their players' worldviews, it is important to pinpoint the repercussions this relationship can have for transgender persons specifically. First, it may be beneficial to examine in general how portrayals of transgender persons within other forms of media can affect social perception of the transgender community at large. Conducting a study that examines the effects of media coverage surrounding Caitlyn Jenner, an American celebrity who came out as a transgender woman in 2015, Miller et al. ultimately find that mass media portrayals of Jenner have a significant impact on how people perceive the transgender community and, consequently, shape how these people may address policies and issues relating to transgender rights (631). In particular, Miller et al. explore Jenner's media exposure as an openly transgender woman as a case of parasocial contact, which affects how individuals come to understand those they only have contact with through the media and can result in the formation of "group-relevant attitudes" (622). Examining the influence of this parasocial contact and deeming the media portrayals of Jenner to be generally positive, Miller et al. find that such positive portrayals actually have an impact in forming positive attitudes toward transgender persons and transgender issues amongst viewers—even those who may be deemed deeply transphobic (622, 632). This example is an instance in which perceived positive portrayals in the media have helped form positive attitudes toward transgender persons.

Of course, there are some discrepancies in relevance between the impact of Caitlyn Jenner's story and the topic of this essay. Perhaps most notably, media coverage surrounding Jenner's transition was conveyed primarily within news media, which may be more generally perceived as informative or factual as opposed to visual media, often viewed as an entertainment outlet. While it



could be argued that the news media's ability to influence group-related attitudes surrounding transgender persons does not extend to films, television shows, and video games for this reason, studies examining the role television can play in shifting attitudes toward transgender persons suggest otherwise. In particular, Gillig et al. look at the medical drama *Royal Pains*, examining an episode that features a transgender-centered storyline and analyzing the effect of this episode on its audience. Overall, Gillig et al. deem this portrayal of a transgender individual to be positive; the show actually cast a transgender teen to play the character, and the show's protagonist gradually comes to understand the transgender character's experiences, working to provide solutions to the character's health issues while also accommodating them emotionally in their transition (516-517). Aligning with the study conducted by Miller et al., Gillig et al. observe that many of those viewers who watched this particular episode of *Royal Pains* formed more positive attitudes toward transgender persons and pro-transgender policies. Furthermore, Gillig et al. also suggest that viewers who had previous experiences with other positive portrayals of transgender persons in visual media prior to watching the episode demonstrated an even stronger support for the transgender community (523). These two results of the study allow Gillig et al. to conclude that:

Our research sheds light on the potential of entertainment narratives depicting marginalized groups and politicized issues to shape the attitudes of those who might not otherwise seek out such representations ... By inspiring viewers to identify with members of marginalized groups and eliciting positive emotions such as hope, such narratives are truly more than just entertainment. Our research underscores the potential of brief storylines and nonrecurring characters to have important effects immediately and over time. (525)

Much like the effect the news coverage surrounding Caitlyn Jenner's transition had on forming positive attitudes toward transgender persons, visual media, such as films, television shows, and video games, can have a similar impact.

Granted, not all attention paid toward transgender persons in visual media is positive; as already discussed, the portrayal in *Yakuza Kiwami* holds an overt negative connotation—there is no such elicitation of hope that Gillig et al. mention. In fact, it is more so the case that despite the examples of positive portrayals mentioned above, portrayals of transgender persons in visual media are blatantly negative or severely construed. As Kronz finds in her study on depictions of nonconformity in American cinema, nonconforming persons are vastly underrepresented in film; if a nonconforming character is present in a given film, they often stand as a misrepresentation of nonconforming persons in the real world. Examining American cinema that was produced between the years of 2001 and 2011, Kronz specifically reports that only 36 of over 1,000 films included gender nonconforming characters, and of those 36 films, there was an overwhelming tendency to address these nonconforming characters as mere comedic value, largely embracing stereotypes and trivializing the experiences of transgender and gender non-binary individuals (106). Running parallel to these findings, Capuzza and Spencer's text on the evolution of transgender portrayals across television indicates similar issues of misrepresentation, pointing toward an overarching trivialization that results from the perceived need to appeal to cisgender audiences. Some of the largest offenses here include attempts to force transgender characters into the gender binary through gender confirmation, repressing transgender characters by avoiding transgender politics, or even selling faulty notions of villainy through transgender characters intended to be petty or evil (Capuzza and Spencer 216). Unlike the studies presented by Miller et al. and Gillig et al., these articles do not explicitly elaborate how or if these portrayals even influence viewers' attitudes surrounding transgender persons and the transgender community at large; however, one can infer that the effects are not positive. After all, if visual media has the ability to posit positive attitudes toward transgender persons upon media consumers, it is more than likely that films, television shows, and video games can also posit negative attitudes. Accepting that reality, these negative portrayals hold a host of negative implications for transgender persons.

6. The Repercussions of Oppression in *Yakuza Kiwami*

Two consequences resulting from the negative media por-



trayals of transgender persons are marginalization and stigma. As defined by Young in her “Five Faces of Oppression,” “Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination” (188). Admittedly, the circumstances described throughout this essay are perhaps not as grave as the threats Young asserts; however, Young’s definition articulates the key issue surrounding marginalization, even as it relates here. Marginalization is an issue of deprivation. As Young later explains, marginalized groups face severe injustice because they are cast out; they cannot participate, and so their representation is dependent upon others (190). While Young specifically talks about the social structure of a capitalist society and how oppression operates within such a society, a parallel can be drawn between Young’s analyses and the lack of substantive transgender representation in visual media. As discussed, and as Kronz has demonstrated, there is an overwhelming underrepresentation of transgender persons throughout cinema (106). *Yakuza Kiwami*’s portrayal reflects this same reality with relation to the video game medium. Of course, not every character in a video game can steal the limelight, and it is perhaps understandable that Ruby and Goda show up for a single substory and are never seen again; this is commonplace for narrative-driven single-player games that contain side quests. The real offense here is that Ruby and Goda are the only transgender characters throughout the entire game. Despite *Yakuza Kiwami*’s considerably sizeable playtime, transgender representation is limited to this small instance, taking up no more time than ten minutes, which is entirely dedicated toward portraying transgender persons in a negative light—likely intended to be “comedic” (*Yakuza Kiwami*; Kronz 106).

In terms of marginalization, *Yakuza Kiwami*’s portrayal of transgender persons is harmful because it affirms an already dominant marginalization of the transgender community throughout society. Divan et al. put the larger issue at hand into perspective:

For a reader who is not trans, imagine a world in which the core of your being goes unrecognized within the family, if and when you step into school, when you seek

employment, or when you need social services such as health and housing. You have no way to easily access any of the institutions and services that others take for granted because of this denial of your existence ... Additionally, because of your outward appearance, you may be subject to discrimination, violence, or the fear of it. In such circumstances, how could you possibly partake in social and economic development? (79)

One might not think the ramifications of such marginalization in a video game are so grand in scale; however, the influence of visual media is on the rise as societies increase their dependence on technology and the digital world for entertainment and information alike. As explained by Holiday et al., a decent proportion of cisgender persons, who make up a significant majority of society, rely heavily—if not entirely—on media for their information and basic understanding of transgender persons, transgender policies, and issues surrounding the transgender community at large (1157). If fair media representation is lacking, as examined with marginalization, the implications of harmful effects for the transgender community are not difficult to see. Fundamentally, this issue revolves around transgender individuals’ ability to properly interact and partake in society without social barriers or hindrances. By limiting consumers’ exposure to transgender characters and transgender issues within visual media, there is an implicit deprivation of transgender individuals’ full membership and participation within society.

Along with the overarching trends of marginalization found in many portrayals of transgender persons throughout visual media, and the problems these instances of marginalization impose, there are also strong tendencies toward stigmatization. Looking at trends in the fields of psychiatry and psychology, Soroka and Stepulak explain that “stigmatization consists in labelling a person suffering from a disorder with the stigma of mental illness, associated with numerous negative stereotypes that are established in both individual and social mentality.” Although this definition does not fit our scenario verbatim—being a transgender person certainly has nothing to do with a disorder or mental illness—a few relevant points can be taken from this definition in order to better understand the problematic aspects of transgender



stigma promoted through visual media. First, as Soroka and Stepulak note, stigma is fundamentally connected with negative stereotypes. These stereotypes can range from passive microaggressions to more active attempts at perpetuating harmful and oftentimes untrue beliefs about a given social group. Second, stigma has the ability to impact how an individual affected by the aforementioned stereotypes views themselves in terms of their relationship with the world and their relationship with their own person (Soroka and Stepulak 60).

Returning to *Yakuza Kiwami*'s portrayal of transgender persons, it becomes clear that the game is responsible for perpetuating negative stereotypes of transgender persons that have the capacity to create self-stigmatization. Specifically, *Yakuza Kiwami* conducts Ruby and Goda in such a way that implies villainy and seeks comedic value. The former is implied when Ruby shows delight over "tricking" Kiryu into sex; the latter is implied when Kiryu "discovers" Ruby's genitalia, takes damage as a result, and is "forced" to fight not one, but two transgender characters (*Yakuza Kiwami*). By employing notions of villainy and comedy around Ruby and Goda, the game engages negative stereotypes. As Capuzza and Spencer discuss in their analysis of villainous portrayals of transgender persons, and as Kronz explains about comedic portrayals of transgender persons, visual media often employ such images and notions to appeal to a more wide-ranging cisgender audience; it should not be a difficult conclusion to make that this portrayal is therefore stereotypical, and this essay will not entertain the cartoonish ideas that these stereotypes may be true (Capuzza and Spencer 216; Kronz 106). Rather, *Yakuza Kiwami* employs negative stereotypes surrounding transgender persons as an exploitative measure to gain appeal; those notions of transgender persons presented through the game's portrayal are unfounded and entirely synthetic.

Beyond the nature of stereotypes, *Yakuza Kiwami*, as a video game, also holds the capacity to influence how a transgender person may view themselves within the greater context of the world and in an individualistic sense, aligning with Soroka and Stepulak's second tenet of stigmatization (60). This capacity of visual media in general is particularly important, as McInroy and Craig assess that "Offline media [that is, visual

media] is frequently the medium by which people who come to identify as transgender first encounter representation of transgender individuals and communities." As a result of this early contact with transgender portrayals in visual media, transgender persons can come to understand themselves in varying ways. Particularly, transgender individuals who have early contact with negative portrayals of transgender persons in visual media are more likely to experience feelings of depression or shame when addressing their own identity, especially if the environment around them also perpetuates negative stereotypes (607-608). The implications here are grand, as this observation would imply that *Yakuza Kiwami*, both as a video game and as a form of visual media, could impact how transgender persons interact with the world and come to understand themselves. If this possibility is accepted, the harm of *Yakuza Kiwami*'s negative portrayal of transgender persons becomes much clearer, as Soroka and Stepulak explain the effects stigma can have on an individual:

Stigmatization leads to a reduction in life opportunities, and the possibilities of self-realization, as well as achievement of important life goals. Stigma and fear of rejection contribute to adopting mentally defensive attitudes by the patients [in this case, transgender individuals], and their withdrawing from social life, which results in limiting their social networks and worsening of their prognosis. An additional consequence of self-stigma is lowered self-esteem, dignity and self-efficacy, which translates into a general worse social functioning at the level of professional life, family and self-care. (61)

While *Yakuza Kiwami*'s mere ten-minute scenario portraying transgender persons with a negative connotation may not initially be considered any point of great concern, research shows that the stigmatization of such stereotypical depictions can hold severe adverse effects for transgender persons, critically shifting how they operate within the world as a result of their understandings of themselves.

7. Looking Forward: The Wider Implications for the Video Game Medium

Yakuza Kiwami's portrayal of transgender persons is not only negative in its connotation, but it can also prove signifi-



cantly harmful in the greater narrative of how transgender persons are perceived and how they operate throughout society. Despite the narrow conclusions of this research, the implications are much larger than *Yakuza Kiwami* for those who do not conform to the gender binary and other perceived gender norms. While not the primary topic of this essay, such implications can be addressed through summary of the information already presented alongside some extrapolation. As discovered, video games, as a form of visual media, can not only attempt to impact their respective player bases, but actually succeed in influencing how their players view and interact with the world (Bogost 2655-2656; Dietz 439; Shliakhovchuk and Muñoz García 50-51). With specific regard toward the effect of transgender portrayals, it was found that visual media in general can also influence media consumers' attitudes about transgender persons and transgender issues—both in a positive and negative manner (Miller et al. 622, 632; Gillig et al. 523; Kronz 106; Capuzza and Spencer 216; Holiday et al. 1157; McInroy and Craig 607-608). Taking note of *Yakuza Kiwami* specifically, the portrayal was negative, which would hypothetically influence attitudes toward transgender persons in a negative manner; however, not all portrayals hold negative connotations with negative implications. By comparing video games with other visual media, the much larger implication for the medium as a whole would be that negative portrayals fuel negative attitudes toward transgender persons and positive portrayals fuel positive attitudes toward transgender persons. In particular, portrayals like the one found in *Yakuza Kiwami*, which trivialize transgender experiences by marginalizing its transgender characters and perpetuating stigmatizing stereotypes, would likely harm transgender individuals' ability to operate in society, as these portrayals enable discriminating behaviors and self-depreciation (Young 188, 190; Divan et al. 79; McInroy and Craig 607-608; Soroka and Stepulak 61). On the other hand, positive portrayals, which might resemble the successes of the *Royal Pains* portrayal, could prove efficient in delivering a more genuine and honest look at transgender persons, which can help media consumers develop more favorable attitudes toward transgender individuals as they learn (Miller et al. 622, 632; Gillig et al. 523). If true, albeit demanding more research, the scale of these implications are indicative of video games' ability to hold significant social influence as a form of visual media.

Looking toward future research, although a rise in visual-media scholarship has been marked, including scholarship on video games, there is still a lack of both empirical and theoretical studies assessing the relationship between transgender experiences and video game portrayals. This essay seeks to bridge the gap, but even the research conducted here is heavily reliant on other forms of visual media. While these other forms of visual media, such as film or television, do allow reciprocity through the social commentary they offer and the opportunity for viewers to consider and respond to this commentary, video games introduce a new level of interaction, as players are able to insert themselves within video-game worlds and affect the very state of these worlds. Although similarities between video games and other visual media do persist, this reason alone warrants special treatment of the video game medium when addressing the potential impacts a given piece of media could have on its consumers. It is precisely the element of play that should differentiate how video games are treated in contrast with films or television shows. Further research in this direction could prove very valuable, as recent video games have begun to alter the ways in which they approach gender, incorporating transgender narratives and allowing players to embrace gender nonconformity through various customization options.

8. Conclusion

Maintaining transphobia through negative portrayals of transgender persons, *Yakuza Kiwami* engages players with a harmful rhetoric that marginalizes and stigmatizes the transgender community, potentially contributing to larger social issues that bar transgender individuals from full participation in society. All the while, *Yakuza Kiwami*'s ability to leave such an impression points to the power of video games as a medium capable of social programming. Of course, in this case, such social programming was overtly negative; however, research in other forms of visual media suggest that this social programming could be utilized to shape positive attitudes, too. The implications of these findings are large, and they could apply to video games generally or, as seen here, particularly maintain their relevance only when addressing narrative-driven single-player experiences. Further research may be useful in testing the extent to which the video game medium holds social influence. Additionally, the implications of



Yakuza Kiwami's treatment of transgender persons are also of interest. Yakuza Kiwami, as previously stated, portrays its transgender characters with a negative connotation; studies examining if this trend persists in other video games would be useful, particularly empirical studies which might find statistical evidence that suggests wide-reaching trends in how

video games treat gender diversity and gender nonconformity at large. To be sure, no game is the same—the way in which video games address these issues will never be completely monolithic—but such studies may allow researchers to recognize issues in virtual media portrayals and respond effectively by presenting potential solutions.

About the Author

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