

Playing Yakuza: Like a Dragon

0. The Whereabouts of Old & New

(Shin Ryu trailer)

The Kiryu saga is over... *(thug yells Kiryu) For a minute! (Kiryu Saved)*

In 2016, Yakuza 6 was meant to be Kiryu's swansong of life. Seeing the old hero off and giving him a chance to rest, but this didn't mean RGG studios would be joining him. With the Kiryu saga brought to a contentious close they had a question to answer. What is Yakuza without the Dragon of Dojima? Well going forward RGG wanted to be less Like a Dragon and more like a three headed serpent.

The following year saw the development of 5 new games and 4 announcements, meant to represent the 3 directions RGG wanted to simultaneously pursue. Use of existing IP with Kiwami 2, so called sideways developments with the currently unannounced Judgment and uh, what's about to happen to this poor not quite LAD, and lastly, the Shin Ryu Ga Gotoku project. What was considered the true next step for the studio. This consisted of two titles, Ryu Ga Gotoku Online, and the game we're all in line for today: What came out in the west as Yakuza: Like a Dragon!

This is our first non-numbered entry! But who needs a numeral when our new lead is Number One! *(Ichiban!)* A joke that only works in Japanese... Where they kept numbering their new games. Over there it's called Like A Dragon 7: The Whereabouts of Light and Darkness. A subtitle chosen at the very last moment by Nagoshi, two deadlines here as this was the final day for the name to be chosen as well as the day he was being taken into heart surgery, and fortunately neither flatlined. The name is a brilliant flash of inspiration, perfectly encapsulating the game ahead. Fitting its genre shift while also perfectly outlining the central conflict.

Yakuza: Like a Dragon is no slouch either, sounding similarly fantastical and not lacking for its own meanings. While merging the series names with impeccable timing considering the transitional title this entry wound up being.

Removing the number has been far from a Shichi thing to do. Supposedly the original intent was for the numbered series to be over even in Japan. Taking 0 into account we're 8 mainline games deep which is enough to knock most series sideways. *(Joke for IW I'll forget – knock 8 sideways)* So what are we gaining by taking a hachi to it only outside of Japan?

More than you'd think. First off it's a reflection of the times, back in 2005 western localisers doubted a game called Like a Dragon would fly. But the Yakuza branding came with its own problems, namely backing up the idea the series would be a sort of Japanese GTA, meanwhile the only thing getting jacked was player expectations. By 2019 people had generally become more open to Japanese media, this had the added benefit of expanding what the series could conceivably do. I genuinely believe the name change was at least part of Ishin's worldwide remaster.

Next up is something I find wonderfully daring for a long time series. Yakuza: Like a Dragon Truly pays off the plot of Yakuza 6, following through on the theme of the older generation stepping aside for the new by actually doing that, in a number of ways within the game and without.

A new character meant dropping the baggage of the long and involved life of the Dragon of Dojima in the same way the prequel did. Only this time opening the way for a new lead who can solve problems in his own way. This led to another newbie boom, as well as a category of fans I'll dub Olads, people who only played the earliest chronological entry of each characters saga. Leaving an impressive 31 year gap in the series timeline. These people are in their own way a part of that new generation stepping in to what is effectively a new series which we've experienced the absurdly involved backstory for. I can't say why I find looking at it this way kind of exciting.

These games are worlds apart in more ways than one, and it's an impressive reinvention. Speaking of... *(omae-wa-mo – Shindeiru)*

This poor goon. He thought he was after Kiryu but didn't ken who he was really up against. Thug of the... No game award! he got picked off in the teaser, to a spin off!
(1080p Ichiban reveal to 720p Hokuto reveal, sorry lads Ichiban took the resolution with him.)

Approaching this new game for this video is thrilling yet intimidating because as a reinvention it succeeds with flying colours, but this is still Yakuza, so as always I'll be drawing on past entries where I feel appropriate, blanket spoiler warning for every game up to this point in the series because the Shadow of the Dragon looms large and even now in 2025 we're asking if Ichiban if not the series itself can step out of it.

If this video manages to move you closer to a satisfying answer it'll be a small miracle. All I can say is this game is a light in the darkness, and I hope to shine a bit more on it myself. Once again there's no fancy intro or install, I'd say the game doesn't put on a show to get the ball rolling but I'd be lying.

Part 1: Fledgling Fantasy

0. Trouble Behind the Scenes

The game opens as it does for many series fans nowadays, not with number 1, but what came before. The climax of a revenge drama, Masumi Arakawa playing the role of a bereaved daughter, taking vengeance on Ginji, the Butcher of Edo, before revealing the big twist. (*"I am the butcher" / Father, were you watching?"*)

Until recently I was a little thrown by this opening. Not sure what it tells us other than setting the stage for Masumi Arakawa. The answer is a lot, though it's a lot that only really clicks in retrospect, looking back with the whole story and themes in mind. This opening is packed, and that's besides the full house Masumi's troupe has pulled.

Within 2 and a half minutes we're hit with all the core motifs of the story to follow. Revenge, duplicity, identity, fatherly ties, how these things can be bound together and bind someone to their fate. Duplicity and assumed identities go hand in hand as the most layered examples and fittingly enough the myriad means of trickery snuck past me until I revisited it and did a little reading. Starting with the obvious, the real butcher of Edo twist within the play itself is a stock standard reveal. It's what we want and ironically expect from a thriller, and the audiences reaction tell us he's a fine actor.

Which brings us to Masumi's profession as an Onnagata, a male actor who portrays female roles. Onnagata came about from a time when women were not allowed to perform. Yet even when they were welcomed to the stage the role of the onnagata continued as part of the tradition, considered a role that had developed its own skillset and mannerisms which made it distinct.

Beyond that we have Masumi performing under the stage name Taro Arayoshi. Masumi Arakawa begins the game three or four assumed identities away from themselves, each somewhat distinct. This is something we've seen before. Having to take on a role to pursue your goals, to protect yourself or even just to get by. And it's revisited here to an extent you may even say is stronger than 5. Bringing with it its own twists, turns, and interrogations.

It's likely Masumi was born into the troupe, his roles and stage name chosen for him. Who he was and who he became has up until this point was never been something he could decide for himself. Some roles he fell into were established long before he or even his family existed, they were merely born into the current and had no choice but to go along with it.

It's not always immediately obvious why someone does what they do or how much say they have. It's a bit of a grey area and we haven't even gotten to those yet!

Another important aspect is the form the performance takes, Taishu Engeki, in English “Theatre for the masses” A variety of Japanese light entertainment which came about at a time when those outside of the upper classes didn’t have easy access to culture. Similar to American Vaudeville or British Pantomime, which funnily enough has its own history of male actors taking on female roles, though we were a bit more cheeky about it.

The shows such troupes put on are intended to be simple and unchallenging: Telling easily understood period dramas with clear good and evil alongside skits and dancing which from several reviews I’ve read is more about energy than skill.

The goal is bringing straightforward joy to the crowd, not weaving complex tales, exploring philosophical themes or interrogating political ideas. Which is a funny set up given this may be one of the most all three of those things entries in the series.

Taishu Engeki isn’t afforded the same air of importance as other performing arts, being seen as cheap entertainment which is less substantive and meaningful. Another name for the form is “Working-Class-Kabuki” a moniker I actually find really charming, but it does succinctly let us in on what the story ahead is about, the overlooked and the downtrodden, those who do what they have to to get by and get the impolite mocking of polite society in return.

The final lie is at the end, the troupe portraying themselves as a united front when they’re anything but. A group and its goals may not always be what they appear on the face of it, and it’s only behind the scenes Arakawa can wipe away one final layer of deception. (*scar*)

The source of the scarring quickly cuts in. Masumi’s mother, who makes sure to belittle Masumi and his father. Stealing the money gifted to them and flaunting her new relationship. Masumi’s father tries to lighten the boys spirits by taking him out on the town for their last night in Yokohama. Eventually settling at the Heian Tower for Peking Duck. (“The King of Chinese food”)

Before their main course arrives Masumi steps out to use the restroom and unfortunately it’s curtains for dear old dad. (*dad killed*) (*scar transition*) Cutting to 30 years later we see Masumi Arakawa, now head of a small Yakuza family, it’s the turn of the century, and he has one question. (*It’s the last night of the 20th century, and all I’m wondering is what’s for lunch*)

I love that line, it’s such biting bitter juxtaposition, with the tiredness alone in his voice you don’t really need to know how the last three decades have been, he just told you, but boy we’re gonna get them anyway. It’s also a nice palette cleanser of a joke to reset the mood so that our new protagonist can start lifting it. Arakawa calls after Ichiban, but the stern Sawashiro, captain of the family has him running collections, and those collections sure are running

1. An Intro With Interest: Ichiban’s Debt Collection

(*Ichiban chasing Ushio – “Let myself get caught by you, you cumstain!”*)

Like so many characters before Ichiban is introduced via a debt collection but this one especially accrues interest. With the first two chapters mirroring Yakuza 1s, acting as a reflection.

Doesn’t matter if it’s a new protagonist they’re not shaking things up to fast, for now, we’re on a shakedown. One where it seems Ichiban is being shaken off.

Our first time interacting with Ichiban is odd, we get a tutorial for the one and only chase sequence in the game... “Ah, the thrill of the chase!” Don’t get used to it. This is a feature pilfered from Yakuza’s new sister series and is perhaps a bit ill-judged being here. Seeing Ichiban pulling off Yagami style acrobatics is an ironically clumsy way to introduce a man who is about as far from graceful as you can get. This isn’t the kind of recycling that suits him. (*can quest joke*)

Fortunately it’s not long before we run into a much more fitting intro.

It appears Ushio gives Ichi the slip, only for the mad like-a-Lad to turn the tables without us (*drop*)

Gameplay aside it's quick and efficient character work. We establish that people underestimate Ichiban, who comes off an idiot but is more quick thinking than even he realises. He never gives up and it's at the moment people think they have him beat he'll get the drop on em. He knows Kamurocho like the back of his hand, and if you mess with the kids or the Arakawa he'll show you the back of his. (*tape throw*) But Ushio doesn't want to go down without a fight... So lets get into... Actually you know what, combat can wait its turn. Right now the story has initiative!

Ushio is defeated, and Matsuo, Ichiban's kyoudai deigns to turn up. With Ushio's ill-gotten gains they've already hit their collections quota for the day, but this doesn't sit right with Ichiban. (*we're returning this*) He tries to live a life of heroism that's not only out of step with the Yakuza, but the former combat system. (*Ichiban explains*)

I hate to say it but I think part of me is programmed to wince at video game allusions like this, they always feel pandering or awkward even from a source I do think is acting in earnest. This likely stems from years of bad examples which always present video games and their players with sneering condescension. While the rare positive reps which Yakuza stands, not even alongside, but above, are often even more embarrassing because in playing defence they just make the medium seem even more lame. My reaction isn't 7's fault, this game is using it for intended effect and does it well, but it has to break my guard, and this first attempt only makes me reflexively recoil. It gets better at these striking similes as it goes along, fitting for an RPG I suppose. One thing I do like is when Matsuo asks how the hell Ichiban can try and act like a hero given the fact he's a Yakuza, it at first looks like Ichiban dodges the question. But when Matsuo comes along with another gig, having returned from his collections turned uh... returns gig. Ichiban gives his answer by demonstrating how he tries to be both a Yakuza, and a Hero.

Finding out their new mark is an old mate. Working construction on New Years Eve and bumming butts off the ground. Ichiban decides to follow the letter of the outlaw and not the intent. (*I've got your wallet*) Explaining to a confused Matsuo that he knows the man is good for the money and just needs time. He was told to get his wallet, so that's all he'll take.

What this tells us is while Ichiban is optimistic to a fairly naive extent he's not so easily pigeonholed as an idiot. Being surprisingly emotionally intelligent and perceptive.

It's a great introduction to the character, breadcrumbing little details and quickly giving us an idea of how Ichiban sees the world which I find immediately endearing. The contrast with Kiryu's introduction is strong: Kiryu's collection gig is quick, efficient, and emotionally detached. Ichiban's is a series of madcap schemes, trying to make it so everyone walks away pleased *if punched* even if he winds up penniless in the process. (*enunciate like 'even if they were punched'*)

Kiryu was a dyed in the wool Yakuza who we come to learn has a deep pit of self-loathing. Even as his heroic deeds piled up he'd never imagine himself a decent person. Because he's mentally filing everything good he does as penance he has to carry out for being a burden. Having so little selfworth that self-sacrifice is all he thinks himself good for.

At the end of the day Kiryu was a criminal with a heart of gold, but Ichiban wears his on his sleeve. Holding a childish conception of himself as a hero for which he's utterly unashamed, and he's on his own Dragon's Quest to be a Hero Yakuza. Inspired by games, the people of the city, and Arakawa.

2. Cozy Kamurocho 2000: A Town Between Games

This quest gets sidelined when Ichiban is called away to deal with family business, and I don't mean the Tojo but the townsfolks. Which gives us an opportunity to take a look at Kamurocho during this oddly quiet moment.

It's a town inbetween the big adventures. The Millenium Tower is under construction, Don Quixote is shut, bantam is back with us, and they've uninstalled all the payphones cause hey, there's nothing happening to tell anyone about! Starting us here feels like getting re-acquainted which is a smart call.

In Yakuza's 5 and 6 the town feels distant and cold. We're on some level meant to share in or at least understand Kiryu's growing distaste for the place because it stands for a past which won't leave him alone.

With Yakuza 4 in mind it had been almost 10 years of in series time since Kamurocho has been framed as something worth fighting for to anyone but a lone lenders longing. Even Yakuza 0 has a dramatic irony to it, with all but OLADS knowing where Kiryu will wind up for trying so hard to fight for the city.

This little slice of the game where Ichiban bums around with the people in his life does a great job putting us in his shoes and giving us reason to once again care about Kamurocho. It's something Judgment also does remarkably despite its darker murder mystery vibes. Acting as a reminder that this is a town where people make an honest go of living out their lives happily.

While Ichiban may grumble, it's clear his affection for the city and its people runs deep.

At first he's called away by Michiyo where both she and Ichiban's time is wasted. But it shows that even though Ichiban is a Yakuza he's first and foremost thought of as a good lad. He then rushes to Shangri-La when he hears there's trouble, but all he gets is some bathhouse bathos. *(Got a plunger)* Shangri-La is his childhood home, it's where Ichiban was found abandoned, his parents a complete mystery. So manager Jiro Kasuga as well as the many women of the night and people of the city raised him. Giving him a deeply sympathetic tie to those who make their lives in the red lights, as well as a rigorous understanding of the sex trade.

And yes via Shangri-La we're getting blasted with thick ropes of dramatic irony which the game itself lathers on thicker when Ichiban is reminded that he may not always be able to come home, a double-entendre worthy of a soapland given how much this statement comes to mean.

It's another testament to just how storied this city has become that just making Ichiban's home this particular establishment immediately connects me to so many events over years of in series time. You could call it a cheap pull, a small part of me does, but cheap pulls are part of why shangri-la was so popular. The point is, at any moment things can go to shit, but for now, all they need is a plunger. *(I cleaned your shit)*

I love Ichiban's back and forth with the townsfolk because he goes from his pure hero act to acting petulantly, regressing to a surly teenager arguing with his parents, demanding respect from them and not realising that in their own way, they are by trusting that for all his bark, he'd never bite. The only people outside of Kiryu's immediate circle we see in his intro is Majima, which more than anything else serves to establish Kiryu's rep. He may be obscure to the lower ranks but he is a power player.

This is the key difference. When we first meet Kiryu he was already a local legend, Ichiban is a local character. Where the city looked up to the former it looks out for the latter. Kiryu's intro depicted the night his life would change forever. Ichiban's intro is a day in the life, but both show what they had to leave behind, and we're not even done with introductions.

3. Core Cast Contortions

3a. Masato's Woes

Before Ichiban can turn in all the nothing he's earned. A furious call from Sawashiro lets us know he's bungled yet another collection. It's his job to chaperone the young master tonight and he's late.

So we rush off to collect the boss's son, the wheelchair bound emotionally ground down Masato Arakawa. He is to Ichiban what Nishiki was to Kiryu. If what we've seen up until now was to warm us to Ichiban and reheat our feelings towards Kamurocho then this scene is an ice water shock. From Ichiban in a panic, running into this fancy apartment block and immediately showing how out of place he is. To Masato's even colder reception upon seeing him. Ichiban has in a moment gone from outspoken to apologetic, and the night is only going to get more awkward. (*Masato calls Ichiban out*)

It's a special occasion, it's Yumeno's birthday! Ichiban's job is to be there and be square. Before they head in to the club Masato directs him into a nearby alleyway. Revealing he's gonna party hard, much to Ichiban's horror (*What is that – Ephedrine*) Ah ephedrine, unblocks your nose and... unlocks your legs. (*Pumps up*) (*-sound confused at end of last line*)

So he rolls, uh, walks into the club, much to the staffs surprise. It turns out Yumeno is a hostess who Masato has claimed as his girlfriend. When she's unavailable Ichiban jumps at the chance to be useful. Finding her occupied, he tries to corral her away but Masato steps in, and not being used to the whole walking or talking thing also puts his foot in his mouth. Trying to bribe who it turns out is a senior commissioner in the Tokyo PD, Hourinouchi. I love this short exchange for showing just how blind Masato is. He gets Yumeno, he thinks he's won, totally oblivious of how badly he lost face in the process.

With Yumeno secured it's time for her big birthday bash with our new favourite punk acting as pinata. (*Ichiban's gift bombs*). Masato then produces a worryingly expensive watch. Failing to clock that Yumeno is more petrified than pleased by the gesture.

Ichiban, stealing a moment to unwind in the bathroom, becomes privvy to Hourinouchi and Yumeno real feelings. The two are clearly an item and neither are too fond of the Young Master. (*"Go squeeze him for all he's worth"*) Unfortunately Ichiban wasn't the only one who overheard. (*Masato dumps money - Wipe your ass with it*) And with that, I think it's fair to say that Masato had a harder time in here than I did... (*lose disco*) Okay maybe not.

This scene parallels Kiryu meeting up with Nishiki, Yumi, and Rena. After the collections were done Kiryu went back to Serena. His groups favourite spot. While there is some tension with Nishiki given his sister's falling health and Kiryu's rising status, the group are able to come together. Understanding Nishiki's frustrations and trying to make him feel better.

This scene throws a wrench into all of that and it does a great job making Masato pitiable while keeping him sympathetic enough for the plot to get where it needs to go with the audience on board. First off instead of a group of friends, albeit one with a love triangle leading to a lot of heat actions. Masato is paying these people to pretend to care about him, Ichiban is the only one here who actually likes the guy and he's been dragged along to be dragged through the mud. He's here to allow Masato to feel important, he didn't even need working legs to walk all over him. And that's the key element of this scene, the way it handles power. Nishiki didn't like that Kiryu was rising higher than him. While Kiryu never put any stock in status or ranks which really only made it that much harder on koi boy.

The Young Master lords his social status over Ichiban relentlessly.

It's clear from being chaperoned by the gang and looked out for by his family that Masato feels constrained. He takes their concern for him as condescension and Ichiban's panic that he may hurt himself as sycophantic. Being treated like glass his whole life has left him bitter and resentful, unable to believe anyone is treating him kindly without pity or ulterior motive. The irony is him then hiring Hostesses to pretend to like him. To make him feel valuable and in control, a feeling he buys into blindly because he paid for it.

He's embarrassed by his disability, and tells himself he's shooting up for Yumeno's sake, but it's clear throughout that while it's her B-day it's his big day. Besides fixing up his legs and flexing on his lackeys the only way he can think to impress Yumeno is throwing money around and you can do that sitting down. I'm going out on a limb but I also take it his interest in Yumeno is less to do with Yumeno herself and more her position as number one at the club, she isn't just an object! She's an objective prize catch, another way for him to feel important.

The final moment where he tosses all his money to Ichiban is him giving up the source of his imagined power. Accepting it could only ever buy him the illusion, and with that shattered it's worthless to him. Luckily for Ichiban, it's a way past Sawashiro.

3b. Sawashiro's notes

(Ichiban presents the wallet) Many notes, but I've only one, Ichiban is a terrible liar. *(Sawashiro assaults Ichiban)* Jo Sawashiro is Ichiban's Kashiwagi. The older brother figure, captain to the family, stern and devoid of humour. The difference is Kashiwagi actually cared about his kouhais. Sure he'd smack seven shades of brown heat out of 'em if they were acting stupid, but he does it for their sake. Sawashiro on the other pinky holds Ichiban in utter contempt.

Like Kashiwagi he's a figure we're never meant to fully know, but while loveable old definitely dead Wags is trustworthy in spite of that, with his aloofness played for laughs.

Sawashiro makes a point of remaining ambiguous to an absurd degree. Over the course of this story so much more will be laid bare about Jo-Boy than his forebear, and I still understand him less than Wags. Every reveal about Jo is counterweighted: Each sympathetic beat packaged alongside something equally if not more loathsome in turn. Left completely to the player to balance their own emotional scales. Because Jo, at best, doesn't give a shit what you think about him. What's important is he's kept interesting and his ambiguity is intriguing, though at this precise point his feelings towards Ichiban are anything but cryptic.

He'd cut the boy loose if he could get away with it, but given the opportunity, he'll settle for a pinky. *(Arakawa arrives)* Only for Arakawa to save us in the nick of time. Seeing what was about to go down, he calls Ichiban away.

3c. Masumi's History

In his office, Arakawa asks if Ichi could at least try to get on with the captain. *(We don't see things the same way – it's okay to see things differently, that's the strength of the Arakawa party)*

The issue is he wants to see Ichi's fancies differently boss.

He tries to put it in terms that Ichiban can understand with yet another RPG simile, with each time they do a dragon quest riff it works a little better, or maybe my defence stat is growing. This one is downright sweet even if it ends on a sour note. *(“Masato not returning calls” – “King of family is just a title”)*

He then invites Ichiban out for grub and before long the two are reminiscing. Masumi talks about the one true love of his life, Masato's presumably deceased mother Akane. It was while she was pregnant Masumi was being groomed by his boss Hikawa to marry his daughter, unaware the boys heart was elsewhere.

When Masumi confessed to having someone else, he was beaten to within an inch of his life and the family were sicced on Akane and their child.

Masumi fought his way free and tried to get them all out, but when the Hikawa were closing in on Akane, Masumi told her to hide their baby in the coin lockers. Only to arrive to find no Akane, and no baby. It's a powerful scene, showcasing a painful desperation the series has rarely gone into without a hefty dose of melodrama or machismo to even out, and this scene heavily benefits from taking those gloves off. Masumi made it in time to save Masato's life but not without a great deal of complications. A glove hiding the damage from the most terrifying moment of his life, and Masato's state a constant reminder of how close he was cutting it, a state which has clearly left deep marks in Masato. Coin Locker baby's are an unfortunately real phenomenon which was at its height in the 70s. It's an issue which continues to this day at a thankfully decreased rate thanks to a myriad of solutions from things like friction, societal reforms, to this, which is bleak. It's an issue where rather than tackling the root causes because that would be uncomfortable and admit to deeper issues in society. They've focused more on making the end result harder to achieve. Which isn't bad but it's closer to sweeping the dirt under the rug.

Arriving back in Kamurocho the two finally settle on their meal. (*Peking duck*) The king of Chinese food, and the king has once again left the building. (*Ichiban yells at them to open*)

So they settle for their favourite food cart, and the topic turns to Ichiban and how he wound up among the Arakawa. After Jiro passed away Ichiban took to the streets. Getting into scrapes and barely scraping by. Until one day he picked a fight with a yakuza and wound up captured by his mates. In a bid to survive he threw out a name. (*The Arakawa Family!*) At first it seemed like the plan backfired, the men who grabbed him were at war with the Arakawa. But when Masumi turned up, he took one look at this idiot kid, and didn't even hesitate. (*Will a finger do?*) And before Ichiban can even thank him, he's floored for a second time. (*punch – Keep your damn thanks*)

Masumi tries to make it seem cold, impersonal, like his hand was forced. But Ichiban sees through it. Refusing to accept the gesture was just pragmatism. And for the next 100 days he waited outside their office to be accepted. Masumi once again tries to keep him out of the life, but learning this kid has none to return to, finally welcomes him into his.

There are bits of this I find something of a stretch. Namely Ichiban's transformation from bitter, angry teenager to bright and cheery manchild stuck out to me as jarring. Considering meeting Arakawa is meant to be Ichiban's turning point, it a little strange how he followed in his footsteps by becoming his exact opposite. Loud and spontaneous instead of soft spoken and reserved.

We see flashes of Ichiban's adolescent rage in moments where he feels lost which does help somewhat. And it's not like he took nothing from Arakawa, picking up on his habit to try and do right no matter how much life wrongs him and that's the important part.

Masumi is Ichiban's equivalent to Kazama. Where Kazama always came across as measured and deliberate, even in his dotage. Masumi sounds exhausted, and you can hardly blame him.

I love how they flip the script on the patriarchal figure just by telling his story. It was as early as writing the first chapter Yokoyama realised Arakawa's importance to the overall narrative.

Saying in a verge interview. "I'm going to depict the life of this man, Masumi Arakawa." More than Ichiban, Arakawa's life is what Yakuza 7's narrative pivots around.

Arakawa's life story is a well delivered tragedy. Meanwhile his relationship to Ichiban as surrogate father is really sweet. (*Moment between the two*) You really get the sense that Ichiban is the bright spot of Arakawa's life, which is all the more melancholy cause his other son is trying to keep him in the dark.

Kazama's life, whether he had anything in it beyond the Yakuza was something we never learned. Because the more you know about him as a man, the lesser he is as a myth.

Yakuza 7, just by exploring Masumi's past, imagines how empty the existence of a man like that may be. He's only larger than life to Ichiban, and his own life has largely been one of tragedy. We see why Ichiban worships the turf he treads on, but we also get to see the groundwork which allowed Masumi to be that person for Ichiban, by the time they meet he's already gone through so much loss, what's a pinky matter if it saves a kid? Compare that to Kazama, who didn't lift a finger to help Nishiki! Here's Arakawa on frame one!

Kazama's life was the Tojo, Arakawa's life is somehow even more of a shitshow. But at least he gets to see off the 20th Century once again impressing his favourite punk. (*Damn, what a badass, I want a drink*) Ichiban himself sees it out alone on a park bench with a few beers. For him, it wasn't such a bad day. (*he smiles*)

Kiryu spent a lot of his life pursuing the image of an ideal Yakuza informed by Shintaro Kazama, and even after he moved past this he held a lingering respect for the man, his ideals remained heavily shaped by what Kazama represented to him, even if the man himself turned out to be very different from the image created of him.

Ichiban was raised by countless people, but he has two father figures, one civilian, one Yakuza, as well as a moral compass guided by simple video game heroics, his life only really begins once he's free of the Yakuza. Kiryu built a cage of his own imagining and never let himself out.

4. Repeat Offender: The 18 Year Sentence

Ichiban awakes to a missing wallet and a worryingly terse call from the boss. (*"Get to the office, act inconspicuous"*) Naturally this short walk is accompanied by one of my favourite tracks from the game and it only plays here. (*Lingering Odor*) What is it with RGG and having so many bangers they feel they can flaunt them. I ignore the boss's orders and linger a little longer to let it play. This is the last time I'll be able to mess with the physics objects here for awhile. Outside the office we're ambushed by the Sakaki family and they're not happy. Explanations and combat can keep waiting their turn. Inside the boss has grim news. (*Ichiban goes to clean, is told to sit*)

For awhile now the Sakaki have been selling inside information to the Omi. Unfortunately they're higher up the Tojo ladder so the best Masumi could do was confront them at an officers meeting, leading to hostility between the families ever since, and last night it came to a head.

(*Jo shot a Sakaki family man*)

Masumi can't risk the Arakawa over this, and so he has a request of Ichiban. (*"Would you take his place in this Ichi"*) This scene is heartwrenching man. Masumi's obvious pain over what he's about to do. Ichiban trying to smile through this, to make it less painful to himself and his boss. (*Let em lock me up – Crying*)

The parallel is pretty obvious, the two leads taking the fall for a crime they didn't commit.

Kiryu had Kazama try to warn him away before he got involved. Ichiban went at Masumi's request.

Kiryu made a snap decision for someone he deeply cared for and took on his fate stoically.

Ichiban is 'offered' a choice to save a man who absolutely despises him and he makes it with mixed and messy emotions. He hypes it up, he needs it to mean something because to him it means losing everything.

He heads out and keeps trying to play it cool as he gets a call from Mitsuo (*Sawashiro rope you into something?*) Depends on the judge, Mits. And for his last meal, he settles on beef bowls. Running into the coolest guy in the series. (*"No one regrets a beef bowl, that's what I say."*) That's customer service, a customer hits you with wisdom and you serve some of your own.

We get another insight to how Ichiban faces the world, yesterday he was telling Mitsuo he was not gonna do it all over from rock bottom again but if it's for someone he cares about he'd start from the mantle. It doesn't matter how poor his luck runs, he'll keep walking forward no matter how hard it is to force the next step or his smile. (*Wallet cop*) His life is equal parts tragedy and comedy and neither can break his stride, and that's how we close chapter one. (*Ichiban's sentence*) But we're not out of the hall of mirrors just yet, Ichiban has only just stepped into the funhouse. Kiryu's murder of Dojima shook the criminal underworld, it's ripples were felt for years afterwards. Ichiban disappeared into the prison system, forgotten by all but Masumi.

While Kiryu was targeted because of his status, in a roundabout bid to protect him if you take Kiwami into account. Ichiban is picked on purely for being the new guy, his name means nothing and his family even less. But when the Arakawa are disrespected he snaps in terrifying fashion. (*"You knocked all of their teeth out."*) (*your sentence has been extended*)

Kazama's letter marks the end of Kiryu's prison stay. Cutting his sentence short so he could bring the conspiracy to a full stop meanwhile Ichiban's ran on. Masumi's letter arrives at the point Ichiban was supposed to be freed, making the extra three years sting all the more. (*"Sometimes I turn and expect to see you there."*) Beautiful crossfade and we're out. (*I'm so sorry Boss*) Ichiban is pained to find no one waiting for him. A guard says the days of bosses rolling up to jail to collect their men is over. Yeah Ichi we had a whole series about the changing place of the Yakuza in society bud, you missed it.

5. Tojo in Turmoil 2019: The Doomed Hometown

Well, it's not fair to say nobody is waiting for him. (*"You really thought the welcome wagon was coming, dumbass?"*) Say hello to Koichi Adachi, former detective, recent DMV clerk, up to date informant and perpetually loveable dickhead, he knows Ichiban front to backstory. Rattling off his life up to this point. (*"They keep that kind of info on Driver's licenses these days?"*) Ichiban wants nothing to do with the aloof old geezer, he's off to see the boss just as soon as he punches up his perm. (*haircut*) and tidies up a certain tombstone. Which Adachi sees as a little suspect. (*First thing you do is tidy up his grave?*) Second thing senile Snake, we could argue the haircut is greater penance.

Their visit to the graveyard is livened up by the arrival of Arakawa, escorted by an army of goons. Ichiban's approach is halted, he's completely unknown to them. Masumi himself hardly seems to register Ichiban's cries, and the strangeness comes to a head. (*He's visiting the Omi chairmans grave*) It's on the highway we're given the skinny. The newly elected Tokyo governor went to war with the Yakuza with his Kamurocho 3K Plan. Which proved a towering success. The Tojo's funding was systematically dismantled, the leaders fled, and all the families were arrested. Save for the Arakawa who ratted out the entire clan. It's then the Omi rolled in, seizing the city with resistance from neither punk nor plod, Kamurocho was taken without a drop of blood spilt, Arakawa was then welcomed into the Omi as acting Captain. It's quite a lot to take in. Even Adachi who so far has been enjoying messing with Ichi knows how upsetting this must be for him. (*"You okay"* *"This is some bullshit!"*)

Ichiban is incredulous and I'll admit, so was I. Back when I first played the game these reveals left me feeling more than a little empty, thinking goddamn Daigo you've daigone and done it again. It was such an upset to the status quo which left me questioning what the point of the last several games was? What Kiryu's sacrifice was for, and yes even the later context the story added didn't assuage this, it may have even worsened how bitter I felt. It took awhile for the bad taste some of these changes left to fade.

Looking back I realise that even if I doubt it was in the way the game intended I was right there sharing in Ichiban's upset. A oneness with him that I wouldn't have felt if the game were to play it safer, it had to take away something from us both. As a longtime fan seeing this happen to Kamurocho stung, As they say no pain no gain and 7 gains a lot by doing this.

It's a trap fans can fall into, struggling to accept when series they like make changes. The conundrum is it has to, otherwise stagnation will cause it to wither and die, and you'll have grown sick of it long before the funeral. It's in riding that line of giving you some of what you want and maintaining the core appeal while adding what you didn't know you needed. You'll always lose some along the way depending on what 'core appeal' specifically means to them.

These videos aren't me just relaying how I felt years ago, they're me trying to merge then and now, You only get one shot at a first impression, but why are we putting so much stock in when we know the least? It's important, but these videos are years on, and trying to build on those first impressions with the understanding I've built in the years since. If the games are gonna be about growth I should try and do that in my own way.

At this point the plot of 7 and what it did here sits well with me, I respect it for being willing to take such a risk and then not only not backing down from the consequences, but truly exploring them.

Adachi is dragging Ichiban to Yokohama to aid in his investigation. Warning Ichi there's nothing left for him back home, but he won't hear it. Forcing Adachi to stop the car before hoofing it back to Kamurocho. Which is exactly as Adachi said, but Ichiban refuses to see it.

The old Arakawa office is gone, having shuttered so long ago the custodian is surprised to learn it was once here. The people in Ichiban's life have moved or moved on, and oh my, it's the Omi! Ichiban tracks down Ushio, now an aspiring inkraiker, and learns that Masato had passed away. Ushio confidently figures this is why Masumi turned to the Omi, at this point only wanting to see the world burn. It's a sensible theory, we know enough of Masumi's life that vengeance on the Tojo is a pretty believable motive. And if Masumi wants to see the world burn, he's already turned the one Ichiban longed to return to to ashes. (*Shangri-La – Let em try*) Feeling down in the dumps he heads to his childhood home only to find it in about the same state he's in.

This sequence is one gut punch after another, and when Adachi returns it's not to deliver the finishing blow (*Nothing I told you has been a lie*) Now treating Ichiban a little gentler he explains what he's after. He wants to take down Hourinouchi, suspecting him of playing a big part in the Omi takeover, but the Commissioner is well beyond Adachi's reach. Masumi is not, and Ichiban is his avenue to Arakawa.

This is the other reason the intro had to set new and reset old audiences feelings towards Kamurocho. Much earlier in this series I talked about how each entry mixed and matched elements from different crime genres as befit their individual narratives. Pulling thriller, noir, and heroic bloodshed motifs as needed.

Yakuza 7 does something really inventive. As it skews closer to a JRPG in format. It takes beats traditional beats from the genre, as well as broader fantasy and gives them a crime thriller makeover. With Kamurocho itself serving as the doomed hometown. It's a brilliant play on the concept because it, admittedly riskily, uses the players own longterm emotional investment in the town to heighten the impact.

Adachi has a plan to get us to Masumi, there's an officers meeting tonight at Heian Tower, the same spot he and Ichi couldn't enter 18 years back. Ichiban naturally takes it as a sign. We're going to break in. We're given a phone and told to meet back here later.

It's then we run into Nick Ogata, he repeatedly likens women to businesses and it's probably cause Nick the Sick Prick owns both, jokes aside the guy is solid, he shows us how to use our new cell and doesn't much care that we just stepped out of one. Then quickly steps aside so the plot can get on.

Adachi returns and we dive into yet another JRPG staple, a dungeon welve.

Having just gone through the doomed home town this is only fitting. Funnily enough this isn't the first time the Kamurocho Underground has served such a purpose.

Playing host to a roguelite mode in Dead Souls, an activity which was actually better fleshed out. With proc-gen layouts and even NPC floors. Here each dungeon is set in samey stone, which I could not guess on first glance given their anonymous visuals and blocky, flow free design. To learn these were handcrafted, or at the least, static layouts, was a surprise to me on par with some of the late story twists.

The two fight under and up through town, Adachi having to stay behind to hold back the cops, and it's then Ichiban comes face to face with Sawashiro, with him blocking the door to Masumi. *(Ichi asks if Jo was there when Masumi turned traitor, Jo says he just did what the times called for)* Neither Ichi's sacrifice nor the years have seemingly softened Jo's low opinion of the boy, the only difference is now Ichiban can hit back. And with Jo being all that's stood in the bosses way, he wasn't going to stand for long. This is a cool fight and uh, nope, still not its turn yet. We'll cross the combat bridge when we come to it.

Yet when he's down for the count, he does offer Ichiban a warning. *(If you open that door, there's no going back – I've been waiting 18 years)* Ichiban bursts in to a room full of Omi officers who didn't notice the ruckus outside, but in here, you could hear a Tojo pin drop. Masumi addresses Ichiban flatly, dispassionately, getting his hopes up. *(You have to die for me)* Before dropping him too.

The final twist, Kiryu broke into a funeral where Kazama was shot, while Ichiban stormed headlong into his own.

Thus ending our long opening, this is the point at which Like a Dragon really starts diverging from... Like a Dragon. But before we move on lets tie the comparisons into a neat little bow.

6. Kiryu & Ichiban Comparison: Old World Vs. New Media

Yokohama said after Yakuza 6 the studios mission was not to create the next Yakuza title, but the next protagonist. Pointing out that Kiryu and Ichiban are top to rock bottom opposites is about the most obvious observation you can make, what's impressive is how absolute that statement is and the lengths gone too to set them apart.

In a 2017 interview Nagoshi laid it out like this "if we don't make him different from the great man, the player would probably end up saying, "Yeah, Kiryu could have done that." We wanted to make the new protagonist someone that would make people think, "Kiryu is great, but I like this guy too.""

Quite a humble aspiration! And with that in mind it could be seen as me doing 7 a bit of a disservice by using this introduction for relentless comparison, perhaps I'm not ready to let the dragon go just yet? Or well, it could be that comparison is the point, by making Ichiban's origin align so heavily with Kiryu's they beat the player to it. Ichiban is inarguably in Kiryu's shadow, they had to shine a light on the ways he's different, fast. So they use similar plot beats to show you just how distinct a story Ichiban can deliver, and you know what? Kiryu is great, but I like this guy too. Quite a bit! What's great about it is if you know it works and if you don't, it's still a great intro which stands alone.

It feels a bit odd to end this round of side by sides on the surface level but if Ichiban just hit rock bottom I feel I can follow. Lets go over their designs.

Kiryu's white suit atop a red shirt represents a stoic exterior with a passionate and fiery core.

Ichiban's flipped colour scheme screams of a loud, emotional sort with a pure, thoughtful soul underneath.

Kiryu's hair is straight and tidy, a reserved, no-nonsense look for a serious man. Ichiban's styled hair says he's more looks conscious, more concerned with how others think of him, it also sells him as more boyish. The fro being an accident also helps emphasise the comedy in a lot of Ichiban's misfortune. It's noteworthy enough to Yokoyama he mentions Ichi going for a haircut as an example of how the two differ in their approach. A scene of Kiryu getting a haircut would feel strange for such a larger than life hero, but Ichiban is described by the team as being a "life-sized" hero, he's victim to life's mundanities, which allows us to feel closer to him.

Kiryu possesses sharp, rugged features. He has the face of a thug and is routinely mistaken for a heartless Yakuza because of it. So his gentle nature often surprises new people.

Ichiban has rounded features which sell his friendliness while also hiding that he's much sharper than he lets on. Their faces both emphasise certain traits while concealing a deeper nature.

This also relates to how they act. Kiryu is stone faced, rarely betraying his feelings, adding impact to times he fails to hide his vulnerability. While his emotions are complex he expresses them through a simple approach to the world. Ichiban meanwhile is incredibly expressive and makes little effort to hide how he feels, even when it'd be benefit him to do so. Ichiban's personality, like his face, is far more dynamic. Everyone brings out a different side of him. He's also not as simple as he appears, there's a lot more going on in the house than what comes out the front door.

Kiryu, being incredibly reserved. Tended to treat most interactions similarly, with only subtle changes in his demeanour. Getting him to smile, let alone unwind was a herculean effort, taking someone he trusts with his entire being. (*Haruka*)

I've heard people say they find Ichiban has less depth than Kiryu. Besides the fact those depths were dug out over a long time as he mined up all that self-loathing. It's also that with Kiryu being less outspoken, less light is shined on those depths. We're given a lot more room to interpret his feelings in any given situation. We partly create those depths for ourselves.

It's rare for Ichiban to leave you in the dark as to how he feels, and I think this can be mistaken for a lack of depth because it's harder to notice what's left unsaid with him.

Back to the face, In earlier designs Ichiban instead had gaunt features, suggesting at some point he was more conniving, he also, unlike Kiryu, actually looked his age, well, looked his age and then some. I am speculating from ancient story snippets, that at some point Ichiban was more thuggish and underhanded.

The funny thing is certain scenes in the game do have Ichiban slip into such behaviours quite naturally. A terrible on the spot liar but quite crafty when he's in his element.

Yet his old look feels off for everything else about him. It really speaks to the power of character design that I can't picture some later scenes in the game with this face, any time Ichiban is being friendly suddenly takes on an air like he has ulterior motives.

That brings me to their origins (*voice*: Wait didn't we just talk about that?) Sorta, I don't just mean Kiryu was a rising star from a top-rung family and Ichiban the fall guy for a third string one. I mean their developmental origins.

Kiryu comes from the Old World. His heritage is that of archetypical honourable gangsters from Ninkyō films. Organised Crime flicks where stoicism and self-sacrifice are highly prized, heroic traits. He's a modern samurai, a stony figure you are meant to look up to.

Ichiban comes from New Media, and by that I mean, a Gacha. He was originally developed for RGG Online, the other half of the Shin Ryu Ga Gotoku project. He even has a full on story campaign which feels like an alternate take on the plot of Yakuza 7

His initial concept was more about him being a punk with a "name complex" trying and failing to live up to the moniker of Number One. Could call it Chin-pira ga Gotoku.

Unlike Kiryu, you're not meant to look up to Ichiban, you're meant to want to fight alongside him!

As the gameplay is a card battler where you do battle alongside your friends. Yokoyama felt that Ichiban emphasised the strengths of a “leader” over the strengths of an individual. More than that, he felt this guy could head the next generation of RGG, he compiled all he could about the character and proposed this protag to Nagoshi, getting the green light. What a pull, eh?

It's fair to say that Ichiban has big shoes to fill, but it's worth pointing out Kiryu himself grew into his over the course of years. The series began by following beats laid out by Japanese crime fiction. This is apparent in how the two intros play out. For how long I've made the comparison, the first two chapters of Yakuza 1 would be over by now if you sat down and played them yourself. This is because Yakuza 1 has filmic pacing and motifs, helped along by crime Novelist Hasei Seishu's plotting. It uses archetypal characters and genre queues so the audience immediately gets who each character is and what's going on. In a 90 minute to 3 hour flick this has benefits, it gets you into the larger plot smoothly.

It took a long time for the in-house RGG style to ferment, Kiryu grew beyond the boundaries of his archetype as his fundamental philosophy and approach to the world was repeatedly challenged. He's a cliché who was put under enough pressure to turn him into a character. Like coal turning into a diamond. And the thing is, RGG was doing the same, building their own interpretation of crime fiction. (*“I'll make my own kind of Yakuza.”*)

Now nearly 15 years on, the studio has its own style, its own archetypes and storytelling techniques, Ichiban and the cast surrounding him are created whole cloth from this unique take on the Japanese underworld. Ichiban being raised by Kamurocho itself is a great extension of this. And 7's intro is this style making a strong first impression. A well-woven series of 20 minute vignettes which each establish a character or facet of the world with their own individual depths.

I only have small gripes, Nick Ogata is the first of a small handful of conveniences, I strain to call them characters, who exist solely to lubricate the plot, which he does with more gusto than any soapland superstar. Popping up 5 minutes at a time to take on great personal risk to unclog any blocked plot without having much of a character or motivation beyond that. There is also Shangri-La, I wish we had a bit more on Ichiban's relation to it and especially Jiro Kasuga, Ichiban's other father figure. Given how much emotional weight is given to this man.

These aren't great weaknesses, the story knows what it needs, but some beats don't land as well as they could because we're given little reason to care beyond the fact Ichiban does. Ichi's reaction to the destroyed Shangri-La being “Well, at least I have my memories” is poignant, I have my memories too, but they're far removed from his. I feel some involvement that an OLAD wouldn't, but not quite in a way which bolsters what the story is going for. Beyond perhaps an “Oops, did I do that?” It does at least work as a visual metaphor for the story ahead, the ongoing decay of certain ways of life, but there's still room for emotional oomph left unfurnished.

Those are minor nitpicks, and I wonder if this is the longest it has taken for us to get out of the intro, so lets get onto where the game starts diverting a little more. While comparisons will still come up where appropriate I don't want them to bog this video down. Ichiban's meeting with the man who made him may not have gone as he'd liked, but it's not yet time for him to meet his maker.

Part 2: Ijintro

1. Ijintro: Spare Change with Change to Spare

Ichiban awakes, he's not in hell, but a garbage heap. (*He falls out*)

We've done it, we've hit rock bottom! Which naturally means we're surrounded by some pretty stony bums. (*You're lucky today isn't Wednesday, they pick up the compost*) Luckily we didn't cross that threshold, just a city limit.

Ichiban's been patched up by Nanba, a former nurse. (*A hair in any other direction and you'd be dead*) He rejects Ichiban's gratitude. Saying he was only saved because a dead yakuza attracts a lot worse than flies. (*the press – peoples lives*) He wants Ichiban to get lost, uncaring that this is clearly the most lost the man has ever been. Just *where* are we? We're in Isezaki Ijincho, Yokohama. At a homeless camp along the Sakura River. Roughly an hour out from Kamurocho.

It's only when Ichiban collapses from his still fresh wound Nanba relents, bringing him into the camp, but as long as he's here, he's going to have to take care of himself.

(*Got any money? Broke as a joke*) As Sawashiro wished all those years ago we gotta learn how to earn, and Nanba here will be our teacher. (*He reaches under a vending machine*)

And so we get a tutorial for the new "Treasure Hunt" ability. A funny little riff on the RPG heroes inclination to pick through everything they see. It's undeniably contextualised and appropriate, but pisstakey all the same. Being the first thing we learn also starts us at rock bottom, we start with nothing, more nada than Shinada! Then as the game goes on and we start making money hand over fist, this ability feels genuinely quaint, how far we escalate from here is genuinely striking.

And in that way, It's really funny to me in how it changes as it stays the same, given my compulsion to keep rooting through trash remained well past the point I needed it. It's a bit that goes from genuine gameplay mechanic to a bizarre joke I'm playing on myself, as Ichiban of ill-fortune continues to debase himself in search of it. (*gold plate*)... And will never stop.

For now, we're pretty much confined to the homeless camp, and this is a chance to explore. It's cozy, one of the most intricately detailed areas of the city, poor folks rich with personality and detail. I especially like this guy who says he'll fiddle our money for us... Buddy, the only books getting cooked around here are in a barrel.

With our first shift over Ichiban meets the chief. Ichi offering up his change is enough for the Big Bum to know he's a man of good intentions and as such is free to stay as long as he needs.

When he mentions he'll repay the debt someday, it leads to him telling the two about his Yakuza past, which results in a difficult question. (*"Does it hurt" – "I don't know how I feel."*)

The song that's playing in this scene is I believe called *The Only Way Out*, it first played in 0, but to me it belongs to 7. it's the unironic version of the sad substory piano and is one of my favourite pieces of video game music, it evokes such a specific pain which so many of the characters in this story are saddled with.

Often playing when a character has to confront how trapped they are, that there's no going back to the easier times and for a moment, they can't distract themselves from that reality.

The repetitive strums and long lingering notes tell us this isn't a short, sharp, stabbing pain. This is a dull ache carried for life, a malaise waiting outside every happy moment for them to step out and discover it waiting right there for them. It even plays during the seemingly happy memory of Ichiban joining the family, for him, Arakawa was *The Only Way Out*

It's a track I adore, it never feels overbearing, and it's exactly the right level of melancholy to hit me extra hard.

2. Can Quest

We're not going to have to wait long for our next distraction. Nanba warns that from tomorrow on we'll need to scrounge up our own food, but he's not done showing us the ropes. Tomorrow, bright and early, we're gonna make collections. (*early bums get the crumbs*)

We're taken to Kan-san, the man who puts the cycling, in recycling! This is Can Quest!

It's a pretty simple set up, we gotta collect cans, down energy drinks to dodge or destroy rival bums, avoid the garbage trucks and occasionally luck be a lady with a torn trashbag spewing spent soda. Collect your quota within a 2 minute window, making sure to return in time with your haul. It's the best videogame adaptation of Carts of Darkness I know. This is the kind of recycling which suits Ichiban!

It plays well, the bike has a satisfying heft. Smashing through the competition is fun, and the whole thing is deceptively deep. Getting S ranks isn't just about skilful manoeuvring. It's about checking the map, predicting freshly spawning cans. Betting on where boosts may spawn while keeping one in reserve for emergencies. Deciding whether it's best used offensively or defensively before it winds up ditched in a moment of panic. To do well you always have to be thinking two or three turns ahead. Sometimes quickly shifting your plans when your imagined opportunity doesn't come through, but when it does it's immensely rewarding. As you clear several roads and rudeboys in quick succession, blowing one boost just to blitz into another, all the while piling on a mountain of invaluable tin.

This all makes for a surprisingly strategic mode which is equal parts helped and hindered by being where it is in the story. What's great about it is Ichiban is at a point where any wrong move will doom him before he's even really begun. He has no real allies, not all the hobos are quite so friendly as Nanba and the chief. They're cutthroat, willing to fight over scraps. This minigame works as a fun distraction and a mood piece which sums up the position Ichi is in.

It also feels like a victim of its place in said story. It's here to give you something to do to flex your fingers and take a break from the relentless introductions the change of scenery necessitates.

But this also means it has just one map, with subsequent difficulties just adding traffic. This is because this mode is introduced and then tied to the incredibly brief window of the story where you're consigned to the hobo camp.

Within 20 minutes you'll see everything this mode has to offer, and then it takes another 40 to "complete" Which is achieved by becoming the king of cans. Take that Taichi Suzuki! Now Ichiban Kasuga is the number one trash man! And if you complete the ascent to ringpull royalty, 2/3rds of your time will be spent experiencing recycled content. I'm certain Kan-San approves.

And he is a canny one to be certain! We're getting ripped... sorry, working for scrip. A sort of new feature of several minigames is having unique currencies for their item shops. Similar but distinct from gambling shops because you can't brute force this with cash.

It's a solution to how the economies of these games tend to fall apart, an issue which has gotten worse now each title has to have a money maker minigame or two. When I said this was rewarding, I didn't mean materially. The issue this can lead to is multiple isolated pockets of pure repetition, worsened if you're only playing said mode for the extrinsic rewards and don't enjoy the gameplay itself. Like say, Ichiban. (*"I busted my ass for this"*)

It feels odd to throw your own mode under the garbage truck, but I do think it once again puts the player in Ichiban's mindset, if we stick with Can Quest, we'll be literally and figuratively stuck here forever. Spinning our wheels for all time. Spending a ton of energy and risking our lives for not much at all.

Even Kan-san admits his eco-points are best spent not on money but random crap he has. I can't say if this is good for the environment, but it's great for his bottom line, and even better for keeping us on the bread line. At least Ichiban seems pleased with that part. (*eats bread*)

3. The Warring Kingdoms of Yokohama

This chapter does bring us what Ichiban needs, a whole lot of change. But not before a familiar sight. Two gangsters, Zheng and a mate of his, here running collection on the homeless. Ichiban wants to interfere but is told to hide, but when the two pick on our new buddy Nanba all bets are off. (*Ichibox*)

Again, a great moment. Ichiban returning the favour, being reintroduced via what else but another debt collection! He may be blind to hobo code of conduct but he sees right through these two. They can't exactly go complain to their bosses they got their asses bested by bums. The loss of profile would be far worse than the loss of profit.

And Nanba, who now has nothing to lose hands Ichiban a silver bullet to get them off the camp's radar for good. (*This isn't Liumang turf!*) These guys are Yokohama Liumang, a local Triad syndicate, and they've crossed more than one line today! This isn't their turf!

It's fun watching Ichiban work, not to mention this is a quick and interesting little conflict. The bums claim to this little place they can call home is tenuous, all it takes is a bit of attention and they could be swept away. Their tormentors prey on that weakness because asking for help is as sure as suicide. All the while they have the same problem just higher up the chain, and Ichiban picks up on that weak link instantly, severing it there and then. The Chief is not unrightfully angry with Ichiban for helping in the way he did, while he came out on top he inarguably gambled with their precarious existence in a moment of uncalculated righteousness. (*Nanba defends us, is shot down*)

It's here Nanba decides to give Ichiban a lesson about the local gangs. The city is divided between the Ijin Three, comprised of the Chinese Yokohama Liumang, the Korean Geomijul, and the Japanese Seiryu clan.

The three are locked in a volatile cold war, Nanba quite confidently supposes the three are all building their power, because at any moment, any spark will turn the situation hot. It's this uneasy peace which has actually kept larger clans from ever entering the town, not wanting to upset the balance. I love this, it's an incredibly juicy setup which perfectly fits the genre shift. Following the doomed hometown and one way trip through a dungeon we come out in a fantasy warring kingdom, reconstituted in a modern setting through the byzantine codes and customs of organised crime. The conflict which insulates Yokohama from the rest of the world even bearing the mythical sounding moniker of THE GREAT WALL OF MUSCLE.

There is so much room for intrigue and criminal politicking which the story ahead does not let go to waste. (*Ichiban calls the twist – Nanba rejects it*) Also yeah lets just attribute me getting dumped in the one place where the Omi can't finish the job to luck.

Luck which Ichiban wants to push, between Kan-San and the Liumang, Ichiban thinks he shouldn't just be bumming around here. Nanba points out why that's a bad idea. (*prods him*)

Which also points us to a discovery. Ichiban is loaded!

Only problem, this is a fake, one of outstanding quality were it not for one glaring defect.

Now the rest of the bums are wary. Nanba sticks up for Ichiban, as it's clear the bill was placed on him post-shooting. Either way, this is the last straw, it's time for Ichiban to get out of their hair. But not before trying to hype up the crowd to join him in going to Hello Work, now it's Nanba who shouts him down, and yeah I wouldn't be so excited about going on JSA either.

(*Nanba yells*)

Jokes aside this makes for an important moment: Ichiban's loud, cocksure approach to life being presented as off base, short-sighted and self-centred is uncommon. The game often shows a passionate, well meaning approach to life as heroic, but here it slams the breaks.

Ichiban can punch the hobos way out of a problem but he can't just shout them out of their entire situation. Their individual lives are too complicated, their reasons set too deep, for one rousing speech to dig them out of their own holes.

It shows he understands the small scale but not the big picture, and Nanba's words do get through to him, he changes a little, and from here more and more.

4. Inkiban: The Ryuugyo

Which fits well with Ichiban's ink. As we exit the homeless camp we're introduced to my favourite new town wandering feature, party chats. We'll get more into these when we have a party to prattle on with, but for now I want to discuss the topic of this one mandatory chinwag Ichiban's Ryuugyo, otherwise called a Dragonfish.

Ichiban says he wanted a dragon, but the dragon stands at the top of the food chain. It'd be arrogant for a fresh faced thug to flaunt one. But he hopes to one day earn his place, and when he does his Dragonfish will shine even brighter than a dragon. It's a humble little aside to the audience, but his tattoo says a whole lot more than this party chat has room for.

While the events of RGG Online aren't canon and are indeed contradictory to this game: I want to talk about how it appears there, it's an Utabori original, and while inking Ichi up Utabori gives us an inkling of his intent.

"A long time ago, I tattooed two men at the same time. One with a dragon, and one with a koi. What's on your back falls between the two ... a koi transforming into a dragon ... a ryuugyo. Will it make it through the Dragon Gate and become a true dragon? ... Or will it be swept away by the current and sink to the depths? That depends on you. Because a tattoo is something that can only be made to shine by the one who bears it." And then he didn't put his signature on it so we can hazard a guess how he fancies Ichiban's chances, right to the inky depths!

While I don't think reading Ichiban as a composite of Kiryu and Nishiki is an invalid way to look at him, it's one I don't personally find interesting. If you do then there you go, the game, well, a different game, has it in writing. It does at least give Ichiban's tat symbolic weight, he's not an archetype like Kiryu who's predetermined by narrative convention to succeed. He is, as we've seen, spectacularly capable of failure.

What's more interesting to me is what the Ryuugyo represents. Simply put, change, transformation, swimming against the tide. In a gamespot interview it was said that Ichiban is meant to be the catalyst for change within the series, and this idea of change has already hit us in a ton of ways big and small, we've got a new town, a new genre, a big shake up of the status quo.

There's a lot of cute little details which further push this motif. The main menu is initially made up of incomplete splotches of Ichiban's tattoo, a handy visual saying the man is not yet complete. Then when he finds his motivation and a baseball bat in the ground the menu changes to reflect his newfound purpose, and baseball bat. Becoming this sick ass image of him stalking towards a distant city, bat in hand, dragonfish on display, ready to wallop the world into shape. Throughout chapters 1, 2, and 3 his job title has repeatedly changed as his understanding of the situation develops, exactly the kind of understated joke I quite like, and spoilers for the job hunt, he'll find a whole new one later, one we won't be thanking Hello Work for.

It's brilliant how the theme of change is woven into the fabric of the game. And to compare again with Kiryu. It's interesting how Ichiban by choosing this tattoo has tacitly agreed to live life in an inbetween state, always growing but never grown. Kiryu compared started at the top, and what did that get him? He was stubborn, resistant to change, he spent several games being taught the same lesson before the next tragedy reopens his trauma and sends him back to square one. Because in his mind he'll always be the Dragon.

Ichiban will only ever be uh, Like a Dragon, see, it's very slick. Never the dragon itself, arguably something even greater, a man capable of change. (*find change*)

PART 3: Dragonfish Quests

1. Ijincho Irritants: Geomijul and Bleach Japan

We move into what I would call the Part-Time Hero arc if only that weren't an actual mechanic. So we'll call it the Dragonfish Quests.

The next six and a half story hours follow a fun formula. We get a new party member, already done that much. Come across a scheme one of the Ijin Three are plotting, and set forth to put a stop to it, Occasionally running into another, even more detestable foe along the way. (*bleach japan*)

Arriving at the job centre. Between the large crowd and their advanced age, Nanba is pessimistic about their chances. Ichiban says passion will pull them through. The thing is bureaucracy thinks passion is poor form, probably even has a form to punish it.

Without a proper address to work with, all Hello Work can do is say goodbye and good luck as it kicks the can collector down the road. (*Other form* → “*When god closes a window, he closes a door while he's at it.*”) As the two brush off a boozed up bum, they're approached with a pretty shady sounding gig at riverside bar Harbor Light, But hey, where black and white rules made em fools, what's in the grey offered to pay. (“*Not everyone sees things in black and white*” – “*You're a loose cannon, director.*”) This is extra absurd to me considering Hello Work is not an invention of RGG say Hello to Hello Work! Japan's actual for real goddamn government ran employment service! Will their real directors slip you off the books jobs? It'd make them better than fucking Jobseekers. When they get to the bar, The two are unhappy to learn they're on guard duty. The Mama is deeply apologetic, it wasn't her, but her meddling friend Hamako who arranged the job without her go ahead. Here's the problem: Across the river, the Geomijul have been syphoning electricity from the bars, running up their energy bills to unsustainable levels. Putting the entire district at risk of shutdown. The cops are a no go, not even they mess with Geomijul, who have their slice of Koreatown on lockdown.

Hamako wants to cut them off, we're here to ensure they're not cut down for doing so.

Nanba is terrified and tells us we better cut, the issue is that Hamako already has. (*wire cut – guess I'm at that age*) I like Hamako, she gets things done. And despite Nanba's protests Ichiban quite happily takes the job. (*if I can help people and get paid, that's my kinda job*)

Many shaky hours later, in comes the drunken destitute from the job centre swinging a sledgehammer. The game skips a chase sequence as we face off with him at the bridge into Koreatown. Learning he was hired by the Geomijul to intimidate them into reconnecting the power before fleeing, his escape covered by Geomijul sharpshooters.

Ichiban and Nanba are pinned down, all hope is lost. Until Ichiban makes a hail Mary speech, telling his anonymous enemy that whether or not they leave the bars alone, the power is getting cut off before long regardless. They send one last message, loud and clear. (*Shot narrowly misses – We good?*)

Nanba is astonished, and Hamako has a tidier gig lined up tomorrow if we're so inclined. (“*What's your name – Ichiban, it's not fake – It's a good name, wear it well*”) That's oddly enough one of my favourite little exchanges in the game. Hamako plays a small role but she's a real lynchpin character to me, representing the quintessentially good traits of a person who makes their way in the grey zones. Warmhearted and jovial, but far from a pushover. She knows how harsh the world is, that it's never going to offer her a helping hand, and decided that's not good enough for her and the people she cares about. So her and Ichiban get on like a house on fire.

It's the next day we learn about Hamako's establishment. (*Girls leave – Nanba comments*)

And it isn't long into their tidier job we meet an even dirtier, more detestable foe.

(*Illegal prostitution has got to go! Get out of Ijincho!*) Bleach Japan, an NPO set up by Ryo Aoki before he went on to become Tokyo Governor and enact his 3K plan. With his name behind it and continual backing, the group is growing popular, especially with their proposed goal of "Bleaching the Grey Zones White", With a particular focus on targeting sex workers.

The reason sex work could be called a grey zone is because of the cultural role of prostitution in the past, which led to a legal definition worded in a purposefully specific, arbitrary way which left obvious room for holes and loopholes alike. And with that, a group of arseholes moan about it.

The group is headed by Kume, and today, Hamako's joint is in his sights. "This establishment is registered as a restaurant, yet all they serve is tea!" Now how do you know that Kumer-Me?

Hamako rushes out to see them off, but she can't get a word in edgewise.

(*Why register as a restaurant?*) Because some people like to eat out Kume!

Introducing the Geomijul and Bleach Japan back to back makes for a strong side by side. While the Geomijul are a cruel criminal faction their wants are often tangible. Their methods may be unreasonable, but they can be reasoned with. When Ichiban gives them a solid argument they understand the juice is no longer worth the squeeze.

Bleach Japan only appear reasonable on their heavily PRed face. They don't even need to sound good, they just have to make noise! They only need to look correct to a polite society who will only ever hear about the grey zones from them.

What they want is recognition and social power, far more nebulous concepts. Hamako can't just unplug a cable and explain the supply is cut off. The people they target are the source of their power. People who are mostly trying to get by in less fortunate circumstances, who can't reason with Bleach because anything to them anything they have to say starts beneath consideration, any point they could make must be belittled before it has a chance to beguile.

Like Ichiban at the homeless camp Bleach doesn't really understand what's going on in the grey zones. Unlike Ichiban they don't care. They're not here to solve a societal issue, they're out on Safari. And the more they rile up the animals the better it winds up looking for them.

Hamako can handle the Geomijul, while they're at perceivably different places in the grey zone, they can at least meet with some understanding of each other.

She cannot handle Bleach, they're black, white, and blind. Kume is a puerile puritanical, an ill purposed and prudish prick who won't stop prodding at prostitutes and unlike most punters won't pay for the privilege. He is a shockingly effective character. I want to reach through the screen and wring his neck before he's done talking to Hamako, as everything she says is either talked over or twisted against her. (*"who would like a hooker for a mom?" - I didn't mind*)

It once again takes Ichiban, now holding the highground, and plentiful ammunition, to send them packing. (*Hamako thanks Ichi – Thumbs up*) I love Ichiban, if you could show me a man looking more heroic holding a bin full of cum... Well, I don't want to see it but I'd be impressed.

After seeing off Kume once again later than day when he makes a more underhanded move on Hamako's establishment. She decides to offer her two new guards a place to stay. Getting them the address they need while making it harder for the buildings lease holder to evict her should Bleach kick up a fuss.

2. Nanba Tells us to Level Up

And so the two dive into their new home, perhaps too eagerly... (*Kinda damp*) yeah.

Riding a bit of a high Nanba finally opens up a little about his past, revealing he lost his job as a Nurse for smuggling drugs out of the hospital.

Ichiban encourages him to start again and Nanba brushes it off, asking what Ichiban's next move is, and having only just discovered his old life seems just as over as if the bullet had claimed him, he has no idea. So Nanba encourages him to start again, and Ichiban brushes it off. ("you can do anything you set your mind to" – "I'm 40" – "You just told me the same thing." - "Oh yeah, sorry.")

So uh, this awkward ass cutscene is one of my favourites in the game, but to properly explain why I need to quickly rewind and work back up to this conversation.

Nanba's arc up to this point gives us so much momentum for the story to build off of. He starts off cold, trying and failing to keep Ichiban at a distance. One trait of Ichi's I adore, which we see starting with Arakawa, is he never unquestioningly accepts rationalisations for good deeds, he trusts the gesture to be genuine. No excuse excusing kindness.

And we see it with Nanba, even before he learns he's loaded he never really stops helping Ichiban, all he does is stop making justifications for it.

He's also serves to highlight Ichiban's heroics. Nanba is less rough and ready, more reserved. He's street smart in his own way, but more for the sake of keeping his head down. But then Ichiban gives him someone to look up to, he's genuinely inspiring to the guy, and Nanba becomes more courageous as he sees this poofy-haired prats heroics actually pan out.

So we get to here, these two new friends talking about dreams. Not in a Yakuza 5 way, presented with unreserved melodramatic enthusiasm. These two need to awkwardly work up to such a vulnerable, potentially embarrassing topic ("I wanted to be a hero" – "That's rich." - "What's wrong" – "Uh, na")

And Ichiban IS embarassed, trying to defend his kid self for having kid dreams. So it falls to Nanba, who started this chapter so distant, who has seen what Ichiban can do, realising he's wrong to judge, that this is the kind of guy the world needs, it would be awful to snuff that fire out.

So he discards his mockery and encourages Ichiban without irony (*You should do it*) It's the chapter long build up to this point which makes it land so strongly, we see the impact Ichiban has on the people around him, his own unwavering belief that the best will come to pass rubs off on those around him as he fights to make it true. It's a motif repeated again and again through the story.

(*It doesn't pay the bills – if a hero kiils enough slimes he levels up*) And my defences are broken, this one works. It's a video game allusion and an emotional critical hit.

I think it's because it starts from a place of believable awkwardness when talking about such a big emotional topic like dreams, then works its way to a point where the video game metaphor clicks with total sincerity. The characters having to muddle through that awkwardness brings me along with them, I said these metaphors got better as they went, the last few only sort of matched the emotions of the scene, but they were necessary to get to this one landing perfectly! It was this moment I knew I was completely invested in Ichiban.

A great many have also found inspiration in just what this scene shows. Two forty year old guys deciding they still got time to start over. I feel I've come from a generation that has struggled with the concept of growing up, that the model of what growing up meant became an empty promise before a great manys eyes. What does growing up mean anymore? I'll get back to you if I ever figure it out. Levelling up though, that's easier to conceptualise.

As these two lads toast to a brighter future, we get a grim reminder of the world they're going up against. (*Hobo killed*)

3. Adachi Rejoins and Party Motivations

And outside, another makes his own little toast to finally tracking down his prey. Slipping unnoticed into Ichibanba's abode. (*Adachi revealed*)

Adachi has returned, over breakfast he reveals he tracked Ichiban down via the GPS in his now charged phone. (*GPS – Ichiban pretends to get it*) Nanba being here gives Adachi a reason to recount his backstory for him and for the benefit of the audience, but he thinks to ask a follow up question, what does he want with Hourinouchi?

Revenge, in a word. Hourinouchi was Adachi's superior at Kanagawa PD before taking getting the Tokyo Commissioner gig. For the sake of this promotion, he let a man take 17 years, a man who wound up killing himself in his cell. All because he was fingered as the perp *before* testimony turned up which would have vindicated him. This mistake would have been politically disadvantageous, so the witness was browbeaten into silence.

Adachi tried to leak the alibi to the press but Hourinouchi caught it, and that's how Adachi went from stomping the streets to stamping the sheets.

An aside but I want to point out how over the course of each of my playthroughs I wound up almost forgetting exactly why most of the party is following Ichiban. Ironically, the guy I have the easiest time remembering is Nanba which you probably understand why.

It isn't that their motives are weak, while a little tangential they run parallel to the main quest in a manner that never really strays, but on the whole their wants feel inert so they're here on inertia, ready to allow Ichiban to dive into any diversion, never seeming to care whether it comes back around to why they've thrown their lot in with him. The funny thing is over the course of the game the bond the group develops is so believably strong I never actually questioned why they were here, I just found myself more attributing it to camaraderie instead of context, and it holds up.

Adachi's backstory also fills in a couple details. Most of Kanagawa PD is connected. Many with the Ijin Three, which does a tidy job explaining why we're not calling the cops on the bad guys... Not that I figured the characters would because that would be an immensely underwhelming resolution, but you know, there's probably a crippling bore out there wondering that.

Second, the ambitious cops often want out of Kanagawa, and this is presented less because of the grime itself and more the fear it might stain their career. Also kinda explains how this sleazebag made it by. (*"Women and drinking were expensive hobbies"*)

There are a great many conversations in 7 like this, titbits and trivia about society, observations on people and how they act. Asides putting forward very dim views of institutions.

Pointing out how what's in the public interest and ones personal interests are often misaligned and how this can have catastrophic results people dependent on the system working as advertised. It's a whole game filled with Uncheery Nojiris, but this time built on a foundation where these topics bolster the overall story rather than feeling like an awkward digression from it.

Anyhoo, Adachi's stunt on the roof cost him his job, and the big ass pension he was due for. So he's coming down Hello Work with us too! His stunt on the roof lost him his job and the big pension he was betting it all on. So he's all in on revenge now even if it doesn't often feel that way! welcome to the Ichiband!

Beyond the bridge we find, a bat embedded in the ground, the three gather round in childish fascination. It won't shift for our two allies, but Ichiban... (*pulls it free*) Less the sword in the stone and more the bat by the bog. But Ichiban's hero status is affirmed all the same! His mental status... A bit debuffed but he's happy to roll with it. (*this'll be more fun!*) So lets... Get to Hello Work! That was not the combat bridge! I promise, we'll get stuck into combat soon! I'm not trying to become a parody of myself kicking the actual gameplay discussion back for so long!

4. Otohime Land & The Seiryu Scam

With a place of residence secured Hello Work can finally address our problem. The Director, Kanbe, who slipped us that dirty job the other day, says that from here on out it's all gonna be by the books, nice clean work, so naturally, a bathhouse.

We're sent to Otohime Land. Headed by the, lets say uncompromising Nonomiya (*Reuse the bathwater*) A shrill skinflint who quickly sparks disdain in the party. Acting especially callous to Nanoha, one of his girls. She's stressed, sick, and trying to arrange care for her father who's in even worse health. (*"It's a shame he won't just die, but I guess he's really hanging on huh?"*)

Between Nonomiya and this place being under Seiryu protection Nanba and Adachi are ready to say "no no", but Ichiban decides "Me, ya." Later explaining to the crew that while Nonomiya is short with people, he's not sugarcoating the business. His knowledge of his girls personal lives must be a sign he cares deeply for them. I can imagine why a boss knowing everything about his employees lives, especially in this line of work isn't an automatic green flag, and still Nonomiya digs his hole. Proud his girls are all people with their backs to the wall, because if they didn't absolutely *need* the job, they couldn't provide the emotional depth customers really crave. You know what they say, desperation is lubrication... I think the only people who say that are on a register and can't go to Hello Work...

We're given our first task. Nono produces a picture of Nanoha, his top earner five years running, or some other verb anyway. She had to take up this line of work to make enough to provide for her ailing father. However she's been absent more and more lately, so it falls to us to discover why. Finding her meeting with a shady figure and slipping him a hefty chunk of change, snippets of a conversation reveal she's not all paid up and has ten days before something comes to pass... Trailing the suit, we wind up before Sunlight Castle, a high end retirement home built out of an old bank. It'd look grand were she not paying some guy in cash and seemingly disallowed from actually visiting her dad.

So all we can do is report to Nonomiya, who is brought to tears by the news. (*"Nothing is good enough for dear old dad."*) This must be that emotional depth he mentioned. Under a rough exterior he does care for his girls. He wants to call us off, but this still strikes the gang as shady. The cost of the place is extreme, the Excellent Course downright Extortionate, and they figure they're holding Nanoha's father hostage until she's paid up. Going over the various ways the elderly can be exploited (*"The pamphlets paint a pretty picture, but the inside's rotten to the core."*)

Nonomiya prostrates himself before the group and asks that we save her. And Ichiban is once again the man with the plan. (*"Are second jobs okay?"*) Kanbe's on board. Finding us some contractor gigs with which we can con our way in. He struggles with Ichiban. Yakuza and retirement homes mix like oil and the contents of a catheter bag!

Once inside, the place appears above board, but when Ichiban sneaks upstairs he spies an eery sight. (*Excellent Area*) Reporting back, Nonomiya even recognises two of the supposed staff are actually Seiryu members who used to look after Otohime. So, we got Yakuza actually running the retirement home, now that's taking the piss!

The group also realise they only have until tomorrow to save Nanoha's dad. (*10 days!*) Something funny was doing side content or not, this felt like an absurd time leap. The team mentioned how in earlier titles stories took place in shockingly short timeframes and so they wanted 7 to feel like it took place over a greater timespan. Which makes sense for developing relationships.

But this is the one time time felt like a factor and it shocked me more than anything. Like I'd slipped in and out of a narrative coma.

I think you could fit the main events of Yakuza 0 in just this investigation and have time to fit in the weekly big shop. Before we move on and retire the topic lets quickly go back over Nonomiya.

They make him vile in his introduction for two reasons, immediately it's to highlight Ichiban's wealth of experience with figures like him, which doesn't stop his super high disco elysium Empathy check from looking like loaded dice. But sure, he's got situational modifiers.

It's also, once again, for the sake of juxtaposition, which is turning out to be YLAD's favourite narrative tool. The seedy, probably seed strewn soapland with a seedier manager who under his grimy exterior genuinely cares for the vulnerable people in his employ.

Vs the luxury retirement home which appears squeaky clean on the surface but is hiding a dark underbelly. Pure blunt force contrast. Exaggerated in the extreme in both directions.

I do think they make Nonomiya far too unlikeable for this to land properly. It's a hard thing to gauge, go too soft and the comparison, not to mention the reveal itself feels limp wristed. Go too hard, which I'd argue they did, and him turning out to be well intentioned feels contrived, and there's no room left in most people to think about what the game is saying with him.

His first impression is something he can't claw his way back from even when it's spelled out to be a false front.

He may care for his girls, but what did he then gain by broadcasting himself being this unapologetically cruel. To test the Ichiban? To throw them out if they found this fake version of him agreeable? To present a hard front to defend the girls he admits he's exploiting? Acting as a potential barrier if these guys were sleazebags. We're not to know.

The connection between sex workers and the elderly is a strange one but I want to draw it. At a certain stage in life you'll have no choice but to be vulnerable. For some it arrives early via circumstance, but on a long enough timeline your wellbeing will end up in others hands. When the time comes you'd hope to wind up in the care of people who *actually* care and first impressions may not always give you the whole picture. The game draws out sympathy by placing the two groups side by side as people who've wound up in such circumstances, you don't choose to get old, that's just gonna happen. We don't know why women wound up at Otohime Land, but it's not presented as something they altogether chose.

5. Bleach: Back in Black (and White)

During all of this Bleach turns up and it once again falls to Ichiban to see them off.

This time he does it not with a bucket full of cum but throwing the book at them. A verbal kumite with kume. The gang expertly leading him into a rhetorical trap, making him profess how unerringly pure he is, never pissing in public, never speeding... That's a leap.

They do this before outlining all the loopholes he's abusing at this very moment. Overstepping his bounds literally and legally ("*Using a grey zone to fight a grey zone, that's irony!*") Eventually forcing him to beat a legal retreat

It's great fun watching Ichiban and gang pull Kume's worldview apart, satisfying each and every time it happens from this point onwards. But what's frustrating about Kume is, while he's a believable impression of these kinds of moral crusaders it's only to a point, and it's in the way Ichiban so easily disarms him.

People like Kume are never so easily shut down by pointing out their hypocrisy. This is because they cannot conceive of themselves as hypocrites. They simply don't have the capacity for cognitive dissonance.

Or else feel their moral crusade gives them carte Bleach to do as they must to achieve their goal, hypocrisy then, is permissible, even laudable, in pursuit of a goal.

Or, if they're actually somewhat conniving. The hypocrisy serves a purpose, it's a glowing red target opponents can waste time wailing on while never actually achieving anything. Hung up on the details of an argument while never actually impeding its effects.

This will sound strange but this is to me the biggest power fantasy aspect of the game, seeing Ichiban repeatedly embarrass this annoying prick, who has just enough self awareness to get snagged on and beat down with, and that's before the beatdowns begin.

Looking at them through the fantasy lens: Bleach Japan is equivalent to a corrupt church. Filled with hateful zealots and blind followers acting towards a misguided idea of a greater good while worshipping at the altar of a false god. It's especially amusing the church analogue operates on "bad fath" interpretations of their opponents words and deeds. Very good.

I especially love their colour scheme. The stark colours say a lot.

A white shirt with black logo emblazoned on the chest. This black white contrast is especially prevalent on Kume, his black long-sleeve under-shirt says it all. This is a group wearing a veil of purity containing a hateful core. Kume is a man who thinks himself noble, but has an inside as black as coal burning with white hot fury. A fury for people he'd never run into if he hadn't decided to stick his nose in their business... Which is probably a service you could pay for around here.

Uh also there's the straightforward joke of sex protestors knocking around with gigantic blowjob shirts on, you can't miss these little details!

6. Ichiban's First Base Raid

The next day, the three sneak their way into the excellent area, saving Nanoha's papa in the nick of time. With barely disguised Seiryu not far behind, followed by the man Ichiban saw 10 days or minutes ago.

After subduing him, they find the Excellent Area has gone into lockdown. Totsuka here threatens to call the police, Ichiban finds this a pretty pathetic move for a Yakuza, but if tattling is on the table, he'll happily raise. (*"I'll talk to your boss"*) He has Totsuka take us to Seiryu HQ so we can file a complaint in person. Walking the gang into an obvious trap, they're quickly surrounded, cut off from Totsuka, and they can only flee deeper into the building, narrowly losing the horde.

Welcome to the Seiryu Base Raid! The base raid is a common occurrence throughout the series, Usually an explosive climax, after tensions come to a head, we tear down their headquarters. The hero taking the fight to the enemies doors, a great display of power as they smash their way through legions of foes. It's cathartic, it's epic, it's usually pretty straightforward.

Ichiban's first go at this is anything but. The party are rats in a maze and I can't cheese this joint. Ichiban's status as being lower on the totem pole is spelled out bright as day, him and his boys are not yet at a level where they can just rock a joint like this and this is communicated not just through cutscenes but actual level design.

Navigation is circuitous, there's backtracking, puzzles that send the gang here there and everywhere, they're at one point literally thrown off course and have to improvise a new route. The only reason they're evading the horde is due to sheer incompetence, of course the clan can't predict our next move, we have no idea what it is either!

This navigation makes the player feel less powerful, less certain, we share in Ichiban's inexperience and are brought more down to earth. It's also genuinely funny, comedy and tension in perfect balance.

The music does a ton of the work here, Seiryu No Ran keeps us feeling like we're on the run.

Its high octane sections match the battles perfectly, they carry some of the classic Yakuza bombast but make clear this isn't a smackdown, it's a scramble, a room by room trial to just get by.

Most of the track however takes on a slower, more creeping form. Both evoke the feeling that we're not *the danger*, we are very much deep in it. Outnumbered and outmatched. As opposed to most base raid music which carries great forward momentum to push the player along.

This is more cautious, as befitting the level design and mood the player is told this is a more perilous, less certain situation. It's a tone the series hasn't tackled in play before and it works wonderfully.

I do also love how it also finds room for some mechanical storytelling. As we make our way deeper into the building we run into the family captains one by one. Learning their movesets, elemental affinities and so on. They're then faced as a little party of their own at the end. Making for a great rival fight of sorts. Demanding you mix and match your strategies for all of them. The Ichiban versus the Seiryu clan. It's great escalation and such a fun little narrative threaded through the stage. All in all it's a brilliant sequence. A bumbling high stakes caper with lives on the very wiggly line. We're once again setting Ichiban apart from prior protags and it's done so charmingly. Creating multiple coinciding little narratives through its design as it goes.

Totsuka is terrified, baffled that they made it this far, he asks just who the hell they are. (*"Workers at your soapland"*) Leave it to Soapland employees to clean house.

Chairman Hoshino emerges, pretty reasonably uncertain of the group, but Ichiban's bill buys him Hoshino's attention.

In his office, Totsuka has lost face, with a finger pretty soon to follow. Hoshino admits people shun the Yakuza, but he has done things to protect the city from his rivals in the Ijin Three. In any business there'll things the rank and file don't know about, keep that in mind. Yet it seems Totsuka's little hustle was playing this in reverse.

The man claims he was going to report his venture eventually, but Ichiban, ever the Yakuza protag, is adamant that murder is wrong. (*Hoshino asks if he gave Ichiban wrong impression – I thanked you – I did not ask for your opinion*)

He lets his underling keep the finger, but ejects him from the clan. With the room cleared, he turns the blade on Ichiban, saying that what he did here today has humiliated the clan. (*"Tomorrow, that knowledge will follow you" – "I got a chill down my spine. And I feel great, captain"*)

This disarms Hoshino. Ichiban goes on to say he thought all the oldschool Yakuza he idolized had vanished while he was in jail. Hoshino showed him they're still around. The old man turns on a dime, and as Ichiban talks about Arakawa, Hoshino obviously recognises the name.

In one conversation Ichiban goes from an interfering civvie, to a righteous and loyal soldier in his eyes. (*Arakawa bit*) He saw something... Two somethings in Ichiban, that made him forgive this transgression.

It is a funny thing that after this whole kerfuffle where we demonstrate that Ichiban is a far cry from the Yakuza of yesteryear, not to mention after a whole series about their decline and how rare these sorts really were, Ichiban sees some of the old school are still holding out. The world Kiryu used to fight for has gotten smaller, but pockets of it still exist.

It looks like everything came out sunshine and rainbows. Sunlight Castle is shuttered, Nanoha's money, and old man, are returned safe and sound, she's able to go back to her old life, leaving Otohime land behind. Hey we just let their top earner go, but Ichiban said he can scout, so I'm sure it'll be fine!

Of course, that's not how these things go (*Nonomiya dead*) No happy ending here. Not unless he was pulling the most courageous Carradine in the world and I have my doubts. If you think I'm crass for making a joke at a moment like that I'll tell you the chapter achievement is named Soap on a Rope!

7. Chapter 5 Brings the Party Alive: Saeko & Conversation

We make it to the final chapter of the Dragonfish Quests, the Liumang Man, a title I enjoy saying an inordinate amount. We join the gang at Nonomiya's funeral, with many in attendance caring more about the property than the person. (*"How could he go to heaven with a goldmine like that on earth."*) At least they liked him enough to think he was headed up.

Nanba is offended on his behalf but Adachi explains why their begrudging him, that being it's more or less impossible to establish a Soapland nowadays. With new rules and regulations strangling them tighter than well... Moving on.

While this is just another aside, this does illuminate that Bleach, for all of their bleaching and bitching, are already winning. While the Law hasn't killed the Grey Zones, it's already put them in a position where they're going to die. Bleach already has what it claims to want, acknowledging that would harm the messaging though so why bother.

It's as the group wonders why Nonomiya took his own life. Ichiban supposing he cared more than he ever let on. They're interrupted by... Nanoha? (*"That guy was garbage, you really think he'd kill himself?"*) Who's this psycho? (*Saeko*) Oh. It's Saeko!

I love how her telling them they've never met before has the group acting like it's the riddle of the Minx. They can't comprehend it, and heaven forfend, a lady lighting up! Ichi cracks the code. This is Nanoha's twin, I told you he was smarter than he looks, Saeko concurs!

She came here with thanks for helping her sister, and details regarding Nonomiya's death.

Saeko worked bar for the Cabaret Nonomiya also happened to run, and was on the phone with him at the moment of his death, this was no suicide, it was an assassination by the Liumang. (*"It sounded like Lao Ma! Lao Ma!"*) He called to let her know about the situation her sister was in, her job kept secret until the situation got this dire, and it's from him Saeko learned about the gang. She tried to call the cops, but upon hearing Lao Ma, nickname of Triad bigwig Mabuchi, the law decided this was not a matter worth pursuing. He has the police in his pocket, and with this being a triad killing in Seiryu turf, news getting out could upset the wall of muscle.

Saeko feels powerless, her cold front starts to falter. She broke away from her family, kept to herself, and never thought much of old Soap on a Rope. Likely seeing him the same way we did on introduction, uncouth and inconsiderate. And we're introduced to Saeko almost the same way, they're more alike than she would have cared for. Only learning just how little he deserved such a fate the very moment it barged in on him. And now she can't return a kindness she never knew was there. (*Adachi tells Saeko their bond meant something, Saeko breaks down*)

With the police refusing to help, Saeko has only these three to turn to, and they were never gonna turn her down. (*"Okay!"* → *"You're getting to know me, nurse nanba!"* → *"Detectives won't go near the guy, my instincts say go for it."* → *"You're not alone anymore"*) And with that, our core party is complete! We're not going to make a great first impression!

We're tasked with tracking down Mabuchi, and our first stop is Restaurant Row. Ichiban immediately puts his foot in it. (*Chinatown – Don't say that*) The Liumang are made up of people who were chased out of Chinatown proper a long time ago by the Snake Flower Triad. A wound that has both festered within and focused the gang ever since. If we're to find Mabuchi we're gonna have to be subtle, this is a fraught situation and we're asking sensitive questions.

It's here Ichiban reveals he has two left feet. Spectacularly striking out three times as he tries to prize any info he can from the locals in bizarre little comedy skits, before saying it's proof of their loyalty to the Liumang in a way that feels daft given how spectacularly he just cocked up. It's an odd bit of whiplash, because Ichiban, while a comedic character, is rarely this inconveniently stupid. What they need is a less than loyal Liumang man, and who passes by but the Hobo Harasser himself, Zheng!

Strutting into the nearby Lin Lin Cabaret, we wouldn't be able to get in if not for Saeko using her bluster and quick thinking to get hired as a hostess and get us access, so we can have a little tete-a-tete with Zheng (Te)

Saeko is immediately sent to the VIP room, a spot where Liumang men can have their way with the unfortunate women assigned to the place. Just as Ichiban is about to jump to her defence, we find she doesn't quite need it. (*Normal fetishes*) One beatdown later, and despite the blue balls, Zheng isn't quite ready to spill.

It takes Ichiban getting him to trust in his good nature to have him say what little he knows of Mabuchi, who despite being in the same gang, may as well be in a different world from the uneducated lower ranks of the Liumang, mainly kids who had no other choice. Much like the Yakuza Ichiban notes. Mabuchi is comparatively clever, sharp, and motivated. Running several of his own businesses in Yokohama. Key amongst them is the Yokohama Trading Company.

This being as much as they can get from Zheng, the group retires for the night. The boys are ready to see Saeko off and go drinking. Saeko notes their bond is obviously strong and she's happy to see it before breaking away. Ichiban sees her shrinking into the night, and decides to instead invite her along.

In a Dengeki interview, Yokoyama notes watching this scene always made him cry. I thought I just wasn't equipped to see what he sees in it. It's a sweet moment, well acted, well scored. It's an emotional moment the series has never tackled before and the hit lands perfectly well.

but what makes it tearjerker material? I had intended to get here and say that while I like Saeko. I did have a minor niggle in that she disturbs the core theme of the party. That while they're all people who hit rock bottom and had to rebuild their lives from scratch. All Saeko has done is put her life on hold. It's not a major problem, but it upsets the rhythm and feels far less dramatic.

Having made it back here, I realised that she too is working up from Rock Bottom. Saeko thought she was living a life of freedom, but Nonomiya's death forced her to realise she was merely living a life free from connection. Coasting, doing nothing, feeling nothing, only imagining she had it all figured out, and she had been this way for years.

Then she meets these guys, only she can see how strong their bond is because she's seeing it from the outside, in this moment, Ichiban invites her in, this isn't merely a boys club and she won't be treated differently or distantly, and it's with them she can really start living again. It's really strong stuff. It's not a tearjerker to me, we're all on different emotional wavelengths after all, and this isn't me saying I'm above that, there's three damn scenes in this game that get me to tear up, but I think I can understand why it hits Yokoyama that way.

This chapter completes the core party, we haven't gotten all of our members yet, but Saeko solidifies the dynamics. Ichiban's passion drives the group onwards. His trustworthiness opening others up to them. Nanba's the voice of reason, the party tent peg who keeps us grounded and reminds us of the stakes. Adachi knows the lay of the land and can point us in the right direction, and Saeko is the people pleaser. The one who can get us anywhere with social grace. They all go through an arc similar to Nanba, embodying the good they see in Ichiban, more daring and less accepting of letting injustice lie.

The writing has the the full power of RGG behind it. All of studio's top guys, Yokoyama, Nagoshi, Judgment lead writer Furuta, and Ryosuke Horii, who has worked his way up from Side Content to being Director of this title. Contributed to the main script. This party took everyone playing their part to make them work.

With Nagoshi saying how much he loved writing Saeko in particular. This four man writing band makes it all the more impressive that most of the time... Most of the time, it leads to characters feeling rounded instead of irreconcilable. The team were all pushing and pulling, making sure scenes worked, and they all seemed to understand the core of each character, but also saw different qualities in them, contributing to how fully realised each feels.

Saeko immediately brings out two of these. We see Adachi fall back into his role as a detective, breaking the news of the deceased with practised, professional empathy... Nanba (“*you’re pretty sexy*”) Has that horndog in him.

Which brings me to how much I appreciate how distinctly each party member plays off of one another, and I especially love Saeko and Nanba’s back and forth. After his terrible first impression, she teases him relentlessly, and it isn’t one way. They bicker back and forth, both pointing out how weird the other is, thinking themselves the normal one when really they’re both freaks on different frequencies. This isn’t the sum total of their relationship however, it’s the seed which sprouts into a much richer friendship.

I adore the party in 7, and between the investigation much of this chapter is spent lingering, letting the party chat, establishing everyone's roles, relations and repartee. While it doesn’t end here this is the last chance for the game to really solidify the groups dynamic before we progress from these seemingly disconnected heroics into the larger plot, and it does this brilliantly, by the time we’re done I really believe these guys will weather the coming storm together.

Horii talks about how when Kiryu was the protagonist, he primarily acted alone. Whenever another character was involved it’s usually because it was a serious scene. And thus there was often a need for it to be plot-critical conversation which moved the action forward. He could only unwind and be explored from other angles in side content. I found that was part of the charm, the hardline separation between grim story and optimistic world balanced each other out.

This group dynamic gives the writing a very different vibe, it allows downtime to possess narrative utility, the small talk is a big deal! It also creates more of a tonal oneness between story and side content. Massaging far more optimism into its melancholy main scenario, the division is still present but the gap is much thinner because same trick wouldn’t work with Ichiban. The man already feels like a substory character who has somehow stumbled into the lead role. He’s kinda like Ryosuke Horii, making his mark with side content and from there earning the directors chair.

Horii notes how useful Ichiban as a character is, he’s an emotional crowbar, his easygoing charm and carefree honesty makes it easy for other characters to lower their guard around him and speak more naturally and it totally works. It’s a big aspect of why the group becoming so tight knit so quickly doesn’t come across as rushed. The man is denser than Kiryu in a way, with a gravitational pull the people around him can’t help but fall into.

This also leads to a more notable consistency of character. The tone can translate far easier between main story and side stuff. So before we end the Dragonfish Quests, lets go get that drink...

8. Drink Links & Bond Builders

Adachi introduces us to his favourite watering hole, Survive, a cozy joint tucked at the northern end of the Bar District, bizarrely unpopular given it is one of the coziest virtual bars I’ve ever seen. Perhaps that can be blamed on its perturbing proprietor... Kashiwagi! The fuck? What does it take to take you out! Where the hell have you been? Do you know what you did to Kiryu! He mourned you, for like an evening! Colder than your damn noodles Wags! This is a real Sawashiro move shithead! Okay I’m not actually beaten up to see Kashiwagi here... I didn’t like it at first but I kinda just came to accept it.

There’s definitely a weird feeling of impotence playing as Ichiban and just seeing him alive and well. I’m Loaded down with questions we know our guy can’t ask. I’ve got concerns regarding what Kashiwagi represents but I’m saving for those for another character who better illustrates them. Look forward to that like five hours from now.

Survive becomes the groups hangout spot, and nevermind, this is the real fantasy. A lovely bar that will never be discovered and overflow, the only thing overflowing here is Adachi's tab and we're added to it no questions asked. Every once in awhile you see people who want Persona but in college. This wish is made about as often as it is mocked. Well, with Yakuza 7, you do sort of have that, it may not be college, but it does feature graduates from the school of life. Welcome to Drink Links! It's funny how in Yakuza 6 Snack New Gaudi was one of my favourite side activities. A little Point and Drink Adventure where Kiryu became a regular at a little bar and made some new mates. With Ichiban this has been retooled into a central pillar of his side content. All but one party member has a 5 act Drink Link playing out like an extended substory, allowing you to see them in casual conversation while wrapping up a lingering thread from the main plot. Each event starts with a bit of banter, which steadily gives way to them revealing a bit of their past which Ichiban helps them move on from. Adachi and the son of the man Hourinouchi stitched up, Saeko helping her sister out of a bad relationship, and Nanba... Stealing a bottle of whiskey, and yet, he didn't actually steal the meds, he was covering for someone else. Through each of these we unmask and expand on a core aspect of each character. Nanba's hero worship, first for Florence Nightingale, then the nurse Mizue, who it turns out wasn't a light in darkness, and now for Ichiban. First a distant ideal, then a fraud, then a friend. We learn Nanba has never been all that self-motivated, falling out of love with nursing, but if he sees someone who has the passion he lacks, he finds his passion in supporting them.

Then we get Adachi, ever since Horinouchi sent an innocent man down. Adachi has been financially supporting his son Takashi until he finishes his education. He does this anonymously, figuring the kid must rightly hate him. Adachi may seem flippant and crude and he likely thinks himself as nothing more than that, not even he realises how much he cares, how much of a burden he's willing to take on. I love how it matches his in game role as the tank in this really novel way. On the cusp of Takashi passing the bar and becoming a lawyer. Adachi learns the kid never hated him, having seen how hard he fought for his father. Years of guilt fall away, and now the guy has a little drinking money!

Saeko meanwhile helps her sister out of one more jam. Sneaking her out of an abusive relationship with a whole lot of guile and trickery. Once again helping her family from a distance without ever letting them know. This one I did admittedly find underwhelming. It opens with Saeko talking about how she fell out with her father and sister due to her controlling nature. Being sharper and smarter than both of them and knowing led to her micromanaging their lives until at some point she realised they'd be happier if she wasn't a part of it and backing off.

So the story is about her stepping back in and breaking Nanoha off from her controlling boyfriend. I suppose it's at least in a subtle way and is undeniably for the best. But you'd kinda hope for a subversion, like the guy is actually caring and Saeko learns she can take it easier on herself and the people she cares about. It's not like she's strict and controlling with the Ichiban and that's where she's undeniably happiest. But now I'm just writing fanfiction. And there is a central theme to each of these drinklinks along with ones yet to be drunk. Everyone in this plot is driven by equal parts love and regret. Each character has a mask of apathy or unkindness which Ichiban gently pries away, making them accept they care more than they let on.

Beyond that, each of the stories ties them closer to Ichiban, helping them grow from their own personal rock bottoms. The other side of the distinction is in the casual banter which gives these stories that bit more heart. Ichiban bounces off every character so differently while rarely feeling contrived for the sake of a joke or to jam him into an awkward story beat.

As opposed to Kiryu who had to do quick time event guessing games to make the right response. Each Drink Link will have a couple multiple choice moments with no right or wrong answers, each feels like something Ichiban could reasonably say. Even the options which seem bizarre for him pivot into something which sounds right coming out of his mouth.

These give the events re-playability, but also contribute to the new, also Persona-esque, Personality system. A secondary form of levelling acting as a gate for further side content as well as offering some status resistances. Between each Drink Link you must fill a bond metre, this is mostly done through fights. The party who slays together stays together after all, but there are a lot of little ways to pad this out.

For now, we'll focus on two. Hostesses have been inverted. You're now spending money not to get with the girls, but to bond with the boys. This helped late game when I was running low on things to do, and needed a bit of social lubrication to tease those last few events out. I like that it's here but can't deny this feels like a safety net.. It helps players who picked the game clean without cashing in their drink links when there were beaucoup bond points going. So they won't just have to go grind out battles for minutes at a time.

Still, this doesn't work for the girls, or for players who've yet to strike it rich.

Luckily a cheaper, slower form of entertainment exists, the Seagull Cinema! At this outrageously comfy palace of classic pictures, you have to pass Fahrenheit style QTEs to stay alive... I mean awake, and this isn't half as amusing as that game, though it didn't leave me feeling half as cold. I really like to imagine this mode has offended one film buff. I can relate to it honestly. As a kid my dad told me how great *The Italian Job* was and eventually we sat down to watch it. I'm sure the reason "You're only supposed to blow the bloody doors off." is such a classic line in British film is because it's an oasis in a cinematic desert. I've struggled with naps my whole life, but the only successful heist in that movie was my consciousness... Now I'm sure I've offended one film buff.

So I was once again right with Ichiban, squaring off against sleep with a lifetime more experience under my belt, and I needed it because it's a cute one off gag, which asks that you hear it 10 times. Do a minute or two of QTES for a little movie riff, then a second time but harder. Oh hey Il-Yu-jin. If you invite a friend along you develop your bond with them, with a bonus if they liked the film. Which is about my favourite aspect of Seagull Cinema, giving the characters such granular movie preferences which come with extra dialogue is wonderful attention to detail, I enjoyed more making the guesses, than I did watching the resulting flick. It's just that each guess takes minutes of time.

The Drink Links are lovely, and the way bond levels work lends a great rhythm to gameplay where after some battles, story events, and minigames I think "You know what, time to swing around Survive, take a break, and get the next round of Drink Links." I struggle to do content piecemeal. A habit my job hobby, jobby? Of talking about games has only made worse, locked down by my want for nice and orderly footage.

So I like bonds for enforcing pace, giving me something to look forward to, a reason to stop and smell the roses I'm growing outside Survive, drenched in staminan, just like me.

It adds a secondary element of character growth and pacing alongside the main story, while doing a decent job fleshing out that cast without having to bog down or add extra digressions to the core scenario. The friendships never feel rushed or forced in this game, and drink links add a mechanical element to that growth. There is another bond building activity though, and it's one that solidified many of our bonds with the series as a whole.

9. Karaoke & the Dub

Survive is where the crew does their Karaoke! I genuinely forgot to mention the total UI overhaul last time, so I'll sing its praises here with an encore to boot.

The new format is much easier on the eyes as I no longer have to scan up and down the screen and quickly adjust to different speeds. Adding heat as a combo mechanic is also cute, visually representing a character really getting into a song and adding extra sting to missing a note.

Yakuza adds further refinement by relocating to this fine establishment. For much of the series, 0 aside. Karaoke has been a lonely activity, yourself and maybe one friend. Worsened by 6's move to these spacious lounges which emphasised their emptiness. The songs were humorously over the top laments, sung to a world that's not listening.

Moving it to a bar, with friends cheering you on immediately swings the dial from bitter sweet symphonies to something with a lot more verve. Representing Kasuga's more optimistic, friend focused approach. These feelings, these burdens, these laughs, are shared. I especially love Ichiban's energetic interjections. In a manner of speaking, there are only three new songs and I'll cover two now: Ichiban's The Future I Dreamed Of, and Saeko's Spring Breeze.

The Future I Dreamed Of is Ichiban's Baka Mitai. Where that song is filled with regret for past mistakes which can never be undone. The Future I dreamed Of is... Well, doesn't take many guesses to figure out it's the opposite. A hard life led to him hitting rock bottom harder, but he's gonna rise up, again and again, and he's gonna drag as many people up with him as possible. It's a heroic song. Instead of stewing in regret, no not yet, he's going to push onwards and upwards. I can't listen to this song without a smile on my face and a feeling that shit's gonna work out if I just put my own effort in.

Funnily enough however, you don't need to put much effort here, this is a beginner track, with the fewest notes in the series and no complicated portions. Almost as if saying this optimism comes easy to Ichiban.

Spring Breeze is a beautiful track and more in the classic Yakuza mould of a song that feels wonderfully jury-rigged. Given a double meaning through what the song sounds like through what its lyrics say, and what divergent or extra meaning they take on when sung by a specific character. Spring Breezes sounds like a love song, but the imagery focusing on the group juxtaposes it, this is how strong her bond is to the Lads, equating platonic or familial feelings with straightforwardly romantic ones, and I find that really sweet.

The third song I'll touch on later. The returning tracks, Baka Mitai, Machine Gun Kiss, and Like a Butterfly are instead spread amongst the group, Each a perfect fit for the character, even the one who hasn't clocked in yet. I especially love Machine Gun Kiss for Adachi, pure J-Dad Rock. I unfairly discarded Like a Butterfly last time, it's unfair cause with Eri and Ichiban it clicked for me, perhaps also because it's a song about wanting to rise above ones circumstances after past failures and entanglements.

In another manner of speaking, this game has 6 new songs! Thanks to a feature which emerged in Judgment, dual audio. Yakuza now features both English and Japanese dubs, with Chinese getting in on the action later.

I did consider using the dub for this video, I'm aware this is for many second monitor content. (*granted you're probably looking now that I've referenced you*). But to me, this series feels uncanny when not in Japanese.

Where appropriate I try to experience media in its original language, though if I'm being honest, it tends to be what I'm first exposed to which grabs me. This is why the works of Hideo Kojima are in English, sorry Adachi. Meanwhile Yakuza is in Japanese, sorry Wags. Please don't take it the wrong way, you're both Solid to me!

The karaoke takes on a different tone in English, feeling more impromptu and appropriately amateur... When it's not being autotuned at least. There's a novelty to hearing an English take on Baka Mitai, I hate to be that guy and say I've seen fan covers which interpret the lyrics in ways I prefer. It's not bad, a little awkward, but in a way which is ultimately helped by the fact this is friends singing karaoke at their hangout spot, and this awkwardness only occasionally seeps out into the wider game.

I think my biggest problem with the dub is this, and it's an issue present in Judgment as well. Much like each character has their own colour palette to set them apart. They also have their own distinctive vocal palette, which hint at their personalities, past, and place in the world in ways which penetrate language barriers.

Nanba's raspiness communicates the rough circumstances he's survived but also his relative frailty and wisdom. Which works with him being the one to most often advise caution.

He is the literal voice of reason. Which makes it all the funnier when that facade slips.

Adachi's gruffness sounds old yet sturdy, and he delivers so many lines with such mirth inbetween daft dad jokes. He's a kid who refuses to be a grandpa. A hard life never sapped his love of taking it easy.

With Saeko it's less how she sounds and more how she uses her voice, able to easily flit between sassy, seductive, and stern sentence by sentence. Demonstrating her mastery of service. Her switching off and speaking candidly demonstrates how much she trusts the group that she's able to be herself around them. That's the Japanese.

In the English audio they all sound like minor variations on the stock tough guy or gal which kinda dubs me the wrong way. For some reason they sound better in the party chats where they seem like they've toned it down a little, which ironically gives them more distinct tones.

In the main story I found there's little colour to anyone's performance, the differences, and in my case the dub, is muted. This especially hurts Ichiban to me. What I love about Nakaya's performance is how much vulnerability he plays Ichiban with. It's the audio equivalent of puppy dog eyes and is what makes his kindness and sadness so believable, as well as his anger hit so hard when he drops into a guttural growl. Kaiji Tang puts on a good performance, but it's a lot less expressive, Ichiban having a tough guy edge to his voice a majority of the time makes him come across as a lot more guarded.

The benefit of playing the game in English in my eyes, or out of em anyway, is I needn't look at the screen to know what is being said. The irony is I struggle to know exactly who is talking sans Saeko. This, alongside many other particulars are replaced with these generic rough and tough voices. An emery paper grit which has only managed to sand down each characters individuality. I can't even say its less exaggerated, it's just exaggerative in the blandest way.

Even the infamous PS2 dub is stronger in this regard, each character has their own register, their own recognisable and representative tone. This new dub is undeniably better acted, but the direction is often dull.

My key takeaway on the dub is this: I'm happy it's here for those who want or need it. It doesn't offend me, it doesn't make the game lesser just by its inclusion, and I'm not saying if you like the dub you're out of the club. Ei-go your own way. It's interesting to look at scenes in English and see how they had to interpret certain lines, occasionally even putting a spin on them I like more than the source material. I'll shout those out when they crop up, I just think it's overall weaker in a lot of big picture ways.

So that's drink links and conversation, I think on that front our cups runneth over, so hungover as we may be, we'd better run off to work.

10. The Conclusion of the Dragonfish Quests

Investigating the Yokohama Trading Company winds up being another fun little mystery. Situated at the Docks, better known as the Docks. The boys are made to lug boxes while Saeko counts the cash. The place trades in high end food and utensils sourced from the Mainland and sold to Chinatown at cut-throat rates. The group supposes this is Mabuchi's revenge for exiling the Liumang. Destroying competition and making them bow, dependent on his product.

The question is how he's able to do this. Saeko learns they sell product at no markup, he's not even turning a profit, how can he afford to keep the lights on? The answer is delightfully devilish, the warehouse is a front for counterfeiting. They're paying their suppliers in funny money printed on site. The Yuan heads to China, and Mabuchi sells his imports at 100% profit.

The crew devise a little handover to sneak some evidence offsite, but it's as they try to carry it out the spirit of the Chuckle Brothers hits them with a little to me to Yuan slapstick.

The workers descend upon them, and their escape goes up in smoke. (*Han watches*)

Thus ends the Dragonfish Quests. Operating as a second opening of sorts. These three chapters have a whole new world to introduce and after the comforting familiar, I love the new direction.

I adore this low level street level vigilante stuff. Each of the three capers is a lot of fun. There's a great sense of freedom with the writing flexing its muscles. Part of me would have loved it to last longer, to extend this anthology of Ichiban and crew righting wrongs against dastardly small scale villains. When I was a kid my favourite part of hero movies was the crime fighting spree before the actual 2nd act kicks off and we explore all the new possibilities.

But it had to close sometime, and it is very well paced. Each chapter achieves a lot with an economy of time.

Expanding our knowledge of Yokohama, giving us an incomplete picture of each of the Ijin Three for later revelations to fill in, adding a new party member and fleshing them out. All while setting the foundation for themes to build on and asking core questions for the story to answer.

But the next chapter, brings us to perhaps the biggest question of Yakuza: Like a Dragon, or at least, its most questionable aspect.

PART 4: Turn Based Complaints

1. It's Finally Your Turn: Combat Intro

Good news Lads and Ladettes, we've found Mabuchi! (*Dragon Quest level up – end with punch*)

Bad news, he found us first, and we're but a small part of big plans.

One of his subordinates records an interrogation. Mabuchi accuses Ichiban of being Seiryu, goading him into giving short, easily snipped answers, before launching into a speech about how the code of the Ijin Three has been violated. (*They have declared war on the Liurang*) The murder of Nonomiya was a trap and we sprung it. For reasons we don't yet know Mabuchi wants to destabilise the Great Wall.

We're left to be killed at the hands of the Warehouse workers, but we're saved by... Han? (*this is all I can do*) We're free! Well, not really, There's a long slog ahead.

I said I'd get stuck into combat later, well I'm stuck with it now, it's finally your turn!

I wanted to wait until all the key elements were in play and here they are. This is the moment I knew to stop waiting on the combat to really take off and get good as I realised oh, oh, this is it. So lets talk. Yakuza: Like a Dragon has made the switch to turn-based combat, and all I can ask is, Why Lad?! Okay that's a bit too dramatic.

This change has created one of my favourite little apocryphal tales in gaming. This genre shift was first revealed in an April Fools day 2019 video. Man, look at Nanba go! This looks absolutely crazy! What a funny little joke, but what if? So the story goes the positive reception to this trailer led to the team uprooting what was supposed to be another action title, and actually make Yakuza 7 a full fledged RGG RPG! For a time I... Sort of believed it, more out of wanting to than this making much sense. I think there are three key reasons this anecdote seem if not credible, then at the least convincing.

One is simply it's a fanciful tale, it makes the development seem more romantic and daring and that genuinely can have a psychological effect on you playing the game. You believe it because like me, you simply want it to be true.

Two, RGG's absolutely bonkers release schedule. They put out Yakuza 2 less than a year after 1, who's to say they couldn't have rejiggered this entire game six months out from release, and three... The combat itself. (*bad gameplay*)

In reality the genre shift was decided on when the Story Outline was finalised, way more than a year out from release. It's an ensemble piece about a group of people rising from rock bottom and fighting against injustices in society. You were going to be fighting alongside a diverse set of allies you needed to feel a connection with. They decided turn based battles with JRPG levelling was the best mechanical means to express this narrative and I cannot argue with that. While I disagree with Nagoshi saying it allows me to get "more immersed" in the story, it is undeniably a better match than the classic brawling which better emphasised individual strength.

It was also after the outline was locked in they added Ichiban being an RPG fanatic to his character as a way to contextualise his gameplay. The battles have always been framed at least a little bit as abstractions. An exaggerated, non-literal approximation of what went down. Ichiban's overactive imagination is simply codifying this series long tradition into an actual diegetic character trait, which is a brilliant reinterpretation of an unspoken series staple. (*"Playing too many games"*)

Yakuza has always been great at expressing each character's personality through combat mechanics, shifting the entire genre is the ultimate expression of that. Plus Ichiban's class change from single target damage, self buffing, wrestling move moron before to crowd clearing, ally and all inspiring hero is a clever bit of work! It's mechanical character development! It feels inaccurate to say Yakuza is now a turn based series, it's more that Ichiban is a Turn Based Character even if he is an infectious one.

The tale that they changed in response to positive feedback couldn't be further from the truth, as a matter of fact the facts are just as dramatic as the fiction.

in Japan they hated the reveal! 90% Red Thumbs says Yokoyama. While the game was red hot on release in the West, but it took Japan time to warm up to it. Word of mouth steadily winning the crowd over! The game itself had to work its way up from rock bottom!

Yokoyama reflects "As a creator that was the most satisfying moment! I managed to prove that my game was good!" Uhh, I mean it should be clear I love this game by now, I respect why the combat changed, but ultimately I love the game in spite of it. I did not turn around on turn based.

So, here's what we're gonna do. Before I judge the combat for what it is, allow me to be a little unfair and judge it for what it's not. When it comes to this kind of gameplay I can't pretend man, I'm not even a tourist, I'm a goddamn daytripper. You can count the number of turn based battlers I've beaten on... Well it's two hands but they've been yubitsume'd. (*Personas 3/4/5, Y7/TW, EVO, YIIK, Twitter*) And we can argue I didn't beat YIIK, it beat me.

Anyhow, after I'm done explaining my misgivings I'll critique it on its level. I'm aware I've got an outsiders perspective, but I'm going to try and not be a total twat about it. (*Nanba grabs Ichiban at homeless camp*)

2. One More Turn, Without Feeling

More than one character in this series has talked about how they get to know someone through their fists. It's always a cool bit of dialogue and until I sat down to make this video, I didn't realise that I'm kinda the same way.

During my first playthrough, during boss fights and cool setpieces my brain would often conjure up the thought. "This is cool, *I wish I was playing this.*" I promise you, that wasn't me trying to be snippy, snide, or snarky, that's what my subconscious offered up to me unprompted.

That right there is my core problem. I can only see what I'm not playing.

Turnbased gameplay, especially in Yakuza, presents a impenetrable experiential wall which keeps me from feeling engaged, every cool moment is something I'm not allowed to participate in. I can't get to know this game through my fists cause I'm wearing oven mitts! You're not gonna feel the heat through that!

The feeling the brawling evoked deepened my connection to the story. I could feel characters personalities coming through via movesets, aggression, attack timings and so on. When I'm immersed health and heat bars feel less like strict parameters for how close I am to victory or defeat but storytelling devices creating intense highs and lows. I felt like part of the drama, now I feel apart from it. The combat in prior games was exactly to my tastes, just enough mechanical depth merged with crunchy, cathartic combat which satisfies my brain and lets me feel immersed in the high octane events of the narrative.

Here I feel less like a brawler and more like a bookkeeper, budgeting my assets against the enemy. I'm not a numbers guy but these guys are all numbers to me!

I gel best with games which grab me in a way where they begin to feel organic, where the mechanics create stories I can abstract or extract from the game. Turn based combat just doesn't resonate. It's ironic that in this game where the combat is explicitly being filtered through Ichiban's heightened imagination, it actually feels more literal and objective to me than the old, less sensationalised brawling ever did.

Real time has a much easier time enrapturing me, I know logically that both of these are, when stripped down, an exchange of resources. By attacking I take resources, and by defending I preserve my own. In real time this is done by dodging, blocking, and parrying, and in turn based is done by guarding, debuffing, and healing.

But my brain will always interpret this as an event, and this as a maths problem. Maths problems can be fun, I guess, I'm too bad at numbers to know, but perhaps you're here for them and you see all this immersion talk as touchy feely nonsense.

Or perhaps you don't have the same hangup as me and can still interpret these battles as exciting exchanges, deriving dramatic highs and lows the same way I can manage with real time. Funnily enough I can still do this with turn based tactics. That my brain can still abstract out into something exciting, almost like I'm directing an action sequence!

That's what I want to interrogate with this. We all want slightly different things out of games. but we shouldn't be mistaking our wants for requirements, our mores for mandates. That what we like are objective correct paths games must follow and straying from them a total mistake, that'll only lead to stagnancy and burnout.

Arguing this way does admittedly get trickier when a series you enjoy makes such a dramatic pivot which in your eyes is for the worst, but I still think I gotta say it, because I respect the daring, and the reasons for why the change are undeniably commendable. But all in all, I'm here in spite of the new gameplay.

When I first started ideating this video shortly after 7's release. I was gonna play defence for the Yakuza fans upset about the genre shift because I'm one of them.

Yakuza is such a unique mix you can't really go anywhere else for. An RPG in a contemporary setting with small but dense maps, threaded together through enjoyable, unique, and expressive 3D brawling. The anger could at times be childish and poorly expressed, but it's understandable where it's coming from. Well it's 2025 now and we know that real time action has not been abandoned. Sure it only exists in the domain of spin offs and I still prefer the old feel, but it is there.

I suppose I should talk about Like a Brawler. It's a mod by Jhrino, jrino? which cycles the game back into a brawler! Congratulations J! you've given Ichiban aphantasia!

I'd weigh up the combat but it'd be comparing invisible apples and oranges. The mod is a ton of fun and an impressive piece of work. I bring it up for those who can't even stomach turn based and don't mind fracturing the wholeness of the experience. As the mods splashscreen states, real heroes play turnbased! I kinda hate knowing that bringing this up is going to summon people who think an opinion like this is a battleground, and this mod therefore has to act as ammunition.

I don't get the impression even for a moment it was made out of some spiteful attempt to "fix" the game. It's a cool experiment, not the opening volley of a pointless forever argument.

To people who enjoy turn based combat, I hope it's clear by now I'm not calling it lesser, outdated, redundant or anything like that. The issue is with me, not the system. It doesn't help however, that the system present has issues all its own!

3. Turn Basics

It's appropriate, Ichiban dumped in Yokohama, me tossed into turn based. We're both Dragonfishes outta water and we gotta muddle through.

I understand the basics of the genre. Set up your party to cover as many bases as possible. Exploit enemy weaknesses while minimising your own. Focus down priority targets, and know how far your resources can take you. I'm capable of that much.

The problem with Yakuza 7 is basically, that it is basic, those basics aren't terribly thrilling, and it bungles it whenever it tries to go beyond those basics and carve out an identity.

Now, gameplay doesn't have to be super complex to be good, but it has to stand on something, whether that's something it does which is unique, or something it does uniquely well. And I don't think this achieves either.

Despite coming from a brawler series with a lot of unique staples which could be reimaged into turn based mechanics. It doesn't really leverage anything beyond the superficial to create some novel RPG street brawler hybrid.

For instance: You'd think heat might be the mana bar? It's not. It's just a mana bar.

The high end Essence attacks don't act like heat moves requiring you to set up specific conditions to trigger, they just drain the bar. What makes this different from most RPGs? Well we drink energy drinks instead of potions... It's aesthetic flourishes, not much more. This is a simple, easy JRPG donning a Yakuza getup, and I gotta say, it's not a well tailored suit.

In an interview the team said of Yakuza's combat that it has never been about depth but satisfaction. The series has never been Urban Reign but it always let me bring the Urban pain, and they've tried to maintain this philosophy through the genre shift. These games have always been made with middle aged Japanese men in mind. Not just as the core cast but the core audience. It's meant to be for new or lapsed gamers trying or retrying the medium to be able to pick up and play and I respect that, and it's why the difficulty has always been tuned low.

In real time this approach works wonderfully. The kinesthetics and animations are deeply satisfying. But part of what maintains that satisfaction through repetition is the mechanical skill, however rudimentary, which is employed. Especially in things like triggering heat attacks. Over time setting up the conditions for each one gets smoother as skill develops which keeps the animation a reward. This doesn't work in turn based, every time I see a specific enemy or animation it can only get less exciting. I didn't earn this attack, I chose it from a menu, it's as complex as changing channels. It can't achieve the same satisfaction because the mechanisms which deliver this feeling are simply too different.

It'd be a lie to say it has none of the staples, there is some L.A.D.N.A. in here, mostly in the form of time sensitive mechanics. Mashing or timing inputs for bonus damage, or hitting block with familiar parry like timing for minor damage negation. These feel good! Especially the block, but they feel more like things to do, rather than instrumental to success or failure. Also, this may be my lack of familiarity with the genre, but I swear the guard mechanic, as in the one where you trade a turn to reduce damage. Seems to only exist to be used once a game to negate the most telegraphed heavy attack in existence, the game stopping and saying "This looks bad, we should block" and then you do, and then I've never needed to guard again. This has been true for every turn based game I've played with a guard mechanic.

One feature which actually lands for me are downed attacks. When a foe is knocked prone, you can quickly trade a turn for guaranteed critical damage. What's great about this is it does take some actual quick thinking. You have to mentally do the maths to work out if a character can close the gap or if the turn is better spent healing or buffing instead, all while trying to ignore how tempting it is to punt a prone punter. The funny thing is I think I've gotten off longer combos on downed opponents here than was ever allowed in real time. (*kicking downed guy*)

Then again there are times when knocking down enough people at once meant the ticker lasted so long everyone who survived got back on their feet, destroying my ability to capitalise.

The combats most unique aspect is its focus on positioning. With a number of attacks having undisclosed firing lines or AOES. This'd be intriguing, were it not immediately hobbled by a total inability to position yourself. Thanks to this they're rendered deeply unreliable as you have no direct means to manipulate the battlefield. You have to spot opportunities, and quickly take them before the squirrely AI takes them away. Oh, and enemies don't stop moving just because you've started an attack. It's like trying to lead your shot in a tornado.

Another neat touch is Ichiban can use improvised weapons, but only if he happens to line up with them which isn't something you can plan around. This can also wind up being a hindrance if you've given batboy an elemental weapon, which some of his best tools just so happen to be, as your element is replaced for standard blunt damage.

The last thing which could set this gameplay apart is in its presentation. Appearing like an RPG approximation of a brawler. The issue is the disastrous amount of clunk. With characters awkwardly running into and out of position, getting snagged on the environment, and occasionally just having severe lapses in logic which can drag battles out far longer than they would otherwise if they played it more safe. So you can wind up resenting the presentation because it backfires... If you don't see the funny side of it.

I can... At times. Some of the Dragon Engine slapstick magic has survived the jump! When systems fall into chaos and ragdolls are sent flying I do adore it! I like this game best when I don't understand what's going on. What blows is this chaos isn't really capitalised on because the combat is trapped in a boring middleground. Too chaotic for its positioning systems to be meaningful, yet far too static for this chaos to meaningfully influence the course of a fight.

One enjoyable element of its presentation is the enemy variety, now called Sujimon. With exaggerated designs based on the kind of people you might see on the street, or else callbacks to past substories. Adorned with delightfully punny names and imaginative attacks to match. The greatest joy in combat isn't so much fighting foes as it is wondering what you may face next. Then when you do face em, well they're kinda like everyone else. There's a message of togetherness! We're all the same when you get down to it, we'd all be easily killed by batshit man with a baseball bat! Seeing as 99% of the roster are human. Much of figuring out their weaknesses falls to guesswork. Pretty sure all of these'd kill me, lets not try and find out.

Many strengths and weaknesses operate on lateral thinking and joke logic. Some are amusing and I felt satisfied when I called them. Like Yakuza type foes being weak to heat! But most often I'd just try everything until it worked. The a-ha! Moments are rare, meanwhile the "oh okay" moments are common.

Plus no enemy brings with them truly unique mechanics, the most out there it gets are summoners or foes who are heavily specced into status effects which can mix things up a bit. I'd have liked more chaotic enemies, like hosts getting me drunk, hordes of hobos who beg me for money, construction workers who scatter stuff around the battlefield for everyone to use, the enemies are imaginative but too few have really inventive mechanics which leverage the setting.

Construction vehicles often operate as great beasts and again, conceptually great fun.

But as fights they not only don't bring new mechanics, they restrict existing ones!

So they're simplistic exchanges of damage, and this isn't a uniquely mechanical... Uh, mechanic.

There are too many enemies who they've just given an excess of health and been stacked with resistances! They're not hard to fight, just hard to get past! My heart sank, last video I said I'd wanted longer, drag out brawls... I didn't like how *Kiwami 2* achieved it, and this is even more extreme!

4. The Jobber System

Then there's the Job system, from *Hello Work* we have a variety of vocations which we can employ in combat! Each swapping out which weapons and abilities a character has access to as well as fiddling with their stats. We could spend hours swapping out who does what and working out which does out the most damage, and bring a whole new meaning to the daily grind.

It's another undercooked idea (*Nanba chef*) Pretty much every characters propriety job is their best with two exceptions. The biggest perpetrator here is Ichiban with his Hero job. It's a great damage dealer, strong against both bosses and mobs, as well as acting as a strong healer and buffer, about his only weakness is how quickly he can burn through MP if the party doesn't share the load.

Putting him in any other job is essentially a step down.

Nanba's hobo class is right at home with a good mix of spells, heals, and debuffs. It's sad that hobo is the best thing Nanba can aspire to be, but we all have our roles in the world!

Adachi and Saeko meanwhile both get immediate access to what are essentially their base jobs but better. Detective is just a worse tank than Enforcer and Saeko's barmaid is a watered down idol. So I guess you two get promotions!

But even changing these over feels surplus to requirement, this is an easy game. I don't see swapping these two jobs over as optimising but expediting. Detective and Barmaid are both just kinda restrictive and actively annoying to use in comparison, with turns often feeling wasted on them.

The other jobs are either uninteresting or else give the impression of crude experiments. The devs exploring more advanced mechanics but not yet having the confidence to be all that daring with them.

The musician has a voltage mechanic which hardly does anything. The Breaker has self buffs which lets a fighter build momentum, but foes are often felled before you have much flow.

Perhaps the worst is the foreman, which could have done more to foretell it granting the one and only metroidvania style movement ability in the game. Something I nearly missed completely on my first playthrough.

These ideas are all deeply limited in their application. Your choice of job feeling deeply unimportant given how trivial the game is unless you make intentionally daft gimmick parties.

Each job has two character skills. Which when unlocked remain in their respective fighters arsenal even after a change of vocation. It's a rigid system and I'd argue self-defeating outside of the two optional super dungeons. There are maybe one or two useful character skills granting universal access to rarer elements like ice or lightning. And unlocking these means putting in a lot of work just to make a couple late game bosses go down a smidgen easier.

But here lies a deeper irony, if you take the time to unlock these you'll have become so generally overlevelled getting there the added flexibility would be pretty much redundant in the face of the sheer statistical strength you built up in the process/ Who needs flexibility when you can just flex your bigger number!

Speaking of optional moves, at the tail end of each drink link you get a tag team attack. All but one is the same damage type, which to be blunt is such a boring payoff! Give each character an element which represents them!

Thing is when you get down to it, this is still Yakuza under the hood, so really, who even needs a job in this economy? You'll be carrying so many recovery items you can pretty much do whatever you want and be chugging along just fine. If you even have to.

While writing one of the older videos I thought I was gonna joke about how I'd have to drop my old self-imposed challenge of not drinking during long battles given how the genre works, but I actually found I could go surprisingly long without. With the battles winding up about as dry as my throat, enemies going down as easily as an invigorating staminan.

It's not long before most street battles devolve into me ending them in one or two turns with a broad swing of Ichiban's bat.

I did play hard for a bit on New Game+, I didn't go for Legendary because hey, Ichiban isn't a Legend yet, and I figured it'd turn fights from saucelless to slogs, and I was on the right track.

Surprise surprise, hard is hard! Enemies hit, uh, hard! What's crazy is the game started making specific demands of me and the combat actually developed a rhythm. It was short lived as the game got obnoxiously difficult over time, but I was actually having fun as I felt like I had to make actual tough choices to stay alive.

Bufs and debuffs were now vitally important, but what became key was controlling the turn economy via status effects. Enemies became so hard hitting I had to give them as hard a time as possible getting hits in. Suddenly each turn and in turn each party member was important as I knew I was always one or two bad choices away from game over. This story of underdogs fighting their way up from the bottom now had a vibe that if they were going against an unfair society, they had to be just as tricky to get by. Battles now had a constant tension and a lot of plates to juggle, wait what the hell is juggling plates? (*die*) Ah fuck!

On normal so much of what you can do feels extraneous, fun extras to try out and maybe make a boss more manageable. Yet on hard... The pendulum eventually swings way too far in the other direction so as to become obnoxious. I'd argue a good base difficulty, where Yakuza 7 has some actual tactical back and fourth and mechanical identity, sits somewhere between these two points.

The game is so easy that choices like job types and what attacks you choose often don't even feel like micromanaging but mucking about. You've probably noticed me making a ton of suboptimal moves in my footage. that is partly down to my unfamiliarity with the genre, but it's also because I'm trying to make things interesting, because the game sure isn't holding up that end of the bargain!

Taking myself out of the equation however. An easier difficulty was a prudent choice considering many people coming over would be action fans, not necessarily JRPG fanatics. We could also argue the poor balancing is a result of this being RGG's first at bat for this genre, but it being easy was a conscious decision. They've said in interviews they've always wanted to give players a feeling of power and I think that's fine. But I do think you need some amount of pushback for choices to actually feel meaningful and for the feeling of power to not be numbed.

RGG played it safe here and that wasn't unreasonable, but they've yet to conquer the mystical realm of fun turn based gameplay, they need to level up a little for that.

(*win battle*)

5. Off the Level

The game has gone for a standard RPG levelling structure. Do fights, get EXP. The only arguably unique element are distinct character and job levels which receive their own experience and can be individually modified via items if you want to make levelling go faster. This brings me to an issue I brought up last game which is naturally, exacerbated here.

I don't like outlevelling story content. It kneecaps my enjoyment and harms the vibe for me.

Ichiban and crew are meant to be scrappy underdogs, that doesn't feel right when they can't stop curb stomping the competition.

I experience a constant push and pull in titles like this. I want to do the side content cause I like the substories and hey, they may give me a fun new gameplay feature I might want to make use of in the main content. But in doing so I risk trivialising said main content and obviously I can't really know, especially on a first go around, how far I ought to push.

Talking about optional gubbins: stuff like Masters and hidden unlockable moves are gone, replaced with a tiny selection of essence attacks rewarded for clearing side content and hidden weapon shops which all pale in comparison to gear you put together via Yakuza 7's new iteration on the crafting system. I frankly find all of this far less interesting as while there's the benefit of legibility, it comes at a cost, that being there's little thrill to exploration.

I remember as a kid, the only tips I'd hear about games like these are where to go to grind, where to quickly get powerful so you can breeze through the bosses with minimal effort, it never sounded like people enjoyed playing the games, but overpowering them so they could be put aside as quickly as possible. I want these sequences to have some bite, I want them to be as daunting as the story portrays them.

It's an issue that started in Yakuza 6 but in that game I could simply choose not to spend points. If this sounds crazier than Ichiban I'm sorry. His mind goblins are more fun and likely fantastical than mine. And the more I engage with the content, the more facile it becomes.

The gameplay itself feels entropic. If I'm taking control of the curve, I want to at least feel like I wrested it from the games grip, earned it! Not just had it handed to me on an invisible dial.

I'm aware there are occasional pop-ups informing me of the recommended minimum level for a story dungeon. I also remember the game City of Heroes having a feature, which is probably in most MMOs, where if you joined a lower level party you were levelled down so as to not trivialise the content. I kinda wish LAD had something like that, an "I want to feel it" button.

There is a problem with both of these in that they kill some of the tension... Perhaps I'm impossible to please, people way smarter than me who get game design and are properly invested in this genre have probably been butting their heads against this issue way longer than I have and there's no one size fits all games solution.

Now, all of this aside: when looked at on a narrative level, this system is a perfect match for what 7 is trying to say.

This is a game about starting over from rock bottom, IE. Level 1, but it's also about facing the cruel, two-faced nature of society. By using standard JRPG levelling in this context, the game says the more you face society, the stronger you inevitably become. Growth is non-negotiable, anyone can rise up from rock bottom. Sure it says this in the goofiest way possible, but that doesn't detract from how hopeful it ultimately is. 7 has some pretty downbeat moments, but an undercurrent of optimism runs through it all.

In a way, this style of levelling, as rudimentary and standard as it is, may also be the most the RPG mechanics have ever actually tied into the themes of a Yakuza story, and part of me is always going to be annoyed that I can't derive any joy from it.

6. Combat Conclusion

What's frustrating about the combat of Yakuza 7 is it so often hints at being interesting, but much like my core hangup, there's a gulf between me and being mesmerised.

While the basic attack, defend, magic, item side of combat functions. There's little intriguing about it beyond the modern day setting, amusing animations, and funny foes. But these elements have a limited shelf life, when the sheen has worn off what you're left with is a boring and ill-balanced game.

It's all such tedious jank-enpon. In a Dengeki interview the team talked about how even 15 years ago. They were never really doing anything new. Likening it to how Jankenpon, rock paper scissors, as well as stuff like traditional JRPGS, are old systems. But they persist because they're great. They see what they do as taking established mechanics and updating the fun, not by excessive refinement of any one element, but by immersing these elements in a cool setting with a rich tapestry of systems, interweaving to create something greater than the sum of its parts.

Helped by RGG teams loose structure where there's great overlap between the various departments. Meaning the combat team has immediate insight into the story and vice versa, allowing the separate elements to feed into eachother harmoniously.

They hold a lot of respect for people who can put new twists on old formulas, and feel it's their job as game designers to novel ways of keeping these old vehicles for fun trucking along. I think it's a brilliant and insightful outlook, and I don't believe they lived up to it here.

Everything which tries to go beyond the basics and lend the gameplay a unique identity feels uncertain, contradictory, or non-committal. Hamstringed homages with timed presses which only offer marginal changes to the numbers done in either direction.

Positioning which is only ever an imposition. With no control offered to the player a layer of potential decision making cannot find its place. So it winds up existing purely in the service of presentation, a presentation which is self-defeating because of just how clumsy it is.

Topped off with a workshy job system which only serves to illustrate how bland the balance is. I didn't even mention Poundmates! 1-800-call-a-cameo! Callbacks and calling for backup have never both been so literal and so needless all at once!

Nothing is allowed to matter all that much because the systems are either unreliable or optional, and as such can't have too much weight placed on them. All this achieves is flattening the gameplay, its gimmicks shallow to the point they're closer to jangling keys than acting as keys to mastery, and the way optional mechanics are treated can only wind up disappointing invested players when their efforts to uncover them only see minimal return. Unless they're aiming for the extreme end of optional content, which takes a lot of grinding and busywork.

That's the thing, I can only imagine most of them pay off there, at the optional megadungeon it takes tens of extra hours to get strong enough to attempt. I obviously didn't feel the pull to get that far, I felt I was combatting ennui just as much as enemies.

The thing is well, I can't pretend to not be biased. When I look at this gameplay, a big part of me will always be seeing what I'm not playing. The old combat which this is replacing. Which I just find so much more engaging. I respect the change, but I don't like it.

It would not be able to carry a 50+ hour game unless it had something else going for it, a common theme of the turn based games I've played, I'm there in spite of turn based combat, something else makes it worth seeing through, occasionally slogging through.

Luckily this is Yakuza 7, a game with so much heart that even if this part won't get mine racing, there's plenty else to keep it ticking along.

PART 5: Holes in the Great Wall

1. The Plot Begins and Yet We're Not Done with the Dungeons

So we fight our way through Mabuchi's torturous torture dungeon. You gotta hand it to the guy! He walked us down mile long tunnel and didn't even keep the pleasure of killing us to himself. He left it to his men! I'd say that's a sign of a good boss but look how it panned out.

And I'm serious, this tunnel is a mile long. I'm amazed we didn't emerge in Kamurocho it goes on so long!

I also wanna mention despite emerging from a Liumang-hole, that place was filled with Yakuza grunts, turns out Mabuchi didn't need us for his false flag operation! I can spot a turf violation right here! Eh it was probably Ichiban's imagination getting some wires crossed.

Above ground we find ourselves by the river. The group tries to figure out Mabuchi's scheme.

Adachi figuring his casus belli required a curious bellend and it wound up being us. And now we've given him the ammo to start his war, he's gunning it!

Two Seiryu have already been shot dead and a truck full of Yakuza are barrelling into restaurant row with the vengeful Captain Takabe leading the charge. The great wall is quaking and my muscles are shaking!

So naturally, with all this excitement, two more dungeons in a row! Okay that's unfair. They're a lot better than what we just went through, having actual locales and narrative threaded into them is the honey which makes the melee go down. First we have the Ichiband rushing to Restaraunt Row hoping to stop Mabuchi's war before it can start. It's an intense scenario, we're pursuing the Seiryu spearhead, desperately trying to catch up with the main wave before it crashes into Liumang HQ, beset by stragglers not caught in the initial push.

It's a thrilling and unique setpiece, albeit one which illustrates yet another issue with Turn Based Combat. This situations pacing is kneecapped by how each battle becomes a break in the action...

Which is an unfortunate thing to have to say about... The action! A classic real time brawl would better captured the desperate push onward this situation is attempting to convey. This is somewhat evened out by the tight quarters of Restaurant Row, allowing Ichiban's area clearing swings to recreate the feeling of trying to claw through as quickly as possible.

We arrive just in time to make the entire situation even more complicated. Taking down Takabe just lets Liurang leader Zhao take him hostage. Ichiban's attempts to clean up the mess he's creating only spreading the muck further.

Takabe has already *met* Ichiban, he knows Mabuchi is pulling a fast one and simply doesn't care, two of his boys are dead, and the entire Liurang must pay. Meanwhile Zhao really doesn't like the insistent insinuation his right hand man is stabbing him in the back. (*fires at Adachi, says he's shit at this*)

I like this scene a lot, the energy is right back up, the situation is delightfully complex. Takabe's fury is undeniably righteous and Zhao works as a way to show just how much the stakes have raised, the wrong word will have them come right down on the heart of the party... Sort of.

While later reveals do make Zhao's actions line up cleanly. I do find it funny how the way Ichiban gets us out of this is more or less to keep doing what's pissing Zhou off until he happens to do it in a way which he happens to find funny. Making him realise Ichiban is so crap at arguing his case that he probably couldn't lie to save his life, which ironically enough saves Takabe's.

Naturally our word is far from good enough. We need evidence we're puppets on Mabuchi's strings, and when you need unassailable proof, there's just one place in the city you can get it, Geomijul.

Arriving in Korea Town, the Lads path crosses with a mysterious woman. Sunglasses at night huh? For when you can't be shady enough. Much to Saeko's annoyance, the boys are beguiled. (*No one beautiful is ever truly evil – Think with the right head*) They're led by the head right into the Spider's Web where if they want their info. They're gonna have to earn it!

Fighting through Geomijul is unremarkable. I know saying it's better than a sewer level is about the faintest praise going but it's the best I can offer. True to its name it's easy to get snagged, navigation is once again circuitous and this time claustrophobic on top, it manages to avoid being annoying in spite of this but it's just less interesting than the way the Seiryu Base managed. Obviously it can't make all of these bumbling comedy capers, that'd get annoying, but this leaves the sequence feeling anonymous, aside from one little standout stand-out sequence!

Word of advice! if you ever suspect you're walking into an ambush. Remember to walk out into the open and slowly scan your surroundings. If you can spot your would be attackers within the hour they'll have no choice but to step out and face you head on! Ichiban doesn't have the best Judgment... Nor does 7 use Judgment to the best of its abilities. But hey, at least there's more than one pussy to spot!

These sections aren't terrible, but while the Seiryu HQ raid's tone and goals worked in tandem with the game mechanics to make it work, what it had was a trick that could only work once. A comedy of errors with the untested party essentially failing forwards. Do that too much as it makes the game look farcical.

These later dungeons and action setpieces struggle to find their own interesting rhythms. The arc of growth is a little flat from this point on, and individually they're either dull or the gameplay and story don't cohere as strongly. The mechanics lacking the immediacy to make them work, at least not without a dose of imagination on par with Ichiban.

2. Wall to Wall Twists

In story terms scaling geomijul is the rollercoaster climbing before the next 4 chapters act as a thrilling descent. From here, twists, turns and reveals come thick and fast.

At the Apex we come face to face with a familiar face. (*My name is Joon-Gi Han*)

Uh Huh, so we're doing this again? and despite us passing this test of strength, Joon-Gi assures us he could have taken us single *Handedly*. Look pal last time something dangerous got in your head it was the end of you... Or at least I thought so.

So we're led into the heart of Geomijul (monitor room), oh so we're doing this again? Couldn't go one game without a new one of you... Well, two new ones of something or other. What an absolute car crash of a sentence.

It's so funny to me that one game after having Kage wordlessly disappear we get yet another super informant. As part of a larger series Geomijul's introduction feels so clumsy, awkwardly running back an element of the series they'd just attempted to grow past.

but in isolation as part of Yakuza 7's narrative Geomijul is far more layered and interesting than Purgatory ever managed as part of its stories. This is because this information network isn't a get out of a writing corner free card. It's an actual dramatic function of the setting, and about to corner us even harder.

Despite Ichiban's imaginings of the Seiryu acting as the balance keepers, that role belongs to Geomijul. Being the smallest of the three gangs, they use their surveillance network to make themselves invaluable to the two larger forces. Using that and subterfuge to keep the peace. As Han puts it, they put out fires before they start. And they have just what we need to extinguish Mabuchi's fiery ambitions. Video proof of him breaking into Otohime Land!

But before he can Han it over, Joon-Gi has yet another reveal in store for us. (*Is this getting shadier – can you lighten up*) We're led deeper into the complex. Nanba especially steeling himself as the gang is brought before a complex apparatus. (*Money*)

The mysterious lady reappears, she's introduced as Seong-Hui! Leader of Geomijul. She takes off her glasses, revealing her... Eyes. Damn girl, you're serving Kent! That only works if it was someone we knew before under there. (*Nanba reacts*) Perhaps somebody does.

The paper we'd found at Mabuchi's warehouse was meant to come here. With Zhou in on the counterfeiting op. Mabuchi's crew discovered the paper and started their own completely independently of Zhou's knowledge, or so Mabuchi believes. Figuring it's better to let him waste some inventory than ask questions about the papers true purpose. Perhaps the oddest, most indirect form of getting paid off I've ever seen, and it's likely why we got out of the row at restaurant row alive, Zhou's knowledge Mabuchi has already made moves behind his back let Ichiban unknowingly prod at this weak point.

What they're producing here are extremely high quality forgeries, made with cutting edge technology aided by mint insider info. So hey this is cool and all but why exactly are you telling us any of this? (*Nobody knows about these bills, so why do you have one? - Huh*) Ah!

Our bill is indeed a misprint from this very place, and they demand to know how Ichiban came to possess one! Fortunately his floundering panic once again relieves the tension.

(*You didn't come here with purpose → Not that you're smart enough to have a purpose*) Big words to say to the guy who just repurposed all of your boys faces into burger meat.

Unfortunately, turns out Ichiban isn't the problem here. (*Seong-Hui turns on Nanba*)

All attention turns to Nanba. As his hidden motives are laid bare. He rolled into town half a year back hunting for his little brother, investigative reporter Shoichi Akiba, who disappeared as he apparently neared the truth of this very operation.

He disguised himself amongst the homeless, believing it'd let him stay beneath suspicion as he spied on the Geomijul, when they stumbled on Ichiban's fake bill, Nanba knew he had to follow him, even if Ichi was blind to its true significance.

It's a great moment, just when it seems Ichiban's bumbling persona has once again diffused the situation, it takes another, harsher step in complexity, that moment of relief is revealed to be false as Seong-Hui goes on to rub Nanba's deception in our faces, and Nanba himself sees his own acts as irredeemably selfish. (*"You know. I was just gonna leave without saying anything pretty soon!"*) I do love how just after admitting to his lies, he immediately pivots into an Ichiban style heroic gesture, begging for the group to be spared, the tension rises with him... (*taser*) and crumples just as hard. His grand display not half as shocking to Seong-Hui as the taser she downed him with.

So, we're free to go, but then Ichiban hits the Geomijul with some real loyalty. (*That's who you call a friend – Friend doesn't begin to describe him.*) Just like with Arakawa. Ichiban refuses to see Nanba's actions as selfish. Not even in spite of his more mercenary motivations, those mean basically nothing to him. Ichiban outright rejects Nanba's betrayal, rejects standard storytelling conventions and decides the emotional murkiness doesn't matter, he cuts right through it! And the hardened gangsters in the room hate that.

Seong-Hui is insulted, emotions rise, and Han's guns go right up with them! What I love about this scene is how it plays on cliches. The Geomijul descends into panic as this turns into a rescue! Yeah call for back up, they ain't getting back up! And we're left to fight with the apparent Han Joon-gi. This is a surreal fight man, compared to the glitz and glamour of the stardust showdown this is closer to a gank in a garage. Obviously it plays Theory of Beauty but it's more like Query of who is this bitch? It is an interesting reversal of Han's prior fights and gives us an insight into how this isn't quite the same guy we saw in 6. Back then Han made a spectacle of fighting fair, concealing a cruel underhanded nature beneath a veneer of magnanimity. This mysterious imposter will, spoilers, turn out to be a genuinely well meaning and mannered guy who fights dirty. Making use of guns, knives, and poisons to tip the scales in his favour. But this isn't enough for us. (*smash*) That's what you get for being so headstrong! (*setup for later joke*)

The escape sequence which follows is really amusing to me. The gang covering for a winded Nanba as he makes his escape through a window... By running through a gaggle of Geomijul Grunts. Followed by Ichiban and Saeko owning Seong-Hui with primary school insults, delivered with awful timing, I mean awful both in the sense the line timings are so dreadful as to make the scene genuinely embarrassing to watch on top of the terrible dialogue but also for thoroughly deflating the intensity of the moment. It's a sequence with substory level presentation which required the more dynamic mainstory cutscene flow. But as it is it's a weird aberration, a moment which juts out so awkwardly as the climax to an otherwise smooth sequence.

Seong-Hui, deeply frustrated but, seemingly having given up on the prospects of killing us. (*"I underestimated you"*) What can I say, it's easy to overlevel in this game. She tells us that Nanba leaking the counterfeiting operation will cause Ijincho to crumble, the group can't understand how much of a problem this is, and we're told to come to Heian Tower later that night to learn why. Sure, just keep giving me secrets, it's not like they're incredibly dangerous in my hands or anything.

But before then the remaining Ichigang decide to do a little digging of their own. Fishing up a laptop Nanba had secreted away at the hobo camp, on which is a draft article written up by his brother. Detailing a fake money scandal going back 50 years tied to politician Yutaka Ogikubo, chair of the Citizen's Liberal Party. A paper thin stand in for the real life Liberal Democratic Party, Japan's largest political group.

Ogikubo's influence greatly exceeds his already powerful position, with Adachi saying some consider even the prime minister to be his yes man. "Sounds like some kind of fixer" Oh god please lets not do this again! Still, without solid evidence this article would be libellous at best. Even though we know Shoichi was onto something.

3. Very Cool Crime Politics

At Heian Tower, we still don't get our peking duck, but we do get a peek behind the curtain. (*Ichi Shocked, Zhou says yo*) The leaders of the Ijin Three!

Ichiban is apoplectic, their men are out spilling eachothers blood and here they are, just chilling! (*"Gonna settle this war over a game of cards" "sounds fun" "Quit fucking around!"*)

I love how Hoshino just shuts Ichiban down here even though I don't think he's wrong, and given what we're about to learn Ichiban's fury is only a preview of how many are going to feel knowing what hides atop the great wall. I've also gotta say one of the more interesting understated elements of this game is how so often Ichiban casually calls the twist only for others to brush him off, not unfairly given how much more complicated the situation is than anyone could guess until they're stuck knee deep in it. It's a fun way to play these reveals with Ichiban often being right for reasons he couldn't even fathom, and it again backs up the idea the guy is sharper than he knows.

Hoshino says the warring among the lower ranks is a necessary sacrifice to maintain the balance. (*"A balanced triangle can sustain outside pressure. Just as Japan moved from dictatorship to separation of powers"*) Adachi jokes that the old man wants to talk postwar climate, but Hoshino is deadly serious. (*postwar climate*)

He explains how Yokohama's Great Wall came to be. Sixty years back the town was stuck in perpetual conflict between the Seiryu and Liurang, and it fell to at the time fresh faced city councilman Ogikubo to pull the plug on this bloodbath.

With few resources to work with he instead came up with an ingenious plot to simultaneously stifle organised crime and fill his own coffers. Approaching the gangs with a joint counterfeiting operation and divvying up the responsibilities between them while routing most of the money back to himself.

By giving the heads of the gangs a shared interest and paying off most of the police. He effectively brought Ijincho's criminal underworld to heel while maintaining the illusion provided by the Great Wall, making Yokohama seem like too volatile a prize for outside forces to want to mess with. Only later successfully rolling in the Geomijul who were what else, Jingweon Exiles, with Han here a body double of their former leader...

Franky put, love this whole series of reveals. Yakuza 7 has some of my favourite crime politics in the series. It's an area where I feel the games can get spotty. With really only 2, 0, and 7 juggling this perfect mix of interesting small scale interpersonal relationships while never making the high level factional maneuvering feel clumsy or too abstract. Even in entries I love like 5, the pieces on the board can all get so blurry. Here the focus is kept tight with the theme of light and dark shining and casting shadows through each motion of the plot.

Adachi for instance is morally opposed, immediately calling this a false peace. Hoshino hits back by asking if results can't matter if methods are flawed. Before mentioning how it took both the police and Yakuza to rebuild the country following the war. (*"Light and Dark joined hands to rebuild."*) To which Adachi has no immediate comeback. It's such a human moment. Anyone would reflexively balk at a plan, but the scale of the results make such an immediate response seem shortsighted.

It's amusing to me how one of the flattest villains in the series, Yakuza 4's Munakata makes a similar argument to Hoshino, but from him it meant nothing. He only said it because he was full of two things, himself, and shit.

Here, that same sentiment fertilises the entire games central questions of light and dark, good and evil. Because Hoshino is a true believer, he doesn't play along with this plan for self aggrandizement or power, but because it works.

And now we know the truth of Yokohama, there's a more immediate big question. why are we still alive? Well it comes back to that note.

That thing is not for Charon. And now we've covered the past, the present issue is Nanba. If we want to know who gave us the note, we've got to bring the bum back before the Ijin Three. Ichiban is not about to sell his mate down the river, but the knowledge Liumang assassin's are on his tail lights a fire under our arse. And Han is willing to give us a tip not yet shared with Zhou. He figures if Nanba went anywhere, he sought out the help of Bleach.

It's as we approach their offices the game makes a weird diversion. We're stopped by a former member of Geomijul, who as it happens is Matsuo's killer from way back at the Harbor Light job. Turns out Seong-Hui was very much against his execution, and so this guy has gone rogue. This beat comes and goes, but it does leave an odd stain which doesn't bleach out.

Years ago I covered a title called Greedfall. The video isn't very good. I say a lot of naive shite and get perhaps too pissy with it. But one point I made in that video which I stand by is how each of the factions greatest evils are awkwardly swept away as being the fault of an autonomous third party acting without the leaders knowledge or approval, who are easily dismantled the moment their transgressions were brought to light. I disliked this because I felt it made the game too wishy washy, it made each group far less interesting by not allowing any room for moral ambiguity in a story which desperately needed it.

If I didn't bring this up I doubt anyone would catch me on it, but Yakuza 7 is effectively guilty of the same thing. With this guys biggest victim not being Matsuo, but the ambiguity. The issue is the story has decided we need to like Seong-Hui now, so she can't be too ruthless. And the game tries to quickly tidy up her image in a way which is transparent, clumsy, and transparently clumsy. It makes it feel like the story lacks confidence in its characters to win back the crowd in slower, more organic fashion, and have the characters stick to their bowguns. Or else stop one or two asinine online comments going "You can't like Seonhee, remember that guy she killed!" Yeah, she's a mob boss, I figured he wasn't the first.

Yakuza 7 is telling a far richer story than Greedfall, but I still think it cheapens proceedings a little when each group has to have their malevolence laundered just as much as their money.

We enter the Bleach office. (*Kume asks what time it is*) Hey Kume, wanking hard or hardly wanking? Inside we find Dickhead Classic, Dickhead Neo, and the Head of Bleach Japan Ogasawara. Here to support the Yokohama Branch, he is very much a Bleach guy, saying the police are lax and the grey zones rampant. Buddy the things we know could make your head spin, which is probably a service you could get around here.

Nanba has already let them in on the money printing operation. So Ichiban tells them right, it's time to go, that info puts all of your lives in jeopardy. To which Ogasawara stalwartly asks why it's them who should be running? Leading to Ichiban spilling even more about the operation! Good going there guy! Kume, clearly out of his depth, thinks we're bluffing.

But Ogasawara is a far cry from his ungainly underling, knowing we're deadly serious ("*Sweet Kume-kun, you've got a lot to learn about how this goes.*") The adults are talking Kume, pipe down. Ichiban doubts the man is a civvie, he is, but he has some backing. Out walks Lao-Ma! And with that, the Blijin Three leave us to the man who knocked off Nonomiya! Nanba telling Ichi he's simply here for his brother. ("*I want to find him, alive or otherwise*")

Mabuchi is again, not much of a boss fight. A two hit combo and some sweeps for crowd control. What's cool is this is I believe the second appearance of Heat auras in the game. First seen on Sawashiro, but now popping up again. I like to read this as the game suggesting this is the point in the story we've strayed into the domain of truly dangerous adversaries. We've left the paddling pool of power scaling and are now facing challenges who would give prior protagonists pause.

Thematically it's an amazing bit of escalation.

("You've got a gamers imagination, but no doubt he's angry as fuck right now!") The actual danger and depth of this fight doesn't really agree with that assessment mind.

What we learn after however certainly does. Bleach is backed by the Omi, a trojan horse meant to infiltrate the region. Mabuchi's murder plot a means to destabilise the Great Wall while Bleach lays the groundwork for an invasion. As Mabuchi proclaims he'll be the Arakawa of Ijincho! (*Ichi sparks him out – You're nothing like the boss*)

4. The Omi Invasion Begins

Nanba returns, telling us Ogasawara has already slipped out the back. His demeanour has changed. He's gone from the apologetic, pleading Nanba we saw just after his motivations were laid bare. To blunt, cold. Trying to seem stern and uncaring as he raises a sledgehammer to the great wall in hopes of finding his brother in the rubble. His cold front is pretty easily heated however. (*hit me in the back, I don't care – We're friends – Shut up!*)

We're not safe for long here, so Adachi says we should quickly check the office, and it's back there Ichiban makes a startling discovery. Tokyo Governor, and Bleach Founder Ryo Aoki is Masato Arakawa! If you weren't so obsessed with phones back in Kamurocho you may have spotted the phoney Ichi! I love this shot on a replay.

We cut to Aoki's Tokyo office, where Ogasawara calls for backup. (*I'll send anyone I can spare*) Back at Survive, Saeko isn't quite as convinced as Ichiban. (*"He's the same age." - "Don't jump to conclusions"*) It seems the young master has risen in the world, literally, no chair! And that's just the start of the incongruities. Aoki has a pretty airtight history, though Adachi points out how someone of Masato's means could fabricate a background such as this. And his Kamuro 3K plan which won him such approval wouldn't have worked without Masumi. Nothing brings a family together like crushing several hundred others. The remaining Ichiban decides that's enough revelations for one night, we need our beauty sleep, gotta be well rested for the invasion tomorrow!

But we awake first to news that there's trouble within the wall. Hamako warning us the Elderly Eradicator Totsuka is hunting Ichiban and we should probably steer clear of Hamako's joint. So naturally we head right on over. (*Ichiban turns up*) Hey, Poundmates!

News of the counterfeiting operations has already spread and there's mutiny within the ranks. Man, the invasion hasn't even started yet and this town's already going to pot... But I suspect it'll turn up any (*phone call*) Ah there it is. Zhao letting us know an Omi backed Bleach Japan mob is about to literally sack the Geomijul and we better get down there. He'd go himself only the liumang's got a bit of a coup detat on at the moment.

Arriving on the scene, Kume is happy as a pig in shit, and naturally, none too bothered by his fellow zealots getting a little overzealous. This is another great little Kume scene. This is the most powerful he has been so far and it highlights just how small he is. He wants to see Ichiban grovel, an insult from Saeko utterly flummoxes him because he can't fall back on any argument Bleach hasn't already programmed on him. Managing at best to call her a hussy. And perhaps lamest of all, how fake his convictions truly are shine when we tell him his men are of a Kansai Bent, their kansai-ben not beating the allegations half as hard as we beat them.

We try to stick around and rub it in but... Well, Bleach has gone balls out... I don't think protest permits would cover that! (*Hell yeah! Here we fuckin' go!*) I think that's a Yakuza.

We try and infiltrate the crowd but we're frankly too colourful for this bunch, and soon find ourselves in the wrecking balls trajectory. (*Dodge, crowd hit*) Boom! Bleaching the grey zones red! It turns out the man piloting the vehicle is Omi Alliance Lieutenant Reiji Ishioda, one of Arakawa's three key subordinates alongside Sawashiro. In gameplay we beat, but in story we beat a retreat.

Han however saw our attempted defence of Geomijul, and thinks us worthy of a special gift. We're cryptically pointed to the nearby Mother's Vow restaurant. In the back is a secret passage leading to the Geomijul's residential district, and with it, a hidden passage into the complex.

Inside, the word has come down from Ogikubo, the operation is to be burnt to the ground, all links between him and the Ijin Three to be quickly severed.

Seong-Hui feels her debt is sufficient to the man that she will go through with torching their home if it's what he needs done. And much to Han's shock begs us to help hold back the tide until the job is done. Ichiban and Adachi are hesitant, it instead falls to Saeko who up until now has had no love for Seong-Hui to see how severe the situation is for her to bow.

We stand in Bleach's path, Ogasawara directing the charge, with Nanba absolutely furious.

What follows is another enjoyable fight, at least from a scenario perspective.

A tag team boss battle against Ishioda and Nanba. I'd say this fight has no wrecking balls but (*kick*) What can you do! As Majima would say ain't that a kick in the dick. I should say, I do love Nanba, but it is really, really funny to beat the shit out of him! Oh come on don't label him as a former friend! I'm easily charmed by fights against former playable characters.

The operation goes up in flames with Bleach fleeing the scene. Their leader Ogasawara captured in the scramble. Nanba is utterly defeated, his last hope for finding his brother gone literally up in smoke. (Nanba says Ichiban stabbed him in the back – Seong-Hui steps in)

With no secrets left to protect, Seong-Hui comes clean about Nanba's brother. He's safe and well, having been held in the Residential District for trying to crack Geomijul. (*"The only reason you've learned the truth, is your friends who risked everything for you."* → Ichiban extends his hand)

5. The Plot 2.0

We rejoin the gang at the homeless camp, they have Ogasawara bound and gagged. Much to the Chief's displeasure. Ichi says they couldn't think of anywhere else to take the guy... Like Survive, or their House... Or Ichiban Holdings, then we'd really be holding, and I've been holding out on that, we'll get to it later. Hey did we just leave Ishioda in that burning building?

For now... Welcome to THE PLOT 2.0! Much like Yakuza 3's infamous plot dump, we're up against a half hour of unrelenting exposition as Ogasawara runs us through Masato Arakawa's transformation to Ryo Aoki, and their shared rise to power.

They have come across an innovation in the decade since Yakuza 3, as Ichiban takes a smoke break every ten minutes. So doing the math, this trip to the plot dump only takes 90 minutes off Ichiban's life. And yeah, it is funny for Ichiban to go "Right, bored now, time for honk honk. Back in a jiffy." Jokes aside this is a welcome feature to break up a lengthy bit of backstory.

Ogasawara first met Aoki while the two were studying in America. He was immediately pulled in by Aoki's obvious wealth and power. But quickly came to learn how little these satisfied him. What Aoki craved was "Frontal Power." (*"Basically, popularity"*) To be undeniably respected and have the capability of controlling public figures.

So he set his sights on the position of Tokyo Governor, a seat described as more meaningful and enviable than that of Prime Minister. An objective metric by which it could be said you've won the peoples affections.

To that end, he established Bleach Japan. At first inflating its numbers with Arakawa goons and hiring young women to attract feeble minded gooners. (*"Kume was one such recruit."*) Huh, coomer-me strikes again.

It soon became popular with young people for, as Ogasawara puts it. Letting them feel important for doing not much of anything at all.

Its proclaimed goals of eradicating corruption and fairness were vague enough for a wide spectrum of naive people to buy into while being difficult to present a case against. The groups tactics led to corrupt politicians outing themselves, Aoki quickly bringing them to hell.

A move Ogasawara then attempts to use on Ichiban, promising him passage back to the Arakawa should he fold. Ichiban shuts him down by reminding the guy and probably the audience that everything he's done is out of avenging Nonomiya, leaving him no impure motive to exploit. If Ichiban is to go back to the family, it's on nobody but his terms. (*"Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer."*) Yeah, too stupid to fool suits us to the ground!

From there Aoki was able to get a lot of media buzz, a young, smooth and charismatic personality who was able to leverage Bleach Japan to leapfrog his way into a strong political career. Seeming to leave Bleach behind but as we've learned, still riding Oga's behind. He won entry to the CLP in a landslide, aided by the Arakawa digging up his opponents every weakness and I'm sorry but... Were we the most powerful third string family in existence?

The apparent success of the 3K plan further boosted Aoki's profile, the public caring very little that really, all that changed was the pins the Yakuza wore. They only ever saw the success, few considered it was at best a symbolic victory. Meanwhile the police were only happy for the Omi to arrive, as it filtered out the unpredictable, opportunistic criminals who flooded the city in the Tojo's absence (*"Ironic, isn't it? They wiped out the Yakuza, only to find they needed the Yakuza."*)

The last question then is what's so important about Ijincho, simply put, the fact it's Ogikubo's home turf. The old man is the one solid obstacle in Aoki's path. The only one who wouldn't budge during his rise to power. He needs to go to feed Aoki's insatiable ego.

Aoki, being corrupt himself, had a sense of who else were bleached black, and figured Ogikubo's rise to power was no less slimy than his own. And so that's what this invasion is all about, finding proof of Old man Ogi's connection to the underworld.

Now, I must stop for a moment to say, it's kind of hard to believe that Aoki is the same guy we saw back in 2000. His ambition, sense of social climate, and apparent charisma are a far cry from the awkward mess we saw way back when. But I'm led to believe that's the point. This moment at the club forced Masato to have a moment of self-reflection. He all at once figured he knew how the world saw him, and the question is whether he hates everyone else half as much as he hates himself.

The reason I think this is because Ichiban is equally surprised by the Young Masters turn, especially upon learning Mabuchi's murder plot was signed off on by Masato himself (*"To get the jump on the Ijin Three, he was ready to accept a high risk, high return type of plan."* - *"So there's nothing wrong with murder, young master?"*)

In the end it only worked because of a stroke of luck, our investigating the murder, and Nanba's leaking of the operation. (*"Ijincho will share Kamurocho's fate. → There's no great wall of Muscle to stop it."*)

The Plot 2.0 is very much a refinement of the first one, being far better plotted than The Plot 1.0 and that's not even considering the presence of break points. Character and theming are threaded into what would otherwise be a very dry bit of exposition.

The political messaging is especially incisive for the series. Going into how groups akin to Bleach use vague yet passionate messaging to stir the naive, the short sighted, and the little dictators all into its ranks. Giving those with full hearts and empty heads nice sounding but hollow solutions.

While supplying an enemy for the cruel to rally against, and the two sides rarely care why the other is there because they're at the least, useful.

As well as that its messages exploit the fact they're to the majority of people, totally unassailable, on the surface everything it stands for is laudable, and in an attention starved economy you're forced to criticise it on the backfoot. Meanwhile all its heads really care about is their own sway. It's played up and dramatised obviously but I think it's a genuinely strong critique of these kind of political movements. Grassroots can grow from rock bottom, but astroturf looks real enough to most.

Now, having just compressed half an hour of plot into a handful of minutes. I want to pivot for a moment and talk about the neverending debate of “video essays” versus “video essays which are just plot synopsis in disguise.” and this is still about the game itself.

I’d say I try to be in the former camp but that’d be lie. If only cause I don’t consider what I make video essays, the funny part is I’ve been at this so long I saw the same argument play out over calling everything “reviews”, I used to call these reviews, now I don’t really care. What I’m doing is really a hodge podge of different approaches that I suppose could be called “video tour guides” Sorry if that seems a semantic get out of death row card but I’m trying not to give anyone rope to hang me with. The crux of the matter is I don’t want a label straitjacketing my flexibility. All I want is these videos to be a fun journey and maybe give you something to think about, and I’ll use any tool that works to get from A to B.

Despite this I spend a long time thinking about how we talk about games, how I talk about games, and the craft of doing so. How to make it fun, how to refine my own appreciation and how I could better get my thoughts across. And I do try and keep abreast of what people are saying, even if the synopsis argument tends to be cyclical, it flares up, a creator or two gets shit on. Everyone gets bored and moves to the next cyclical argument until a long video flares it up again. Maybe I’ll get the pleasure this time! It’s been a minute since we had video game difficulty, can we run that crucible again? Holy shit it actually happened while I was narrating, watch this not be relevant when this goes up (*skippable bosses*) I do synopsis, but I make an effort to match or exceed that with actually trying to dig deeper. And I see synopsis as a reminder for people who’ve played the game and necessary info for those who were never going to bother, while acting as a launchpad for talking points. I try to make the videos worthwhile and not just suck the game dry like a content vampire. The struggle is how to best compress information without losing definition or maliciously muddying the games intent in the process. And with Yakuza 7 this is especially tricky because this game is *lean*.

The more moving pieces, the easier it is for something to break. That’s true of both mechanics and the mechanics of storytelling. So the difficulty I’m having trying to keep this video sharp is to me a sign of how this games ambitions, ambitions which rivals the Young master, do not exceed its grasp. Very little feels extraneous and what does feels very little indeed. The Plot 2.0 is a break in the action, but it’s well placed after the exciting torching of Geomijul, it’s a chance to calm down and catch your breath, but even that doesn’t mean the reveals have to stop.

And neither does Bleach, having finally tracked down Ogasawara, the camp is raided and the man is lost in the mayhem. (“*Next time you kidnap someone, do it far away from me.*” → “*I wasn’t gonna do it again, probably.*”) Ichiban lives an unpredictable life, Chief. (*Seong-Hui gets a call*)

Oh, life’s calling again. The Seiryu have put down their internal rebellion, but Zhao can’t be reached. So Ichiban is off to check in, Seong-Hui loans out Han, and the gang once again reaffirming their shared goal. (*Our truths are heading to the same place*)

But before we can go, Nanba returns one last time. This time appearing flippant, dismissive. Telling Ichiban to let it go. Not to risk anything more for the sake of the Ijin three. (“*Do I detect concern.*” → “*Good guys get used by guys like me*”) Again, his new facade easily breaks, just as much as this town has broken him, Nanba’s only tactic left is to plain beg Ichiban to be selfish.

Which naturally won’t work, and just like Nanba was here for his brother. Now Ichiban is in the same position, it’s a smooth changeover. And Ichiban won’t let allow the guy to leave on bad terms as hard as he tries. It’s a “we’re not so different” speech which for me, actually works. (“*If you ever call me, I’ll come running.*” → “*See ya.*”)

6. Music at Qing Jin

It's a bit lame how we have to fight through more or less the same dungeon to reach Zhao's homebase and Restaurant, Qing Jin. What we played before was essentially one half of the full sequence. But once inside, we find the staff are ready to serve... Their new master!

And man... The music that plays here makes up for the repetition! This is kung funk! I guess Ichiban's imagination has taken him to old martial arts movies! You know this track is nostalgic in an odd way to me, it kinda gives me a Yakuza 4 vibe.

I think it's time to talk about the music, battle music in particular, as usual for Yakuza it's banger after banger. Nothing out of the ordinary there. But the reason this track gets me thinking is because of how unique it is when taking all of 7 into account.

I loved how varied the soundtracks of 4, 5 and 0 could be and find 7 lacking in this regard. That said it does have an undeniable character, and these are still very much beats to beatdown to.

Ichiban's sound is defined by techno. I apologise for the vague term but I'm not the best with musical genres. While Kiryu wasn't averse to synths his sound was mostly characterised by distorted guitars with a heavy rock emphasis. Ichi's techno focus is great, it fits his role as a more modern hero and pays homage to his love of games. The substory boss music Backscratcher of Coins is even a remix of Dragon Quest V's battle theme, while also incorporating *Aria of the Soul* from Persona. I'd ask where Ichiban found time to become a fan of that series too but hey, like most of them he probably never felt the need to actually play the games!

The switch to a techno focus also better fits the needs of turn based. While it still lends the fights a great amount of energy. The guitar feels like an instrument which adds drive, it encourages pushing forward in a way which would feel at odds with this format.

The music does still rise and fall, but it tends to sustain the same intensity for longer stretches.

It still speaks to the danger of a fight but it's no longer telling a player to hurry up and make a decision. What can I say man? Unlike Nanba the composers for this series just don't miss (*Nanba misses*)

Another way this dungeon is nostalgic, we face off against a tiger, drop it! And we're up and before Mabuchi... I love this shot. This framing tells you everything you need to know. For all Mabuchi's ambitions of being the Arakawa of Ijincho. The Omi Alliance would never see him as an equal. (Need a hand Mabuchi → I'll defeat him and swear up as a full partner)

And so we rematch with Mabuchi and hey, since we're on music I do actually have something I was holding out on last time. His theme, Warmaker is about ten times cooler than he is. (*Warmaker*)

I love the war horns blaring. There was a period before we got official track names where channels uploading them had to think up their own names and the one they picked for this was *Cold-Blooded*, does this sound cold blooded to you! This track is as fire as the blood flowing through Mabuchi's veins!

What's really cool is with electronic sounds representing Ichiban and the gang. The boss themes often play like a battle. With the bands sound fighting with the bosses. Sawashiro's theme has guitars reminiscent of Kiryu's, representing him being an old world Yakuza. Ichi's sound fights to be heard through Mabuchi's war horns, summoning conflict to Yokohama through falsehoods. Ishioda's emergency sirens shout caution, heavy machinery. Even Han reprising his already techno focused *Theory of Beauty* makes it apparent he'll naturally slot into the Ichiban as a party member. The use of boss music remains strong, and Ichiban having a defined sound allows the boss tracks to have an extra narrative layer. A battle of the Ichibands!

7. Nanba's Return

(*You assholes are up next*) Ichiban is so cool, not that these guys believe it.

It's in here we get a look at Arakawa's third Lieutenant, the absolute Titan Tendo. (*"A champion doesn't get in the ring with a pup who can't stand"*) A former heavyweight boxer who killed a man in the ring, joining the Yakuza for the thrill of the fight. Leaving Ichiban for later. Ishioda meanwhile doesn't want to wait.

The group is winded, hoping Han can bring forth a miracle. Tendo may have just butt out, but the bum is in. (*"Looks like you haven't played your last card yet"* → *Nanba returns*) Sometimes all I think I need to say about a scene is it brings a smile to my face. Nanba affirms his loyalty to the group, and we get our *third* bossfight against Ishioda.

I kinda feel bad for him, he goes from wrecking ball, to fighting alongside a wreck, to just plain getting wrecked. As to make up for his betrayal, and inspired by the Geomijul fire. Nanba gets the one and only story mandated supermove, and as we all know, Yakuza are weak to heat!

With Ishioda down for the count. Nanba's return to the group is made official. I've seen this moment and many like it get flack here and there. There is something I find a little bleak about how the scenes of Ichiban I've seen the most people take issue with tend to be his moments of forgiveness, with the greater the effort the greater the pushback.

It's a little tragic how one of his core character traits of seeing the best in people and believing in their better natures is the one most people just can't get on with. (*Saeko: You say the shounen stuff so easily*) While exaggerated, especially in Infinite Wealth if we get there. It's one of the most admirable, inspiring traits of his character, and I often felt his forgiveness was well motivated without requiring anything more than basic scrutiny. And I do have to remember there are plenty of people online who mistake being a prick for being tough, or sensible, or some other shite.

What I like about this twist is on a replay you do look at Nanba's actions in a new light, you start questioning how self serving he is and it's easy to realise he often displays kindness even without clear benefit for doing so. Does it add a dark undertone to one of the cheeriest scenes in the game? Yeah but it doesn't ruin it for me, just adds a bit more depth to it.

Remember what I said earlier, Ichiban always looks for the best intentions in good deeds. No excuse excusing kindness. Nanba's first instinct when he was caught was to beg for Ichiban's life. In his every appearance thereafter he's acting like a dick and it's clearly *acting*. Trying different approaches which are on the one hand trying to break Ichiban's will and get him to stop interfering with finding his brother, but I do also believe it's out of genuine concern for Ichiban now Nanba knows what he's up against. If he truly didn't care about Ichiban, he wouldn't be here trying to talk him out of further endangering himself.

If there is a problem, yeah Nanba did kinda ruin everything. I buy Ichiban's forgiveness, the rest of the Ijin Three? Not so much, no matter how much the game has revealed that beneath the curtain they're actually well intentioned, they're overlooking a rather large... (*fire*) Indiscretion.

The game kinda just sneakily ignores the amount of damage Nanba has caused which isn't very slick given we were very bluntly told what that damage would be and then shown what it was. It does this because spoilers, on a long enough timeline it works out for the town, but obviously the characters can't know that, and it's not due to Nanba redoubling his efforts to make up for it.

That complaint I do get. The Nanba's brother plotline is also pretty thin. Serving more to establish a parallel between Ichiban and Aoki and how they treat their subordinates.

I do believe the Masato connection is a big part of what finally pushes Nanba into coming back, returning the favour for Ichiban unknowingly helping him with his own fraternal fracas and that's sweet. Him finally asking if he could still be called a friend is the cherry on top after on his vehement rejection of the label. (*"You'd still call me a friend."* - *"Yeah, isn't it obvious."*) That shit hits for me man, I love this group. (*"You guys are so hopeless"*) You know a lot of these videos is just fighting the urge to let certain cutscenes run.

8. The Great Wall is Down & The Clean Use of Dirty Money

With that done, there's a handful of loose ends the game needs to tie up before we start transitioning into the story's final act. In a bit more moral laundering Nanba's grudge with Geomijul is put to rest. His brother was not only treated as an esteemed guest but met the woman he intends to marry while in captivity. How nice for this man we will never even see.

And oh yeah, Zhao, the man we're here to save! Well he was saved off screen by an old friend. One who wants to see Ichiban. We're brought face to face with... Wait who are you? Just kidding, it's Mitsu! Ichiban's overjoyed to see him but Mitsu is reserved, the situation doesn't allow him to share in Ichiban's glee and *The Only Way Out* playing lets us know this is a less than ideal reunion. He has just one thing to share. (*"Arakawa is putting all his chips on the table. When that happens he needs all the allies he can get"*)

We then leave, once again forgetting Ishioda, but at least this time the building isn't on fire. Ichiban asks Zhao the big question. What happens to the Liumang? Zhao says he's going to stand down. The point of the Liumang is to provide a home for its men, so his last act is to merge with the Geomijul, putting them under Seong-Hui's leadership. With the wall crumbling and the threat of war. They have ample reason to put grudges aside and have each others backs. (*"You're trying to help her just as much as your men."* → *"Not everything needs to be said out loud"*) Yeah Ichiban don't go making him look good. Reminded of the bill, Ichiban figures it's time to go collect a debt, first time for everything after all! Sawashiro would be pissed.

We start digging into the truth of Ichiban's arrival in Ijincho. Nanba, having his own suspicions takes us to the homeless camp. The chief explains they've long had a deal with the Arakawa. With the bums handling body disposal for the hit happy family. Within that was a secret clause however, Anyone brought to them who was merely wounded were to be patched up and released, with their survival kept secret.

Ichiban has up until now been desperately clinging to his left over loyalty for Arakawa. An area where the rest of the gang has been treating him with kid gloves, but this makes Ichiban truly want to believe Arakawa shot not to end, but save his life. His last words landing closer to his heart than the bullet (*"I'm counting on you, Ichi."*)

From Hoshino we learn even more. The bill could have only come from him. A symbolic letter of introduction to Hoshino. The old man explains that soon after the counterfeiting operation started the Ijin Three needed smugglers. One such man was travelling actor Toshio Arakawa. When his wife stole a large sum of fake bills Toshio was to be made an example of, a hit which fell to a young Hoshino, who only learned of Masumi's presence when it was too late to back out.

The troupe disbanded not long after and Masumi fell in with the Yakuza, working as a hitman for the Hikawa. He used the hobo's body disposal as an excuse to visit Yokohama and track down his father's killer. Eventually, he found his man. When Hoshino received an undisguised invitation to meet, he had no intention of fleeing. He was ready to explain why Masumi's father died and face death over the matter. (*"I could think of a lot of worse ways to die than giving that kid some justice."*)

But after hearing him out, Masumi simply got up to leave. (*"Didn't you come for revenge."* *"A shame you took me up on the investigation, I could have shot you in the back that way."*) That goes so hard, and I love the wealth of emotions captured in that. As much as Arakawa hates it, he forgives, or at least understands Hoshino. He can no longer go through with vengeance and be at peace with himself over it. A thread which will soon tie Ichiban back to him even tighter. When Arakawa started his own family, Hoshino sent over a fresh batch of defective bills. Metaphorically placing his life once again in Masumi's hands.

The money that his mother stole and in turn, took his fathers life. Hich Hoshino gave him so he could end his at any moment. He instead uses to buy Ichibans.
As both a literal and thematic object, this game makes such ironically clean use of dirty money. Bringing it into the theme of lights, darks, and greys.

Hoshino assures Ichiban Masumi couldn't have shot to kill, he shot to save. He wanted him to find Hoshino. (*"Arakawa understood the importance of that bill, can you understand the importance of him entrusting it to you?"* → *"I can feel my faith in Arakawa coming back strong."*)
A sidenote of this scene, it feels redundant to say a relationship in this game is heartwarming but I forgot just how much I like the bond Ichiban develops with Hoshino as yet another father figure and a friend he trusts just as much as the gang. Hoshino genuinely wonders just how deep the familial bond between Ichi and Masumi goes, and often envying the man inspired such a good hearted and loyal soldier.

And now we know of him, we also see the machinations of Masumi's other son. Aoki is pushing to dissolve parliament and instate him as Party Chair, or else Aoki leaks the truth of Ogikubo. The PM tries in vain to resist, but Aoki simply holds all the cards. (*"You're much too young."* → *"Then trot out some old fossil who can stop me, if you can."*)
The Prime Minister is blown the fuck out, three years ahead of schedule!

Aoki later visits the sickly Ogikubo in hospital. Gloating about taking it all from him and promising to lead a new era of politics. (*"Much of what I'm about to do will be blasphemous to you old timers."*) Before Aoki literally and figuratively sinks to reveal what this is really about. (*"How does it feel, sir? To have everything taken from you by idealistic children?"*)
A great deal of Aoki's animosity isn't just because the man was an obstacle. This came about from the old man once slighting Aoki by calling him and Bleach Idealistic Children, this moment wonderfully reveals just how childish the man still is, as he taunts this old timer over what turns out to be a, half-true assessment. Optimistic? No. Childish? Baby this is kindergarten!

There's the Masato I knew, beneath that veil of charisma remains a deeply broken, easily wounded kid. Ogikubo's heart rate rises as Aoki tells him how he's going to dismantle the grey zones and leave all who depend on them with nothing.

9. Late Joining Party Members: Han Joon-Gi and Zhao

But before we get outta here, I have to talk about the one, well, two big issues with this games pacing. And it's in how late we get our two party members. Han joining in Chapter 10 and Zhao at the start of the third act, chapter 11. These two are now shacking up with us at survive. (*"When Han Joon-Gi asks if you can stay the night."*) Buddy you're the reason he set his house on fire, I don't think he's gonna heat up your sheets.

In battle they're both focused high damage dealers. Since the core four so perfectly cover eachothers weaknesses these two may feel superfluous, but that's what's so interesting about them. The trade off of coverage and utility for sheer power, which I find to be an intriguing late game question! And man, is it some power. Perhaps Han isn't wrong to be so headstrong! And that's thanks to everyones favourite move! (*Head trauma*)

Head Trauma is a head scratcher. A super low MP ability which for reasons unknown has double base damage calculation. Making it one of the most powerful attacks in the game! A dirt cheap dirt nap dealer! This series has gone from secret koreans to secret korean techniques. And Zhao's good too!

YLAD's pacing of content can wind up really working against these lads, they arrive at a point in the game long after a majority of the optional content has been made available, meaning the player may well have exhausted or grown exhausted of a majority of what there is to do. Giving these two even less overall time in the party and a greatly diminished presence overall.

Which is worsened by them being absent from a great many group cutscenes beyond this point. As such they never quite manage to entwine themselves with the party.

My usual playstyle with these games is to do content as it comes. When I start, I ain't stopping until it's done or I'm done. I'll be the first to admit this is not the best approach as it makes a lot of Yakuza entries feel incredibly frontloaded.

I believe the more intended experience is to follow your nose and bounce from one diversion to another, but that's never quite been how I do things and in this instance it wound up really biting me. My first time playing this game I skipped the twos drink links, something I made certain to rectify on this playthrough.

This time I made sure to leave myself things to do so that I had things left to do with these two johnny-come-latelys, and even then I had to blow a lot of money on the cabaret club to get these two sauced and ready to talk. Having to drink with them in order to drink link with them later. You gotta live a little even if the liver'll be a little less lively down the line.

Having now seen these stories through I am sorry to have missed them as they wound up being my favourites, and they're best played as the last two in the set.

The way they relate to Ichiban and each other provides fantastic parallels and builds on the conflict of Nature vs Nurture we see between Ichiban and Masato.

Han Joon-gi, real name Yeonsu Kim, was turned into a body double by his father. This was done without Kim's consent or the real deals knowledge. He was then offered up to Han just so dad could ascend the Jingweon ladder.

The real Han seemed genuinely disturbed by this, but accepted the gesture and wound up treating his double well. Han reflects on... Han quite positively. It's an unexpected and weirdly humanising reveal. There's something really crafty in the idea that even in 6 we never saw the *real*, real Han, and now we're getting very guarded snippets of the man from his fake. Who is trying to conduct himself based on what he knew, *while* preserving his legacy, *while* also occasionally letting little bits of himself show as he opens up to us. He's a literally layered character. One which could easily fall into feeling jumbled or clunky but actually comes across as rather effortless and believable. I love that no matter what, even when trying to be natural, even this Han is almost accidentally flashy and *saue*, a switch he can't turn off assuming he even wants to.

In an interview Yokoyama said that if the Jingweon were back, Han Joon-Gi would have to be there and having a body double of their leader felt in character for the group. It's surprising because reading about it in the abstract sounds simultaneously barbaric and pandering!

Especially since, while I didn't mind Han Joon-Gi, I'm nowhere near as smitten with him as some fans were. The very idea of him returning sounds desperately contrived.

Which makes it all the more surprising the result is this sympathetic and surprisingly nuanced, working in tandem with the themes of the narrative and the new tone Ichiban brings.

The question of why he chooses to remain as Joon-Gi is the central arc of his drink link, and the answer is a happier ending for the Jingweon than I'd have thought possible.

Learning that some older hands are hunting him for failing to save the boss. Han draws them into the open not to eliminate the threat, but to invite them to a new home among the geomijul.

At this point they're all long forgotten castaways from the mainland mafia, further estranged for their failures in 2006 and 2016. Time is doing a better job destroying the Tojo than they ever could and the moment for revenge has passed. So what does this Han do? He beats permission to let go into them.

The real Joon-Gi had to put up with a legacy that was handed to him. His body double can do more for who's left by finally cleaning their hands of it.

He opts to remain as Han Joon-Gi in the hopes the Jingweon's last dark secret can instead be their guiding light. It's such a hopeful note to... Possibly, end this groups long, bloody history on.

If Ichiban is to be a catalyst for change in the series, and if 6 had the theme of the old stepping aside for the new. I'm okay with the series embracing a more optimistic direction with a younger cast who can bring with them new solutions the older generation couldn't conceive of.

In this case putting a bloody past behind as best as one can, and working towards not just a better future, but the hope of a future at all. It's sappy but the game makes it work really well, and it doesn't do so weightlessly, the irony is as much as Han Joon-Gi wants to carry the torch of the original, he can't help but be his own Han.

Meanwhile Zhou who I just didn't care much for first time around wound up becoming just as well realised as the rest of the Lads! Genuinely let down by a lack of mandatory screen time. He and Ichiban have a far more bantery rapport. Zhou likes to crack jokes and mess with people, it's a shtick that could be annoying and shallow and I definitely mistook it for the latter first time around, thinking him nothing more than a hollow jokester. What's great is that he actually is, but only on the surface. He's introduced as callously indifferent, and as he joins us at Survive he doesn't stop joking. Acting exactly the same regardless of whether he holds whiskey or a weapon in hand. But as Ichiban starts matching him jab for jab the tension melts away. It's a real testament to how dynamic Ichiban's writing is that his voice with each character feels so distinct yet so undeniably Ichiban.

We learn Zhao was born and bred to be leader of the Liumang. As a kid he was exceptionally talented at whatever he set his mind to, he could have been whatever he wanted, but he was destined from birth to be a crimelord. It's as you get to know him his flippancy reveals itself to be his way of emotionally distancing from the cruelty he was born into, from the life he never had any say much less stock in. He's not a monster, but he had to look like one. While he never stops joking, he does at least become genuinely jovial.

His drink link ends by tying up a plot point left truly unresolved by the story. Confronting a now disgraced Mabuchi, who still imagines he can take Ijincho's reigns with just one more push. It's the one time Zhao drops his mask and is openly emotional. Letting a shocked Mabuchi know just how furious he is, an anger borne of worry and regret. Zhao was betrayed over a position which stole any chance he had at a normal life, a role he never put any real stock in, but had to try his best at anyway because of the people who depended on him. In the end his best friend betrayed him over something he never wanted, something only Zhao could know is so empty. He'd have likely gladly handed the reigns over to Mabuchi were it an option. I really like these two stories, both for doing a great job adding dimensions to these two late comers. But also for how they tie back into Ichiban. All three are characters whose fathers set the course of their lives for them. None chose a life of crime, it chose them and they had to make do.

Now their reasons for staying in that world are gone and for the first time in their lives they have to decide who to be.

They do this while at the same time giving us a preview of the conflicts ahead and how Ichi might navigate them, just as much as chapter 11 to come these move us into the late game conflicts. Part of me wishes this stuff was in some way integrated into the main plot, but knows that it's probably for the best being optional content. All of this adds extra dimensions and considerations to the primary theme, but if it was all mandatory we'd wind up in a Yakuza 5 situation where the main plot becomes messy and contrived because it's unable to ignore a heartfelt tangent or thematic reincorporation. That is what I love about five, how it looks at its central theme from every angle. A feat 7 does actually repeat albeit much more cleanly, this is a much tigher narrative because it knows how to show restraint, and Drink Links wind up a clever way to have its shot and chase it

too. It's probably best where it is for giving me a little something to stew on without throwing too much into the pot (*devils hell stew*)

Oh yeah, the final karaoke track... Well, it was written when Horii was once eating a stew and was really irritated for some reason... I'm sure we can all relate! God wait until next game for me to discover I've somehow undersold this one like I did Like A Butterfly.

The second act of Yakuza 7, chapters 6 to 10 is maybe one of the longest unbroken chain of reveals, twists, and upsets in the series and it's so much fun.

While the openings, multiple, do a great job getting me invested in the characters and setting.

Giving me a supposed understanding of the world around us. This second leg tosses it into a washing machine. It's such a ballsy story to set up such a complex yet intriguing situation and not rest on it for any longer than it needs to make its points. Tearing it down as quickly as we come to understand it.

I realised I had no time to cleanly stop and talk about Yokohama itself without feeling like I was rudely interrupting the narrative. But it's time to hit the breaks and finally tour the town we're meant to be fighting for.

Part 6: YokohamaRama!

1. A New Town with a New Philosophy

Another parallel between Kiryu and Ichiban is Kiryu was born in Yokohama before moving to Kamurocho while Ichi is the exact opposite and that is... Pure coincidence! That's nothing to do with why they chose Yokohama. So why here?

The practical reason is it needed to be close enough to Kamurocho that a wounded Ichiban wouldn't die in transit. Initially the team had set their sights on the Kamata District of Tokyo, as it had long been Sega's favourite drinking spot. But it was dropped for the rather depressing reason that it lacked landmarks.

It's then Yokoyama remembered living in Yokohama, and realised how well it worked for the story he had in mind. Settling on the setting of Hinodecho, Sakuragicho, and Isezakicho, resulting in a map three times larger than the old Kamurocho. I think his old apartment is somewhere around here.

Director Ryosuke Horii explains *"We'd wanted to create a town of contrasts, with clear differences between rich and poor, light and dark, and Yokohama is a great setting for that, so I was confident it was a good choice from the beginning. You have that beautiful night view of the harbour lights spread out before you, symbolising the "rich", and then you have the "poor", the people who can't go there, who live in this world behind the "wall of muscle"; the contrast is clear, and Yokohama itself has so many different faces, which we could use too. I think Yokohama was the perfect choice."*

The much larger map size is only the first of many things which sets Yokohama apart. It follows an entirely new design philosophy both literally and in intent. Befitting the games more fantastical nature. RGG broke from their approach of utterly faithful recreation.

Yokoyama's Yokohama is not the town you'd see were you to visit in 2019.

It's instead an amalgam of the modern town and years old memories, a place out of time, based on the old streets and shady diners he recalled from his time there.

This more impressionistic approach has another facet, motivated by the games heavier commentary and sympathetic depiction of red light districts. Led to them not pursuing any real world tie ins for fear brand deals might lead to them having to compromise the depiction of the town or water down the message of the story. Which could be part of why the licensing deal with Don Quixote wasn't renewed.

It's genuinely surprising. Using real world places and products to make the setting feel more real has been a longstanding series staple. But this time it's more rise up, less ryzap! Given the content of this video it may well wind up demonetised so if I've entertained you to this point, I'd ask that you chuck me a few bob. Even without the product placement, the feeling of fidelity to a real place is very much alive, and this act of less strictly adhering to reality likely also helped in compressing this much larger area into a space which remains interesting to explore.

2. Yokohama Yonder: Town Design

There is a worry that the town's greater size could lead to a loss of the tight, condensed personality many prior hubs had. While there are pockets which feel superfluous, I kinda find that charming in and of itself. I know it sounds weird to be thrilled by a boring street, but in Yakuza that in itself is kinda novel, and even these seemingly redundant roads host details that make them feel lived in or meaningful to someone. Instead of feeling like one characterless worldmap it comes across like a collection of miniature districts which are arranged remarkably well to act as part of a greater whole. Each has one or two unique features or landmarks to stick in your memory, and it means even before you're told, this place feels storied, there's history and life programmed into these streets. Even with a bigger city, they haven't forgotten the small details which make the place.

From the welcoming liveliness of the homeless camp, cozy bends of the bar district funnelling me to Survive. The square of the Red Light District which begs questions of swinging around or cutting through the parking lot. The energetic throng of Isezaki Road where fights seem almost unavoidable. I adore how Jinnai station bisects and signals the north south divide of the city. From here the roads grow more open and buildings taller, it's less claustrophobic, but also impersonal. With Hamakita park at the top acting as a wild frontier boasting an abundance of rare crafting items and dangerous foes. A cute little fantasy flourish once again contextualised in a modern setting. Using a park for that I just find an exciting twist. Going back to Horii noting the divide between rich and poor. This is done via a north south divide in simple but elegant fashion. As the saying goes the higher the latitude, the stronger the attitude, with both affluence and difficulty rising the further north you go. What Yokohama achieves feels like an advancement of Yakuza 3's Ryukyu and especially 6's Onomichi, but expanded and built with JRPG concerns in mind. It's made up of distinct zones and each has its own vibe. At a glance I can tell where in the city I am from the road layout, architecture, and type of people I see milling about.

The city is tightly compressed, but so well laid out, with each area possessing such well considered checkpoints and passages it never feels artificial, it flows from spot to spot, each area feeling as big as it needs to be to sell its scale. Like so much of Yakuza its greater than the sum of its parts. Navigation feels natural and intuitive, but distinct, each area having its own rules to figure out and features to exploit in your hunt for goodies or getting out of dodge. What I especially like is how a majority of places which come to be meaningful to Ichiban and gang are all situated on the Southern end of the map as well as how often we're reset here. This makes it homely, it ingratiates us with the grey zones mechanically just as Ichiban feels his connection narratively. With excursions into the less welcoming North becoming more common not to mention deeper as the story progresses. This allows the story to travel, shining spotlights on different areas as events proceed and making sure things never feel static, while never keeping us too far from a safe, welcoming place to retreat to when we want to catch our breath. Prior stories had to work within their limited space and that claustrophobia could be felt at times, here, no such issue!

3. The Wonder of Wandering

In earlier titles a trek across Kamurocho was a small prospect. Only requiring combat and perhaps one kind of collectible to give such short jaunts meaningful friction. To accommodate for the larger map 7 has massively increased the amount of microcontent, as well as given the player unlimited sprint. something fun to do. You got three speeds, walking, jogging, and sprinting. But women for whatever reason can only walk or sprint, and if you jog, they go. So you can force them to repeatedly bump into you, or else launch them like missiles, look at her go!

And well, that's the least of many things to do, something this stupid is probably the last thing you'd bother to touch. The content is thinner, but the increased density of things to do in transit staves off tedium and lends meaning to exploration. This microcontent comes in many flavours.

The first collectible is actually a repurposed series staple, which is that you now need to track down and activate Taxi spots. Unlike prior cities where prior protagonists had prior knowledge of the town. This little change tasks you with figuring out Yokohama in tandem with Ichiban. You have to first travel to a new region on foot and get the lay of the land. It makes finding a taxi both a relief and a reward, if you're of a mindset where quick travel feels a bit like a cheat, having earned it first is a good way to hush those mind goblins.

I mentioned Party Chats awhile back. These are so much fun to stumble into, they not only build on characters, they add immediate character to the city and draw your eye to its details without shoving them down your throat. They're remarkably charming little skits which allow characters to talk about anything and I mean anything, and solidify how explosive the group chemistry is.

Something that's so remarkable about Kamurocho by now is how each and every street has at least one memorable event taking place on it over years of stories and substories. If these streets could talk they'd probably never shut up! I'd love a map of Kamurocho listing every event, main or otherwise by road, I think it'd take an age to fill up!

These walk and talks get a jump start on tying memories to these places and it always brightened up my travels when I chanced into one. These are good by themselves but naturally also build bond to progress drink links.

And we don't just drink with friends, we now also dine with them! I'd say eateries no longer offer experience but I'd be lying, EXP has been replaced with dining experiences!

Table Talks are further skits alongside the Party Chats. Where you get a bit of food trivia, party food preferences, and occasional food quizzes, these really take off when Han, and especially Zhao join the party. More than any old completion bonus, this had me looking high and low for that next tasty morsel of character detail. Which is much easier given the party can swallow the menu whole. No more needing damage to fix or stomachs to be empty.

By the time you're done with party chats and table talks, the characters all feel so fully realised, and probably just plain full from all the food I've forced down them. Gonna have to walk some of that off, which only leads to more chats!

The placement of shops and restaurants has taken on a far more gamey design. Following JRPG logic, they're now treated the ways Inns would be in a fantasy setting. Spaced much further apart. This is intended to give travel more considerations and consequences as the player has to go longer without access to healing, meaning venturing into a new part of town has a moment of danger before you learn the lay of the land. Given the easy difficulty this unfortunately rarely if ever landed for me outside of one particular exception which required a lot of imagination on my part.

This further sets Yokohama apart from older towns. It's less bustling and convenient. And makes it so that returning to Kamurocho later makes it feel like the big city.

And well there's so much more. We talked about treasure hunting, which I'm still doing by this point in the game. (*hunt*) Well there's also hidden containers and secondary currencies hidden away to give purpose to nooks and crannies. Then there's bespoke enemies and honk honks so you can deal with some crooks and nannies. (*Honk*)

Each area has unique Sujimon to hunt, further adding character to each locale via it's local characters. I'll say one annoying part of travel is that since the Sujimon live in Ijincho their eyesight hasn't been cooked by the neon glare of Kamurocho, and as such these buggers can see you and trigger fights from miles away. It's a concession given the much wider map but I can't pretend it isn't annoying!

Simply put, while much of it is filler content, it feels measured, and fulfills the purpose of giving you a lot of little things to do while traversing this much larger map. It doesn't feel like cynical padding, but to add fun to cyclical plodding.

It's a lot of little stuff to keep you occupied and keep the much longer travel times from creating a feeling of empty space, breadcrumbing rewards for the various mechanics like bonds and crafting.

And a ton of little side activities remain, as ever there remains much to do off the beaten path!

Gambling games return, now hidden behind personality checks which is an awesome use of the system. You gotta be cool enough to join, I wish there was more stuff hidden like this around the city which makes you feel like you're really becoming part of it and getting to be in the know.

you can play baseball and even golf! Darts are now a party activity with each of the lads having their own skill level, a really cute touch and again this stuff raises your bond level.

Something fascinating about RGG is how much their departments overlap. Everyone knows at least a little of what everyone else is doing. You'll have combat designers doing dialogue and vice versa. I can't help but feel this developmental synergy is why the games possess such an interwoven nature, with every element feeding all others.

That aside Horii talked in 2017 about his feelings that to be competitive, console games require three things. "Spectacle, challenges, and volume." to compete with modern shorter attention spans which mobile games feed on. Saying "*With apps, you can try it for a bit, be "ah, bored now, let's do this," and straight away try something else, but with a game you can't switch off quickly, because it's made on the assumption that you'll continue for a certain amount of time, you've got a problem, that's why there has to be a way of switching channels as it were, within the same game.*"

A lot of praise is heaped on Yakuza for its breadth of offerings, for its playspots. I like the big stories, for me, what's always been so gripping about Yakuza's side content is how it all works as part of a larger tapestry, how it bolsters the main scenario in ways both mechanical and narrative, as well as its broader power of adding depth to the setting and excitement to exploration. Each Yakuza game is a rubiks cube for the player to puzzle out.

There are so many games where I can beat dudes up, only in Yakuza could I be doing that to get some gambling money. Win big at Blackjack, buy some crafting materials, then get those made into a new weapon to beat up even tougher dudes! That's the thrill, all elements working as part of this big harmonious system, while often being fun in and of themselves.

4. Part-Time Hero

The last thing which ties this all together is the Part Time Hero system! I'm not all that fond of Part Time Hero but I wouldn't give it a big fat zero. It's a less troubling version of Troublr and a complete recontextualisation of the completion menu. Making it a phone app is great, just like the plot of Yakuza 0 a little framing goes a long way. This simple change did make completion goals a little more compulsive by framing it as an in universe game of sorts, and it feeding personality points is a nice and sensible reward, that little bit of extrinsic motivation to sweeten the deal. There was a funny moment when Part Time Hero unlocked mid-party chat. Meaning I was suddenly flooded with tons of completion rewards... (*rewards coming in*) Sorry Adachi, I can't hear you over Ichiban having a sudden personality influx! I think he watched American Psycho last night!

So, like Troublr it gives you mini-missions, stuff that'd be too small scale for a substory but takes a bit more storytelling than a random encounter. The two categories are support and rescue missions. Supports are fetch quests and hidden object hunts.

While Rescues minibosses and much more annoyingly, takedown requests. Which is hunting down specific enemy types. So if you wanted to add grind to your grind, grind away hero boy!

Running in circles for half an hour to barely take down the kinda guy I want, I'll admit to throwing in the towel, I'm a hero, not a street sweeper! (*A brief aside to say Snake believes Sanitation workers are heroes this was just a joke*)

While support missions are more or less fluff (*UFO CATCHER PLUSHIES*) I do think the menus are really valuable. There are a ton more random items in YLAD, and by encouraging you to gather a mix of common, rare, and utterly unique items it lets the player in on these things even existing, which naturally prompts curiosity to explore and figure out where they come from. It's an ever cycling game long treasure hunt and that's really useful.

I think its greatest strength is in how it guides the player by giving them questions. Tracking down missing people leads you to really scrutinizing the map and finding hidden passages. Meanwhile the man who can't stop shitting led me to every restroom on the map, and in doing so I stumbled into several other discoveries along the way, and I was led by the nose and not just because my objective stank! I found the restroom casino and proceeded to really flush my money down the toilet!

While the part of me who hates checklisting doesn't enjoy engaging with part-time hero it is an undeniably elegant checklist. Well contextualised and necessary for the larger scope of the game, it also doesn't call you every five seconds which is a bonus. Though I will confess, I did pussy out of finding a bunch of cats again... The second time I was asked.

And hey, while we're being a part-time hero, we should probably talk about who we're being a hero for, the men, women, and utter weirdos of Yokohama

Part 7: Dragon Sidequests

1. Ichiban in Substory

Much of the fun of substories up to this point was the world taking a pickaxe to the ever stone faced Kiryu. Obviously there were substories from many emotional flavours. The funny, the heartfelt, the thriller, the *thriller* (zombies). As many colours as the rainbow. Regardless it allowed us to see a whole other side of this character by putting him in situations you wouldn't usually find him in and showing how he'd respond.

With Ichiban, who as I mentioned, feels like a substory character thrust into into centre stage this dynamic winds up inverted. It's far less surprising for him to get involved in the low stakes zaniness substories often feature.

He's far more extroverted, not to mention proactive than the reactive Kiryu. Often taking it upon himself to figure out solutions to problems and step in even before he's explicitly asked.

Instead of revealing a hidden side to him, because little of Ichiban is hidden. It's more adding dimensions to what we already know of him and reaffirming just how deep his well of kindness runs. We've had other playable characters with substories before but since these were bit players these diversions would zero in on their gimmick. Akiyama had applicants, Haruka had Idol conundrums, Shinada had balls and so on. But Ichiban isn't a bit player, he's player number one. So we gotta stress test him in a variety of scenarios and see how he plays.

For all we joke that Ichiban Kasuga is a madman, the joke of many substories is him throwing his hands up and saying "This is too stupid even for me" before getting pulled in kicking and screaming. It's a gag I find far more stock, while there are still moments which get a laugh out of me, which tends to be more when Ichiban is on the insanity's wavelength instead of above it. Though my favourite joke of the game is one that's weird but grounded. It's when his good nature backfires spectacularly, leading to him and Mr. Masochist sitting together in abject misery.

But the humour is overall a lot less to my tastes. Kiryu acting as the Frank Drebin to his worlds insanity while being blind to his own brand of absurdist stoicism was far more up my alley as far as jokes go.

Ichiban, being a more outlandish and weird character means the general insanity of the world has increased to accommodate. A rising tone lifts all schizos and all. Some weird shit happened in old Yakuza but because it was more grounded, these tears in the fabric of reality ripped a lot louder. Now they're more outlandish in general.

I'm not exactly fond of this but I get it, there have been several hundred substories by now, you have to up the ante to keep coming up with fresh ideas. My issue is it has seeped into the main scenario but well... That's an issue for later games.

Don't get me wrong, insanity is far from all that's on the menu! There's still a wide spread of substory types, and there's enough grounded, character focused stories which warm my heart and really reaffirm just how much I like Ichiban.

One thing I dislike however is how all they all have Ichiban by his lonesome, only story mandated substories featuring other party members. I understand Drink Links, party chats, and table talks more than fill the void here, and this does actually help the games sense of taking place over a longer timeframe by showing downtime away from the group.

but I'd have liked to see the other characters step in occasionally to offer insights and see how they might handle these less intense situations. I'd have loved to see Adachi help the old batter or investigate the apparent masked killer terrorising Koreatown, Nanba's begging skills aiding Megumi's quest to collect money for her sick brother, Saeko's nightlife expertise helping an ageing dominatrix and Mr. Masochist, Zhao could have added extra flavour to this story about a young cook trying to prepare himself to inherit his father's chinese restaurant, and I can see Han getting really into doing a traffic census. They didn't have to be everywhere but the benefit of substories is exploring characters in lower stakes situations. Ichiban is fun enough to hold these stories up but I feel like a great many moments were left on the table.

I understand why they didn't do it, given how skittish one of these lot is this would require time gating substories which is often seen as massively inconvenient. But I'm cool with flashbacks! And hang on a damn minute... They already time gate substories! Sure it's a tiny amount but it's not like they're outright opposed to it. I may be in a minority but I'm willing to sacrifice convenience if it allows for greater opportunities.

Seeing as some of my favourite substories from 4 and 5 were the group ones so I can't help but find it a missed opportunity no matter how sensible the decision was.

And while it's really funny, it does take me a bit out of it when they just appear when the mandatory ending fight kicks off. Especially when it means some poor overzealous civvie is suddenly getting ganked by the Ichigang, who materialise out of thin air to punish this guy for the crime of being a bit overprotective of his son.

2. Substories at Rock Bottom

Lets go back to where Ichi's new life began for a moment. I personally feel we leave the homeless camp a little too quickly. It's one of the most detailed spots in Yokohama with a clearly rich history and unique social structure yet the story spares no time getting us out of there.

To make up for that, it's also the only area in the game which gets focused expansion in substories. We even find a body in the garbage 10s of hours before we learn about the deal they've got going on. Hey idiots, don't you know this is an Arakawa operation! Wait shit forget I said that!

Nanba yelled that it's not as simple as dragging everyone here to Hello Work, and having taken that on board Ichiban actually mucks in, getting down and dirty with solving some specific problems. In the process the game explores not only some the hardships they face but how much motivation it takes to fight the uphill battle to escape on top of that. From how limited their opportunities are, to how difficult it is to even grasp those opportunities when most of your energy is spent just trying to stay alive, to the mockery they then get for daring to take those opportunities.

While Ichiban will step in and fight their literal battles, when it comes to getting them out of their funk he takes the approach Nanba preached. He doesn't force anyones hands or merely try and shout them out of it, all he does is give them the direction they needed to start facing their problems, and the game doesn't say this is an easy fix but the start of a long process.

Like many Yakuza games do, the substories re-examine the core themes through as many lenses as possible. Which makes a great many in 7 about people fighting their way up from rock bottom. And the way it's presented is great, it offers a hopeful message that while there are many ways one can hit their lowest, there's just as many ways to climb back out.

3. The Konbini Quest and How to Measure Adventure

One substory in particular really grabbed me this time around. Though it took a lot of legwork both literal and imaginary on my part.

Ichiban, after chucking a hobo's pet crawfish into the river. Goes to great pains to return it. Only to learn he's merely delivered the guys dinner. Having formed a connection to the poor thing... The crawfish not the man. He winds up cutting a deal, her life for a sushi box.

Now, at this point I couldn't recall where to get one, but I knew it wasn't in any part of town I was levelled for, I could have held off, or been lame and retreated through, but I decided sod it. We're going on an adventure. Now the quest to the cornershop may not sound a fantasy epic, but it wound up being an unexpected highlight of my playthrough.

Somehow, I wound up in this perfect emotional flowstate, I bought into the adventure I made up as I trekked deeper into the city not entirely sure in which shop I'd find this mythical sushi set.

I don't know what came over me, I just know I could be jollier if I could enter that headspace more often.

And that brings me to the fact that during the making of this video. I thought it only sensible to go on my own Dragon Sidequest, and play the game which not only captured Ichiban's imagination, but has clearly held it hostage since. I went and played Dragon Quest. I'll confess I didn't finish it, as should be obvious by this stage I'm not a JRPG guy but I will say, I actually rather enjoyed it!

Why is this relevant now, well, it got me in this headspace with much greater frequency than far more advanced titles have ever quite managed. The simplicity is charming and the combat delightfully more-ish. The thing that took me most however was how in lacking certain conveniences the genre gradually developed it wound up pronouncing the feeling of 'adventure' in ways more forthcoming games can't do.

You can't see monster health bars. Your spells don't have their MP or effects readily listed. You can't even tell how much of an upgrade equipment is until you've tested it in battle!

From a certain angle these are all negative, but it led to a game where I have to actually feel out monsters, remember roughly how much it takes to slay them and in turn get an idea of how dangerous they are, figured out over multiple encounters. When my new sword suddenly felled them much faster or my armour turned a grisly blow into a mere glancing one, it was a genuine tactile surprise. It felt rewarding in a way it couldn't have if the shop told me upfront. All the while remembering what all my spells can do and how much I can afford to spend at any one moment. It was on me to remember what both I and foes were capable of. By putting the responsibility on me to both learn, retain, and effectively apply knowledge instead of having it easily supplied, it forced me to give the world weight.

This weight is multiplied by the distance between expensive inns, and the singular place I can save. This turned every expedition into the wilds into a proper journey, I need to have an idea where I'm headed and what I'm trying to achieve. Going out without an objective puts me in needless peril. The greatest threat is never any one monster, it's me overextending. If I have a lapse in judgement or get cocky I could be doomed several battles before I realise it. Unless I've bought a very expensive item to escape, which is rewarding in and of itself because it's an item I had to first buy and experiment with. Using it correctly therefore has an adventurous quality rather than feeling like a cheap get out of jam free card.

All of this gives Dragon Quest a compelling and addictive loop. More than once I returned to the castle thinking I'd save and put the game down only to go... Nah, one more trip! It's not only my stats that grew, but my experience, my confidence, that I can hold out just a little bit longer and make it a little bit further in the wilderness. And I didn't know what I'd find!

I went into the first dungeon expecting an experience bonanza. Instead all I found were directions. Something I hadn't quite thought I needed yet. Assuming I'd get them in more grandiose fashion. The surprise was memorable, the directions however, were vague. It was left to me to remember, or remember to write them down, and it was on my shoulders to actually make sense of these directions using my own accrued knowledge of the world. What I got from this game was a great sense of trust.

I wound up adoring this design. You could call it simple, but pure may be the better word. Later additions to the genre would up advancing the mechanics while diluting this purity. There's always a little give and take. What would lead some to call this game antiquated, led to me having a truly fresh experience.

I understand why it was phased out, the only reason it can get away with telling the player so little is because there isn't much to tell. As games got more complicated and the mental load to play them greater, providing such information kept the experience from being frustrating, and the key skill games challenged went from exploration to system mastery. With exploration being rewarded in secondary fashion. The reason it worked, and the reason this moment in Yakuza 7 worked, is because the distance of an adventure can be measured by how far you make it from the closest thing you know.

Too many games nowadays tell you everything, which snubs adventure before it even gets out of the shire. But for a few precious minutes, this game somehow had me right where it wanted me! I didn't know where the Sushi was nor if I was ready for the foes who stood in its way, but I pushed on regardless.

Not bad for what was in reality, a trip to the shops, and this is how we saved Nancy!

4. Self-Referential

Now for the opposite, a substory which took me out of the experience. Picture it, Yokohama, 2019! A former Arakawa grunt with a heart of gold stalks the streets to root out evil. And he finds it in abundance! A merciless yakuza trying to make off with milk from a helpless new father! He sends the villain packing and we learn the mans story, a new dad struggling to keep things together! And just as he learns Ichiban's, it looks like history is repeating, a cry rings out from a nearby den of iniquity... The two join forces to help this new life... Only to find an old, dead joke. (*Gondowara*) From formula to formulaic, all in a moment! We got the big Gondowara on our hands here! You know how I feel seeing these guys, 15 years later, doing the exact same thing? I feel depressed, like really man? you're still doing this a decade and a half later!

We've hit a very odd point in the Yakuza series. There's a downside to it realising its own longevity and level of popularity which floats between cult and mainstream. It's not only becoming more self-referential, but pretty self-reverential too, way too gung ho about not only repeating stand out moments, but trying to force iconography.

I'm jumping ahead but it's an issue which incubated with the response to 0, starts taking shape here and is truly cemented by Infinite Wealth and the Gaidens. With certain characters or groups being artificially contrived into ongoing importance when they are at best one note gags.

The Gondowaras, the business chickens, Ono-Michio returning as a nationwide icon, the robots, And worst of all, the Obatarian. It comes across like they're trying to recreate the nugget moment and I get it, this had a profound impact on the series popularity, but by getting progressively more whacky to try and synthesise this response feels desperate, and only dilutes what possible impact each can individually have. Nugget worked because well, it was a genuinely surprising and unique moment. Now I can't help but eye every sort of quirky character or event now as if RGG is going "D'ya like them? Well post about them online and don't worry, they'll be back to make the same joke next game!" And I don't like being this cynical, but I can't help but feel condescended to by this kind of pandering.

It may seem like I'm treading a fine line here as I've praised returning characters in the past, but there's a world of difference in their handling. In the older titles you had Date's Daughter Saya, the Florist's son Takashi, Emoto, even the leaders of the Colour Gangs, I didn't like these two buy hey, they still felt like actual people!

After their main story introduction you'd get substories to check in with them in the following titles. These were nice and low key. You'd get a few jokes, but more than that you'd get some character development, then come Yakuza 4 when it seemed like the series was trying to move on they all got a conclusion. Except you, yeah you, yuya, you needed a little longer to cook, but we won't hold that against you, yeah!

The issue now is, the series is not only much less grounded, but it's hitting a cyclical point, there is no more "moving on". Recurring elements are not played the same way. They're not going to be treated as characters to advance with jokes acting in service of said advancement, but icons or jokes first and foremost. Or uh... Lau Ka Long... Yeah he isn't dead either, when I say no more moving on I suppose I'm also talking about from this mortal coil. Is there a single real bullet left in this universe? The point is I don't want to be questioning if I'm playing Like a Dragon or watching Little Britain

Now I'm not against fan service or returning characters in general. Look this is a series where asset reuse is one of its virtues. But jokes aren't assets, if you think you can just plonk them in again with no new twist or subversion you're just gonna make people start resenting any and all returning elements even though not all asset reuse is rendered equal.

I'm with the crowd who dislike the Oba-san, though I'll cut her some slack for being useful back in the and her 80s. I genuinely wonder if people in Japan really like Etsuko or else no one does but someone at RGG finds the scorn she inspires funny, and if that's the case I respect it. (*I only just learned she's a real person and I cannot find a thing about her.*)

And the thing is, it's not like RGG has forgotten how to do this. In one substory we find Il Yu-Jin, a full 10 years since his last appearance in Yakuza 3. The Korean star is now washed up, liquored up, and people have had it up to here with him. After beating sobriety into the guy he explains how it all fell apart. Digging into the dirt of the entertainment industry with more gusto than 5 allowed itself in pretty short order. After stopping a sleazy producer from forcing himself on his manager the two were blacklisted from the biz, and Il Yu-Jin fell into alcoholism to cope with his fading star. It's only after running into a fan, her not quite realising it's the same man from her favourite film "Our Winter Sonata", oh hey I watched that, it was a... medium movie to sit through. Does he realise what his work meant to people, and with the help of a... Honest celebrity journalist, don't get too unrealistic now! He decides to tidy up his image and make a serious go at stardom again. It's sappy but I really like this substory. I like tracking characters one entry to the next, but to track something it needs to be moving!

I love that this is how the uh, illusion is broken, he hit rock bottom so hard his facade shattered. Turning him into something more than a simple joke about vainglorious celebrities and annoying fans. There's one of the exciting possibilities in how long this series has been going. Il-Yu Jin had been a joke for what, 13 years? Now all of a sudden he's a person with depth, achieved via a thoughtful tie to the throughline of starting over from scratch. Returning characters can breathe life into a series, repeating jokes kills interest quicker than anything else.

5. The Unique Substories

The selection of substories with bespoke mechanics is once again pretty thin. Besides Mr. Masochist, arguably a joke that could have worked in real time. None really make use of the new format in an interesting way.

The Michi Minefield is a hidden object hunt. Traffic Census Sensei is a counting puzzle. Bubble Bubble, toils and troubles us with a stealth section with an admittedly amusing scenario even if the gameplay is trivial. I don't begrudge this too much but I feel like this game lacks one or two big ticket substories which bring something big and unexpected to the table. I mean there is a monkey in an excavator which is arguably both but I'm seemingly hard to please.

One substory highlights something I'd have definitely liked more of. The Miracle of Spice has Ichiban solving a series of mundane or clichéd scenarios with the aid of a super spicy Kimchi a failing salesman just can't shift. Saving the mans business and unlocking a unique vendor who sells this miracle grub. I quite like this substory, it repeatedly got a laugh out of me, actually leveraging its more rigid presentation to make punchlines hit harder. Plus it's the level of stupidity I like to see Ichiban operating at. But as to what this sidequest uniquely has:

While this isn't the only instance of a substory unlocking a vendor, it is the one truly unique item I'd argue you find. This Miracle Kimchi actually affecting the turn order.

Now, more than poundmates and violating child labour laws (*hiring kid*), this is the kind of extrinsic reward I want out of substories. Genuinely new gimmicks and tools I can take with me into the main game.

We do open up the pawn shop via a substory, helping the owner process his wife's passing a little and starting living to carry on her torch rather than burning down everything they've built together. So it's not a unique shop by the series standards but the circumstances surrounding it are. It's a small way to show Ichiban having a positive effect on the world around him.

There are still a handful of substories left and boy are they a handful. We'll come back to them when the time is... While not right, more appropriate. Okay it wouldn't be appropriate either but man. If you know you know, for now, we've got a brother from another mother we should probably smother.

Part 8: From Rock Bottom...

1. The Odds

So Chapter 11: The Odds, this is a transitionary chapter, moving us from the fall of the wall to the end of it all. True to its name this is about establishing just how imposing Ryo Aoki is and it hits Rock Bottom running.

To start with: The Ijin Three are in utter disarray. Bleach has spun the Geomijul fire into a massive success, them achieving what the police could not. They also killed Ogasawara, claiming he perished in the blaze. Turning him into a martyr and further galvanizing their already massive public support. In a sane world I figure this kind of thing would be treated with far greater scrutiny but I'm starting to doubt I live in a sane world so go ahead Yakuza. Han straight up advises the group to pack it in and run. Which Ichiban can't afford to do. (*"I can't. I need to stay here until someone contacts me."*) So rooted in place, all we can do is prepare for the attack, and their first blow hits low. (*Call from Hamako*) Hey Hamako, need me to beat up Totsuka again? Taking out the trash? Totsuka again, got it. Hey, part time hero!

Actually no. Her doors are closing! Ichiban is handed a flyer for the Ijincho Revitalisation Shelter. A bleach run facility with the apparent goal of helping people in the grey zone. Offering training for more above board employment as well as visas.

Why, Hamako can feel herself turning around on Aoki! He even happens to be in town attending Ogasawara's funeral despite his full plate! Lady he's gonna eat you alive.

Ichiban tries to express his scepticism but Hamako won't hear of it. (*"Don't judge him if you don't know him."*) *Oh you have no idea.*

Rushing to the funeral, what we find is a delightfully sickening farce. Ryo Aoki delivers an entirely self serving speech about how much Ogasawara wished to see Yokohama reborn, and how it now falls to the man he doubted... Sorry, doted on most to carry out his dream. That's right, now it's your Yume Kume! This snivelling little prick is Aoki's pick for office in Yokohama. (*"In the election to come... I will see Kume realize his potential as a man!"*)

And well, he may be shutting the soaplands but the man can put on the waterworks. Everyone is buying it, the crowd outside enthusiastic to carry Ogasawara's torch

Any hope of getting an audience with Aoki seems impossible. But Saeko and Adachi put their heads together and we track him to a hidden parking lot. (*Ichi accuses guard*) Ichiban you may be right but you can't just accuse every Osakan of being Omi! (*Adachi baits guard*) (*Disarm*) He may need a pill to do it, but the man's still Solid Snake!

(*Knocked down*) For a moment it still looks like we've lost our man before he swings back around. Aoki immediately puts the charm on and it is offensive. (*Young master – Aoki wrinkles*) Luckily Ichi lands a tiny nick in the armour and Masato tells him to come to Otohime Land alone. The Ichiband strongly advises against going, especially alone. But naturally the man won't have it. He can't miss this chance and he would never betray the young masters trust. For all of his differences with Kiryu, stubbornness is one area where Ryu and Ryuugo together.

We arrive at the abandoned Soapland. Like father like son, Masato has a taste for the theatrical.

(*Masato enters*) Oh no need to sit down, I already recognised ya! That was low of me.

(*"You were born in a sty not unlike this, right?"*) Oh nevermind, not like you ever needed legs to run your mouth did you dickhead? (*Masato smirks*)

This scene starts strong, I love how as Masato recounts his childhood he sinks into the seat, but as he starts talking about all he's achieved Ryo Aoki emerges, spreading his weight around.

I'd compare this moment to the reunion between Kiryu and Haruka in 6. A meeting we've spent much of the game waiting to see.

With many words built up from the truths we've uncovered along the way. Only now being face to face, there's a gulf of painful emotions which need to be crossed to even find the right words. I was a bit overly harsh and pedantic on that moment but I still find this one works a lot better.

Where I felt that game left a lot unsaid in a very wobbly attempt at drama, rejecting an easy slam dunk in service of botching a hail mary emotional scene.

This reunion is brilliantly tense, the two are here at cross purposes. Ichiban is here to talk to Masato, Aoki is here to establish dominance. The words left unsaid are clearly motivated by the two circling each other. Ichiban trying to avoid the emotional minefield Aoki has laid out for him, but unable to hide his melancholy, he still wants what's best for Masato, and Aoki believes he has it.

Aoki meanwhile wants to show off how powerful he has grown to Ichiban, but when Ichi can only look at him with sadness, it's the first thing which actually, if only for a moment, gives him any pause. How dare this peon he used to be able to push around still pretend to care?!

(aren't you going to congratulate me – I can't say what I don't mean – Glare)

I gave the face acting in Yakuza 6 some shit, 7 I find puts it and body acting to better use.

More often in service of accenting exchanges as opposed to being the supporting pillars where it works especially well with Aoki, the little moments where Ichiban pries at Masato's mask just by being himself.

Ichiban asks, pleading in his eyes if Masato is even happy as a politician, his answer is it's a good life. Not requiring violence to assert control. It's rather telling for two reasons. One is that's not the first metric I'd go to when weighing up the quality of my own life. Which is banging by Aoki's standards. Two is the sheer amount of violence. I guess he only said you don't have to use it... Politics! You don't have to use violence! But it sure does help!

This quickly brings them to Ogasawara. Aoki talks about disposing of him with a smile. (*"Risk management."*) Ichiban condemns him for murdering the man without even knowing if he talked, but it takes little effort for Aoki to sus that he did. (*"See? Risk management..."*)

Ichiban continuing to argue puts Aoki on the counter-attack. Saying it's, once again, like father, like son. Same as Ichiban being cut loose from the Arakawa, and it turns out we were not given the whole truth. Sawashiro was not the one who killed Suzumori.

Flashing back to 2000, we see Masato stumbling back to his chair as the Ephedrine leaves his body. At his lowest ebb, hating every fibre of his being, help is the last thing he wants. Screaming at bystanders for even daring to look at him. This is the moment Walt becomes Heisen...*(cut)*

Adding insult to injury, he finds his chair, tipped over, slapped with a label for fly tipping. He passes out, only to be awoken by Suzumori, thinking him utterly legless. (*"Move you drunk"*)

Masato is too far gone, he can't help but antagonise the guy. But it's as he's dragged away to be beaten his survival instincts kick into gear. *(Masato draws – Suzumori laughs - Draws)*

Thug of the game award to you pal! Gotta respect the balls on this guy. Yelling at a quaking Masato he's a punk who doesn't get it until Suzu becomes the punk who does. The new year rolls over, and so does he.

All along, Ichiban went to jail for his 'brothers' sake. I like how strengthening the Yakuza 1 connection is employed as a twist. Not to mention we now have all the parallels between Ichiban and Masato. Both hit rock bottom, had a symbolic death only to be reborn elsewhere. Now outside of the Yakuza they could seize a new life which better fit their talents. Masato as a politician, Ichiban as a Hero, sans the yakuza part.

While Masato used money and manipulation to buy easily discarded allies. Ichiban won irreplaceable friends with no guile and even less green, just by being a good guy. Aoki cuts people loose the moment he even senses insubordination while Ichiban bends over backwards to understand and forgive everyone their plight. Masato prayed on hatred of the underclass while sanitizing it into a noble sounding goal. Ichiban has at every turn stood up for the downtrodden, using empathy and straightforward truth to unite seeming enemies... And as it turns out, we played right into Masato's hands, granting him the opening he needed to move on Yokohama.

Still, he's failed to break Ichiban. (*"Speak your mind, Ichi" – "I still trust Arakawa" – Glare*) It's not even just face acting. Sometimes it's just clever use of angles to create strong kuleshov moments. Without a look you can just see Masato hates how he can't get Ichi to bend. No matter how much he rubs Masumi's apparent betrayal in the guys face.

It's a wonderfully tense verbal stand off and with everything out of the way, it's finally time to negotiate. Masato is here with a condition. He'll let Ichiban live if he never approaches him or dad again. So Ichiban, mistaking this for a fair meeting presents his own condition. Pull Kume Out, he doesn't belong in politics, and Aoki wholeheartedly agrees, (*"If he had no support, an ignorant mongrel like him could never win."*) We've known all along Kume was a tool, what we didn't know was just how much that meant. His only value is proving Aoki's. Kume is such a fascinating and loathsome character, one of the most pathetic to ever do it, or not do it in all likelihood.

And as for those Revitalization shelters, well, they're even more useful. A way to round up and deport immigrants. (*"What...? So you're lying to their faces!?" – "It's hardly a lie"*) Oh that's sick, you are a fucking politician mate. And as should be obvious, he's not taking the deal, he's taking it all, our life included. (*The only reason you're leaving alive is pity – Masato leaves – Ichi follows to find Sawashiro*) Yo, Jo!

(*"At least I came alone" – Nanba appears*) And save! I love these guys! That's what's great in a story like this. The party still feels like a group of actual autonomous characters, who respect Ichiban's loyalty and honour without sharing his blindspots. Ready to push the story forward in their own ways. (*Adachi pushes a dumpster*) Still, we run into yet more Omi, and Sawashiro leaves us to face the horde. (*"You're bailing on us" – "I don't want your filthy blood on my suit"*) Leaving us with Officer Matoba, perhaps the least characterful boss in the game though he tries hard for an immediate impression. Though I find my bat makes a bigger one on him. **(smash)**

It seems we've won a moment of respite but the hits don't stop, Hamako comes running having just learned the truth of the shelters. (*"I didn't want this! I just... All I wanted was for them to be happy!"*)

I wouldn't be surprised for someone thinking Hamako's actions in this chapter seem far too naive for her but that's why I find this moment actually hits so hard. In each snippet we see how she's both determined and wise to the world, and she uses those qualities to stand up for those around her. Holding out in the hopes of giving people a better life. A hope which Aoki expertly exploited. You can fault her for her shortsightedness, but the fault lies with those who put the blinders on.

As the group sits alone, defeated. Nanba repeats what Han advised. Perhaps it's time to get outta here. Ichiban asks the most pointed question. (*"Where?" → "If you can win a fight, you're just a bully."*) Pretty strong condemnation of the games balancing there Ichi. Jokes aside, I love this speech, I love this chapter. It tells a great little almost isolated story bridging the twist heavy middle and the deep character refocus of the ending stretch.

True to its name, it shows us the various ways Ichiban and Masato are at odds, as well as obviously the insurmountable odds we're up against. By this point I'd happily call Masato not only a really deep character but one of the series best schemers, and I love how his brilliance in that regard ties so deeply with his core motivation of punishing the grey zone for how pathetic it made him feel. He's instilled in his followers the very thing that drives him, a deep hatred dressed up as a righteous crusade, at this point their backs are to the wall, and if there's no choice but to fight, they're going out swinging!

(*Ichiban speech continues*) That's chapter 11, and Aoki should be filing for Chapter 11 moral bankruptcy.

2a. Ichiban Holdings: The Money Game

Some time later we find Ichiban meeting with the heads of the Ijin Three. No longer in the palatial Heian Tower but Zhao's much humbler digs. The food may be sweet but the mood is definitely sour. (*"I'm afraid Japan's fate is sealed."*) Ichiban is here to convince them not to lie down, Zhao quickly agrees. (*Zhao reminds Seong-Hui*) and before long the group is talking strategy. Since killing Kume is sadly not an option. They'll simply have to beat Aoki at his own game, field a local candidate and win the election! One issue, running costs money, three million yen to be precise. Well, lucky for us I have that much and more burning a hole in my pocket, but where would number one trash man Ichiban ever find so much money? Well sit down, get comfy, and let me tell you a tale, I said I was cool with flashbacks. (*flashback*)

Shortly after Nonomiya's passing, we stumbled upon a mysterious, easily rattled woman rattling his doors. Say hello to Eri, president of Ichiban confections!

A once prosperous company fallen on hard times. Conned by greedy vultures. Eri was about to hand over the business to the slippery Soapland Sod, as it was only thanks to him there was anything left to salvage. The boys are surprised by this kind gesture, but Saeko explains that when Nonomiya was drunk he'd ramble about going legit so he could build a safety net for Ijincho.

Ichiban decides then and there to pick up where Nonomiya left off! And he has the gangs full... Uh, partial uh... He has their blessing, they'll be drinking at Survive (*"I know you can do it. Good luck, Ichiban. Saving the city? Very heroic."*) Yeah yeah, future traitor. Don't trip over your invisible brother on the way out. At their dingy little office, Ichiban is ran through the basics of business and basically... This business is screwed! We're in the red! Investors have left us on read, we may be a confectionery but we're not baked, we're cooked!

We need capital and we need it quick, if only we knew someone who could lend us some money (*fake flashback*) Ichiban calls Ogata, swayed by our story, he fronts us the funds with some fairly slack strings attached! Our goal is to become the Yokohama's Number One! No matter how long it takes! So here we go, welcome to Yakuza 7's Money Game, Ichiban Holdings!

It's a worse version of Real Estate Royale... Sorry, business stopped being fun after the 80s. We're not even allowed to embezzle funds anymore! Our holdings and Ichiban Holdings Holdings are separate, and never the two shall meet! I don't actually mind that, but this is the first sign the real world and the business world are now worlds apart.

Let me quickly run through a day at the office. We can buy and upgrade businesses, each has different sales volumes, how much profit they bring in. As well as a base maintenance expense, how much they cost to run. Each business also has three requirements and just as many slots into which you can place employees. Upgrading volume increases requirements, while upgrading requirements fulfils them.

Employees have preferred industries, as well as differing specialisations in each area. They have a base salary which scales with promotions, raising their level caps. The opposite of the Peter Principle, you can only be as good as your title permits! Their mood also drops with each shift, requiring counselling to fix them back up. What the hell is this bakery putting them through? The bloody oven?

The core of the game is arranging all of your pieces to maximise profit while minimising expenditure. A miserly but not entirely miserable time, and I've probably made it sound way more complicated than it is. Just put them in places where the bars get longer!

Then you hit go and watch the money come flooding in! This screen is charming at first, that wears off before we're done here.

Thus ends a round, there are four rounds in a business period, and between each there's a chance of encountering a small selection of random events. We may get approached by potential employees, other businesses may try and poach ours and we either have to give em a raise or let them go. And because we're apparently an ethical employer we can't write dodgy contracts to combat this. There are seminars which temporarily buff training effectiveness, letting employees level faster. Certain industries may have booms, giving a minor bonus to their income. The jackpot is advertising slots. Acting as a powerup massively boosting profits for several turns. (*Advert*) This is the best part of the mode by the way, I like to imagine Sawashiro seeing this and getting so angry he starts lopping fingers off.

After 4 rounds we get a shareholder meeting. Another form of JRPG combat and it's a sorry skirmish... Literally. You must lead your sales soldiers in a struggle against your shareholders worries. This is the good Janken Yokoyama talked about! Team composition truly matters here, everyone is strong against once business type and weak against another, each also grants and costs differing amounts of command points. Some employees are best kept for these showdowns.

I love the use of time, you're very much on the clock here so spend it just as wisely as your money.. Do you spend all your energy at once in big attacks or string things out a little. You gotta prioritise the biggest threat and talk them down first, and navigate the menus quick it's like you're really batting aside their concerns.

So short and long term strategies are both in play. All along Ichiban is building up a super sorry which can give you a last second rally. It wasn't until very late in the game the two minute time limit stopped feeling oppressive, and after each of these apology laden altercations Ichiban gets his own bit of spending money, his wage growing with the business. This is the easiest intended way of getting a ton of money in the game.

Once we hit certain levels of income and especially after successful shareholder meetings our share price and rank increases. We are occasionally given soft time limits to reach certain ranks by Nick and beating those grants some money as we go into the next tier. So if you're playing well momentum just tends to build up faster and faster.

So, this mode isn't bad, but I do like it a lot less than Real Estate Royale. Sure having to leave the office and wait for business to be concluded was a drag. But the rhythm connected you to the city, encouraged you to go out and have fun. Actually having to hunt down businesses to buy added more meaning to the map, it was an extra layer of exploration. There are many buildings you'd never look at in Yakuza which is a shame as even the ones you need never interact with are distinct. This made it so the player had a reason to actually scan all this unique modelling and texture work.

Is this an improvement? Well yeah okay I'm sure most would agree it is, but now we're stuck in the office for long stretches. There's a reason the word grind is in grindset. You're grinding yourself down, humans aren't meant to be ground down!

I'll say it, this is premium podcast gaming right here! The core of it is, like the combat, a maths problem... Huh, maybe all those stupid business guys were right to be reading Art of War. Anyway, it's not an especially hard one which makes this victory not especially hard won.

And thanks to the games structure I feel like I only needed to solve the problem once at the start, and then I just coasted until it was time to clock off. I bet some of you, especially those listening to this at work are nodding your heads going "Yep, sounds like work." The only friction I had was early on. Where I had to weigh up taking a loan to meet Ogata's first, and really only intimidating deadline. Crossing it not even really in the nick of time. This worked out but I at least feel like I was skating on thin ice for a moment, and then there was never any stakes or drama ever again. Because after that it was just rejiggering. Slowly replacing parts of my empire. Less profitable businesses get cut and less powerful peons got the axe.

All the while having a larger reserve of cash which only makes things easier. Ad slots are only ever something you might have to pass on once, afterwards you'll always have enough of a war chest to take them whenever offered as there's no risk to doing so, it'll always pay off. It doesn't take long before there's no threat, and no real sense of escalation, the game settles into a dull routine. So now I've given you the overview lets zoom in here and there.

2b. Managing the Menus: A Boring Question on a Boring Topic

As my empire grew I had a thought... Man, managing men is meandering!

This is a menu game, it's all about leafing through lists and allocating your resources for maximum gain, and I often felt the game could stand to gain by making things more convenient.

You wanna know what the worst part of being a CEO is? Firing people. And no, it's not because of the emotional toll it takes to rip someones livelihood away from them, making them a disappointment to their friends and loved ones, eventually leaving them destitute as they hit rock bottom or any namby pamby nonsense like that!

It's because finding the useless bugger gets really annoying when you're juggling so many people! I should fire all of you for hiding this guy from me! There are many sorting options to make initial placement simple, but there's no quick way to find unassigned employees who are just sitting around collecting a paycheck. You have to hunt down the man with free time, and believe me, that's a seven hour chore!

Restructuring is even worse, there's no way to easily swap employees from one post to another. Leading to tons of just sifting through menus to figure out who's assigned where, who's free to be placed, who can be let go. God forbid you remove someone from an active post when you didn't mean to. O may have required more frequent employee turnover but its segmented turn structure made it much easier to manage. So I don't like these menus, but I spent enough time in and thinking about them to explore a very boring thought... Am I right to want these menus to be more fluid? It may sound like a no brainer, but follow me on this for a moment.

The challenge of Ichiban Holdings is carrying out the role of a Corporate President. The idea of one anyway, heavily simplified obviously.

These menus are in effect the gameplay. If I'm asking for tools to easily filter redundant employees or quickly and easily assign the right people to the best posts am I asking for better gameplay? Or is this equivalent to wanting an instant win button during the battles. Surely this has to be the difficulty curve, that as my resources grow so does the job of managing them.

Am I deciding I don't like a thing and rather than engage with it as a meaningful choice, It'd be better if it could be skipped entirely? So I can go back to... Watching this screen? I guess watching the money roll in is the real job of a CEO and anything else is a distraction.

The problem with supposing this is the challenge is that there's no actual pressure. There's no ticking clock tasking with me efficient menu navigation... That'd be horrible, but the point stands. If there's no risk of loss. What's lost by making this get out of the way as smoothly as possible while leaving micro-managing to the real number crunchers.

What complicates this is there are conveniences present, which means they knew at least some of this was needless busywork. I can't remember if it was there on release, but there is an auto-care button. While I never added it up I assumed it's less cash efficient than manually assigning care per employee, but even at my poorest this was never an issue. I could always afford to skip this 'gameplay'

Perhaps automatically doing best placements could have required hiring consultants, putting a price on automation may have been the key here. But then there truly would be no gameplay.

In a sense, the game keeping this rock paper scissors diagram on screen during the business battles is pointless. When Like a Dragon first released the weakness indicator wasn't enabled both here and in regular encounters. I figured this was a purposeful design decision as asking the player to memorise weaknesses isn't too tall an ask, at worst it punishes players with a trip to the menu. Meanwhile it rewards those paying attention, making picking the right element a little more gratifying. The pressure in these battles is making the right choice as options and complications grow, and the right choice may not always be hitting a weakness. I don't think the indicator is a necessity, but I didn't mind it being added because it was a minor smoothing of the experience. In business battles, ignoring Ichiban's supermove, there is only one choice. Who attacks who? The pressure isn't in multitude of choices, but making the right one against the clock. In this instance the Weakness indicator substantially decreases the difficulty and makes the rock paper scissors diagram almost pointless beyond informing a player strengths and weaknesses exist. You can see my playstyle is to pick the most dangerous foe and just mash through my options until I'm told what the right one is. This kind of convenience can easily be seen as detrimental. Looked at a certain way, the biggest convenience is also the most self-defeating. The button to end your turn and see how business plays out tells you ahead of time with great accuracy how much you will make or lose. Meaning it's all but impossible to go into a deficit unless you're actively sabotaging yourself. Would this mode be better if it was up to the player to break out a calculator and add it all up themselves? I wouldn't want that, but I also believe this makes the game far less exciting than it could have been. It'd be like if Balatro told you if your hand would pass ahead of submitting it. It would severely dampen how much the player needs to engage with mechanics and put thought into their moves. It'd make the experience far more disposable because the game is playing itself for you. I think that's the difficulty of putting a mode like this in what is otherwise a fairly light, casual experience, it cannot allow itself to be too demanding. I should clarify this is more of a thought experiment. I actually doubt I'd like this mode any more, and may have even loathed it if it were made this way. Not being in that parallel universe we'll never know. But I was left with a lot of time to think over such inane things as I leafed through these rather unappealing menus.

2c. Yokohama Personalities: Vacancies and Vocational Schools

While lesser, the game does still tie back into the open world. With investment opportunities and applicants dotted all over town, so you know where I'm going first right? (*Book cooking bum*) What? I can't hire this man? Come on RGG, you had to have known people would want the book cooking bum in their employ! Sorry fella, I've got my own company but it turns out I can't have yours! You can find extra people in two ways, just like in 0 most of your units will be people returning from substories to help out, or ask for a damn handout in this case. Again, a fun reward even if it feels a lot more impersonal this time around given the decreased ties to the actual town. The rest of the applicants are gathered in two ways. They either require a fetch quest to get them on board, or being up to their standards like some bizarre reverse interview. This is where your personality scores really come into play. So far we've seen two ways they can be gained, via choices in drinklinks and filling out the completion screen, becoming a more complete person. We can also buy items from vendors, the more powerful ones are some of the most costly items in the game. You know how they say money can't buy taste? Like a Dragon says otherwise! But perhaps the biggest source of personality is the Ounabara Vocational School! We're inducted by Ikari. A man who isn't half as bright as the blinding torch he carries for Miyakoshi! And ironically she's the only one who can't see it. This is another big ticket new minigame, quizzes! A perfectly serviceable if not groundbreaking mode of play, though again carried by 7's ample charm, and hey who doesn't love a quiz! I love sitting down, watching the Chase and feeling clever for getting one answer right! Before Ichiban Holdings takes off these certifications are prohibitively expensive. A lot of money to risk boosting a stat system which has at best nebulous function before this point and at best nebulous use thereafter.

At least after 10 quizzes Ikari himself joins Ichiban Holdings as a pretty powerful employee. I did notice that even after earning every cert the school offered I was still far from fully rounded... Literally, it goes to show work and school can't complete a person.

While I find it thinner than 0's Real Estate Royale which possessed far better interplay between the overworld and the business world, 7 does acknowledge your engagement in other aspects of the game. Perhaps the reason I found it so easy was because my investments elsewhere were paying dividends. And hey, if you really want to invest, you can just spend real money to get utterly broken DLC units. For how easy I've made it, I could have been laughing all the way to the bank, you're essentially paying to not play a part of the game.

2d. Ichiban Holdings Story: Minutes I'll never get back

The story for Ichiban Holdings is as thin as the chapter we're on. With a by the numbers plot where with each boss you go, bye number!

The numbers this time are the Mischievous Three, led by the malevolent moneyman Hosho, who crushed Eri to get back at her father for having the audacity to run an ethical business. A matter which has no effect on the gameplay despite being the motivation which led Ichiban here in the first place. I would have sold Ichiban Senbei if the game allowed me, it's a sentimental chain around my ankle! And really we're not much of a safety net considering the game actively rewards hiring the best and firing the rest. Dropping businesses the moment something more profitable comes along, and cutting every corner we can get away with besides employee care. Which we only have to care about because it boosts us in the shareholder meetings.

Which is where The Mischievous Three and Hosho turn up as bosses, I'm not sure if it's because I was particularly liberal about throwing my money around but I tended to find these guys lagged behind the difficulty curve of the standard investors. Though I did have one highlight where I defeated the Sweatshop Slayer with the power of child labour! Good stuff. Again, not as interesting as the real estate wrong'ns giving us various boss fights, the game seems as bored by this format as I am! The Devil Killers, the Five Billionaires, the Five Stars, the Six Lunatics, another one note story proudly trotting out one note characters doing one note jokes.

When really these guys should be nothing but notes! It lacks the tactility of 0's games and the actual plotting of 5's sidestories, I miss these modes having casts with at least something going on under the surface, with a pacing which fits how the mode develops. Some actual ambition to tell a story. Instead of making everything fit into this tiresome mold.

Eri and her grandmother Tome, are, to me, just kinda boring. They do get off one good gag when Ichiban threatens over asking them to abandon their old, homely office to upgrade at Nick's command. Only for them to be overjoyed by the idea.

It's the one moment which breaks from the formula of Granny insisting Ichiban is the Ichiboyfriend, Eri getting flustered and Ichiban calling her an old bat or something. Then the chicken makes a noise hoping you'll b'gawk at it. A dynamic which we've already seen, albeit done with more energy. It feels redundant to call this rote because I've already mentioned they've wrote this story god knows how many times already, it's just the 2nd time a chicken has been involved!

Eri does at least join us as the one and only optional party member which is rather exciting! A crowd clearing monster with early game access to blade and gun damage as well as great debuff potential. She also has a unique approach to bond levels, with it rising as your share rank does. So less drink links and more linkedin. We also get some powerful attacks out of the deal.

Ichiban Holdings doesn't totally hold out on us. The same way Ichiban has been placed in Yokohama by Arakawa gets a parallel in Nick helping Ichiban to further his own interests behind enemy lines. We are once again helping someone else up from Rock Bottom and the story pays lip service to the idea of us further helping the downtrodden, even if it isn't putting it's vast reserves of money where its mouth is.

The charm of this mode is really more in the grand tapestry of this game. We started out scraping change from under vending machines changing the very fabric of this town. Going from rock bottom to the upper crust! It's just that what lies between is a rather middling management game.

Anyway, we topple Hoshio, Eri gets to deck him one. And Nick turned up to pretend this was about something, (*flashback ends*) So now I can generate 3 million yen in less than ten minutes.

Hoshino: *That's nice and all Ichiban but did you have to explain the vocational school?*

Well old man with age comes wisdom but with money comes shortcuts. So I'll drop the cash off tonight.

3. To Sotenbori!

But then! the call comes in. Arakawa is about to make his move, and we're needed! The news is broken to the group (*"What's this about going to Osaka?"*)

Ichi is itching to get to Osaka to help! It's cute how he's almost reverted to a kid at just the idea of seeing Arakawa again. Most of the group are hesitant, but they know there's no point in arguing. (*Zhao is excited*) And they're not letting him go it alone, shutting down his attempt to pull a Kiryu.

We deliver the money to Hoshino, enjoy it mate. This was meant to be a nest egg, and not just cause I earned it with child labour and a literal chicken.

Upon receiving the news we're leaving town, we learn Hoshino has heard rumblings. Masaru Watase is getting out of the joint, this will be his first meeting with Arakawa, who from Watase's perspective may as well have appeared out of thin air and claimed his spot as acting captain. One wrong move from our old man could be disastrous. Hoshino tells Ichi he too needs to be cautious. (*"I just hope you don't get another bullet to the chest" → "I wish I had more men like you."*) Well Hoshino, start shooting and see who sticks around.

Meanwhile Aoki is taking the news hard, because this IS news to him. Sawashiro is meant to report Arakawa's every move, but Dad has acted without warning (*"He's betrayed the cause" → "He'd never betray you." → "No, that's high treason! The Yakuza only have power when I deem it so."*) Suspecting Arakawa will kill Watase and take the reins of the Omi for himself. As the chairman is terminally ill... Okay the game never goes into *who* is the current Omi chairman. I really like to believe Tsubasa is still alive, just hanging on out of sheer spite. (*Sawashiro 'proclaims' loyalty to Aoki*) Nice little two faced answer there Jo.

So we're in Osaka and the gang is having a Grand old time! Well, except for Ichi, the man is restless, irritable, he's dying to see the boss. Luckily a drunken Adachi has an idea. (*"If you're gonna be so damn thorny, just go to Omi HQ already!"*) He may actually die seeing the boss. Well, if we're gonna break into another base, we'd better do some prep, so off we go to Don-Quix-Oh no! (*Yappi*) I don't like these robots. But he does lead us into something I kinda do.

Welcome to the Sotenbori Battle Arena! This is my favourite optional dungeon in the game. Being about as close as 7 gets to a colosseum. 30 Floors of battles which aren't too tough, but do come with optional challenges to claim rare and powerful items. Though given the nature of the game, the optional challenges are closer to a secondary level check.

Do you lose? Win? or win easily? If easily, get prizes to further lower the difficulty! At least it does demand more of the player in a way which adds intensity if you are where the game wants you to be, it just has very limp means of ensuring that.

This is a pretty conspicuous opportunity to grind but considering what's ahead it pretty much had to be. The game has led you to water and you better drink deep, or else the only pool in your future is your own blood. Depending on how you look at it this may not even be optional content.

This aside, Osaka is Sotenboring! There's some fun party chats, but aside from that what do we got? We got Golf. I don't like golf. It makes me want to hit people, so we'd better just hurry along to Omi HQ.

4. Omi HQ: The Difficulty Spike

Well, hitting people will have to wait, this is a stealth operation! It's better and worse than the one in Yakuza 6. Better in that it's a stealth section with some actual stealth! Worse, well, arguably improved by being even more ramshackle than last time. Remember, the Omi are only out for Kasuga, so these Civvies and uh.. The ghost of Koreans past, well they get a pass.

It's as we approach the Dragon Chamber where Arakawa awaits Ichiban is spotted and just kinda gives up. (*Ichiban → Can you even try*)

We make short work of the grunts, but then it happens. (*laughter*) We've rustled the Jimas! And look I'm happy to see ya, really I am but why are you *Still* dressed like that? I like to think he's just broken out of jail again and somehow wound up with *another* parka. Then again he has splashed out on a pricey one so maybe the guy has realised he's sticking with them. He has one buried outside every jail in the country. I was blown away when he wasn't wearing one in Hawaii, I need you to understand this is the most character development the brick Shithouse has had since 2012!

The gang senses something is off about these two... Oh they mean their power level, and unlucky for us they've no interest in calling the alarm. (*"Let's do this shit" – Intro*)

Welcome to a life changing fight! And by that I mean it changes your life to 0! An infamous difficulty spike and one that goes right up your arse!

I'd say I dodged it this time, knowing what I was in for, but this is where my hard mode aspirations were cut short so I still got the experience! Call me Phineas Gage cause I should have known better, yet the spike still blew up in my face.

I mostly find powerscaling completely asinine, but here it works. As far as difficulty spikes go this may be one of the most narratively appropriate I've seen and it's awesome. Everyone loves how hype it is to face former player characters. It's always an exciting moment. This one achieves that and more by showing that at this point, The crew are mere mortals trespassing in the domain of legends.

Surviving this boss is an act of constant healing, buffing, and debuffing. It's the first real scramble in the game. Enforcing again just how much the Ichiban have to rely on each other to have a shot at getting by. There's a little mini arc through this chapter of Ichiban thinking this is too much for them and he has to go it alone and they've shut him down at every turn. The game declares this man is not allowed to be a Kiryu, and if he came here alone he wouldn't have made himself a dragon, he'd have been dragged out by the ankles.

Another aspect to this fight, just speaking from a weird fan angle. Isn't this kinda heartwarming? Not just cause it finally gets my blood rate up. I mean seeing these two finally getting to fight side by side. For all I complained about fanservice earlier, I find RGG is pretty reserved and tasteful in this regard. By that I mean keeping time between certain characters brief to add impact and often tragedy. Held in reserve to give moments like these impact. Here are the two Saejimas, finally getting to work together, and we see what a terrifying pair the two can be.

If you're an OLAD. This is an area where you're missing out... Also for any OLADs and anyone new to the series (*doppelganger*) That one isn't Ichi's imagination, Majima can just do that.

This powerscaling is then much less elegantly reinforced by ending the fight showing the gang struggling to stand while Majima and Saejima haven't even worked up a sweat. (*Guess that means we can stop holding back*) Although again, in the context of the series, I think longtime fans were happier that the only thing Ichiban could hope to win is the old casts approval, and even that's tenuous, it's a sliver of respect for at least not dying on impact. There would have been riots if the Ichiban actually stood a chance against these two, and it leaves them with plenty of room to grow.

Part 9: The End of Yakuza

1. The End of Yakuza

Fortunately for the gang, the fight is called off. (*"You mind holding off until tomorrow, Ichi?"* → *Ichiban turns*) Arakawa, followed by yet another surprise appearance. (*Daigo Dojima*)

A sweet moment of the group surrounding Ichiban, not sharing Ichiban's endless enthusiasm for the boss. Masumi for his part, does seem regretful, and it's upstairs we're told what's going on.

Arakawa never betrayed the Tojo, when Masato demanded information. He was obviously hesitant, Sawashiro told him to exchange the information for being kept around. (*"He's softer on Masato than me."*) Ultimately Masumi went to Daigo to inform him of his sons plans. Who told him to go ahead and play the part of the traitor. (*"And ultimately, that led to him having to shoot you. Don't blame him."*) Clearly he was borrowing some of your accuracy.

Daigo could see the world was going. Anti-Yakuza laws are so open to interpretation the police can effectively bend them to their will. (*"Eventually, a yakuza sigil will become the brand of a government slave."*) The arrest of Watase, now Omi Captain, all because of an underling resisting police harassment was the writing on the wall for him. So Daigo decided it's better the Yakuza die free than live as slaves. Seeing this as a way to hasten a merciful death. He allowed the 3K plan to happen and has been in hiding ever since.

Tomorrow marks not only Watase's release, but also Daigo's. (*"We'll disband the two largest yakuza factions. The Omi Alliance and the Tojo Clan"*) And that's why we're here, we're the backup for when these two tell tens, potential hundreds of thousands of men, whose job is to be good at violence that the gig is over, tomorrow is gonna be the retirement party of a lifetime! They've anticipated it, and the Sixth Chairman has laid out every detail, oh this'll be good.

So the next day the gang return to Omi Headquarters. We definitely stick out like a sore thumb. Tendo challenges our presence but is told to stand down by Arakawa. (*"He came all the way back from hell to see the captain released from prison."*) Ijincho isn't that bad. (*Ichiban taunts Tendo*) I love that moment, that's the shit Kiryu couldn't pull.

Watase pulls into HQ, the crowd bows, great use of camera angles with foreshadowing so slight I only caught it on replay. The officers part, no idea what's about to happen. (*Speech begins* → *We're sorry*) What a play Watase! The discomfort quickly turns to anger, only worsened by Daigo joining him up on stage. (*Daigo dissolves Tojo* → *Witness each other*)

At this point it's mere moments before violence breaks out, stoked by Watase daring the crowd to defy him. Tendo, knowing where the action is flips to our side. His winning smile won me over, he has such a bizarre, 1950s style design which somehow seems out of time yet fits better with us, the classic honourable Yakuza, and Ichiban hypes this up as the most exciting moment of his life, his time to finally step out of the shadows. It's a message aimed at the audience, trying to hype them up for what is really, a scene which loses all energy the moment it falls on the shoulders of the gameplay to sustain it. (*"I've never been more ready to throw down!"*)

This is another instance where the turn based combat really works against the scene. What's meant to look like pandemonium looks closer to an awkward dinner party, the active enemies barely hiding the legion of lads just awkwardly standing around. Life is drained from the room faster than even Head Trauma could keep up with. This encounter needed some kind of defence gimmick or else far more active backgrounds because right now, Ichiban's imagination is lacking. (*Fight cutscene*) Yeah this is more like it, this is the good chaos!

It is so funny to me that at this, the Yakuza's last moment. For reasons only a small handful are in on, is joined by a bum, a boozehound, and a barmaid who just so happened to be there. That's one for the history books!

And that's not all, they were also joined by a ghost. (*Kiryu saves Watase*) What? Watase and Kiryu act cryptic and we get another round of really dull combat where we just have to... Sit with this sudden appearance. The stragglers are mopped up and the VIPs make their exit, Kiryu turning and giving the new blood his approval. ("*I owe you one*") Little contrived but sure. The scene does end on a high note at least, Ichiban, too tired to move, genuinely overjoyed to finally be reunited with and useful to his father figure. It's a really upbeat moment, our first bit of hope in so long. ("*I'm... Glad you managed to survive it all, Ichi.*")

So I have some really mixed feelings on this scene and we can't get into all of them right away. You know what I was thinking when I first played this in 2019? I was thinking of the ham-man. I'd just replayed 4 for the video. And the game was still on my mind, especially the messages it decided to leave on which the rest of the series quickly left in the past: Namely the idea Kamurocho and the Tojo are the leads responsibility, that their lives must be spent ensuring its legacy and preservation.

After 4 the series flipped on this idea, honestly 4 is so hilariously ignored in the series chronology and honestly, much as I like that game, it was for the best.

I didn't see it then, and just like with Kamurocho falling to the Omi, I hated this moment, I saw it as the latest and greatest of Daigo Dojima's disasters. Throwing in the towel and giving up when the going got tough, invalidating an entire series worth of struggle in the process.

All the while doing it in the stupidest, most tone deaf self-defeating way possible! I loved the resulting power vacuum this leads to but I was like of course that would happen! You didn't explain anything to these people!

But, for reasons both my own and because of what's happened since. I no longer see it that way.

I've re-evaluated my feelings on Daigo a ton since then. When I first played this I somehow ignored all the politics, politicking, and theming and just saw this in a literal fan mindset, how dare you throw out the things I like, I refuse to understand why!

I was just as mad as the crowd we beat down to allow this to happen. Now I understand this is the culmination of years worth of build up, inspired by the real life diminishing role of the Yakuza in Japanese Society just as much as the events of the game.

This shit happened the other day! (*end gang wars forever*) Like a Dragon may be a soap opera but reality is truly stranger than fiction. And In the series we've seen the clans power, prestige, and purpose wane. Yakuza 6 showing them at their most pointless, a once proud entity now thoroughly devoid of humanity.

What Daigo is doing here is preserving the Tojos legacy by letting it go out on its own terms.

To explain to these men why it has to end would not only sap the scene of energy, it would make the Tojo's finale weak instead of defiant, and likely done nothing to change what happened next regardless. And while I definitely don't like Kiryu being here, again for reasons I can't get into yet.

This is such a kindness to do to his character. He's finally able to help free Daigo from the burden he placed on him all those years ago, when he mistook the Tojo as something worth fighting for.

This has also led to an arc which is still ongoing in the series today, the ongoing dissolution of the Yakuza. In principle I find this a really interesting idea but the execution has been rocky to say the least.

It'd weird to say the least. I very much like all of the motivations and mechanics behind this twist even if I still don't much like the twist itself. I like how Masumi's role as a traitor is revealed to be a gambit, as the game has handled suspicion of him well throughout. Daigo's move to let the Yakuza die free rather than live as slaves is a nice ironic capstone to his tenure as chairman, a role placed on him by Kiryu where he had very little real control over such a duplicitous organisation. And in the immediate plot this is our first proper move against Masato, and it's the first thing which establishes that winning is going to require a new approach, a new mindset, a shedding of the old ways!

and it is a genuinely shocking swerve! I suppose that's part of my problem? It's such a big shift for the series and it hits you out of nowhere, it gives you no time to really sit with it. Yes the chapter is titled the End of the Yakuza but you know what I'm getting at.

Overall I don't know how I feel about this sequence. Playing as Ichiban during this moment, while we're still heavily involved, does feel like we're being sat at the childrens table while the adults do the talking. For something with such huge ramifications for the series, which feels like the culmination of years of build up. It plays like a drive-by, and not an entirely accurate one. It's dizzying and breathless when it really feels like it needs room to breathe. Perhaps we're meant to share in the shock, much like with Kamurocho, not to mention it is overshadowed by so much else happening in this story, it's like okay folks, that's it, it's the end of Yakuza! We'll be right back with Like a Dragon!

2. Ichiban & Masumi: Peers at the Pier

So from a scene I'm pretty sure I don't like to one I'm certain I love.

Ichiban and Masumi reconnecting at the Yokohama promenade, the night is already over and Ichiban can't hide his sadness Masumi has to go early, Masumi himself doesn't want to.

In this moment Masumi knows the life is over, he's trying to enjoy that fact, but he's been Yakuza for so long he can't switch it off, even as he tells himself. (*I can eat with who I want*)

They talk about the ongoing confusion, Masumi frets about Masato, because in a way, he's finally free to be a father. (*"If I don't stop him" → "I don't want to see him break."*)

Ichiban asks what's next, Daigo plans on setting up a legal means to give the former Yakuza a place to go... Sounds like some kinda honest living association, wish I knew someone who could help!

After this, Ichiban asks the big question. One which turns this scene into one of my favourites. (*"Can we go back to being a family?" → "Ichi, you mean..." → "After all I did?"*) All the wrongs Masumi did to Ichi come flooding out of him, and Ichiban forgiving, overlooking, disregarding each one absolutely kills the man inside. To have done all of this to someone who trusted him so deeply. Everything Ichiban does in this scene to try and cheer Masumi up makes him feel worse, because he knows what he's done makes him unworthy of such devotion. It's fucking heartwrenching!

When the two of them were in the clan, Masumi said the only thing that mattered was ones face. You have to look stern, uncaring, unflappable. It's what allowed him to be such a great actor, what allowed him to carry out his role as traitor. Now, the job is done, the Yakuza are over, his face no longer matters. And now that he's free to laugh, now that he's free to cry. The last thing he wants is for Ichiban to see it.

He recounts a dream he has, Masato being born in Ichiban's place, in Shangri-La. The dream scares him, he asks if Ichiban ever wanted to meet his parents, this is a really on the nose bit of foreshadowing but it works because of just how deep and complicated the feelings between these two are. Ichiban is thrown by the question. When Masumi backs off from the thought, he gives Ichiban an awkward smile and says there's no point dwelling. Ichiban can only awkwardly smile back. Unsure how to respond. It's one of the few moments Ichi feels genuinely hard to read.

(*I'll go the rest of the way myself → Ichibows*)

It's such a brilliant note to leave these two on, and the next morning. Arakawa's body is found in the ocean.

The parallels back to Kazama are obvious. His own opportunity to apologise was brief, forced out of him by circumstance, and even then his last moments were more spent ensuring the survival of the Tojo than expressing guilt over the people he used in service of them. I do think Kazama cared about Kiryu and Nishiki, but he was a man of the clan, first and foremost.

Part of this is again, Yakuza 1 had a very different style, an economy of time where the plot had to move quick so this scene is as much about efficiency as it is giving us insight into Kazama.

How impenetrable a figure Kazama was led to Kiryu reckoning over his feelings on the man for years to come.

Not to mention back then, fighting for the sake of the Clan was taken for granted as an honourable act by the series. Part of why Kiryu's slow, all too late realisation over what really matters in life feels so organic is because the series itself had to make the same connection.

It's only as the years went by and Like a Dragon developed its scepticism towards these archetypes and institutions did it start seeing this scene in a different light. Which is why we're here now.

Masumi is not Kazama, he just plays the role of him in Like a Dragon, he's a damn fine actor, and in his final moments he's free to be himself, a man with a lifetime of regret, pain and loss, both given and received. The Tojo destroyed his life and he had every reason to react in kind. But in the end he didn't do it out of hate, but compassion. And in the process did what Kazama never could, he got his kids out of the life.

3. Masumi Passes On

(As Ichiban runs for Arakawa) So there we go, you did it Yokoyama, you depicted this man's life, from grisly start to tragic end. Ichiban is shattered. The killer hasn't been caught, and Takabe warns the group should be vigilant.

Back in Kamurocho the struggle to fill the power vacuum has already begun. The turncoat Tojo captains berating Sawashiro over Arakawa's unfulfilled promises. When Ishioda tries to pay them off and their tune changes. Sawashiro takes their earful, and gives them an eyeful over it. Saying he needs no help establishing the Tokyo Omi Alliance. *(Sawashiro confronts Ishioda)*

Very exciting, everyone is racing to establish themselves as a new era dawns. A pretty realistic result coming from such an idealistic act. I loved that then and now. I may respect why you did it but I have to say, good going Daigo!

We rejoin Ichiban, sat alone at Survive. His friends keeping their distance, unsure how to console him. Hoshino calls, telling him to come to Heian tower (*"I'll treat you to his final meal."* - *"Thanks, but..."* → *"You're coming."*)

At Heian. Hoshino makes a serious go of comforting Ichi. Being the last thing he has as a father figure. He says Masumi was at peace last night. Finally getting to try Peking Duck, having waited all this time to finally have it. A bittersweet resolution to this little narrative thread.

Hoshino says the only one who could have ordered the hit was Aoki himself, and he wants us to get even. *(Gun)* *The Seiryu itself* is ready to throw its weight behind Ichi. But after a moment's thought, Ichiban knows revenge is the last thing the boss would want, to seek it would spit in the face of all he hoped to accomplish. Ichiban is reinvigorated, he's going to carry the old man's torch, and make Masato see the light. Hoshino is genuinely swayed. *(Hoshino apologises)*

This just leaves how we're going to get to the Young Master, and the only way to him is through Kume. Which is difficult enough, his new security detail is thick, and I don't just mean they're from Osaka... Hey Kume, this one's for you! *(Han guns down guards)* Wow, he must be more captivating than I thought!

Speaking of, the gangs attention is grabbed by Aoki. What's startling to them is how it seems his father's death hasn't even irked him. He's already spinning it and the dissolution to benefit his image.

It's then Hoshino returns with our money, and an idea. He could never find a suitable candidate, but seeing as beating Aoki is no longer an option, at least politically (*punch*), Ichiban should run! If all that matters is getting close to Kume, this will force him to confront us. Ichiban is in! but registration is closing tonight so Ichi better make like a boardgame and Go!

4. The Theme's a Dream: The Whereabouts of Light and Darkness

So we go on the campaign trail, and the next time we find Kume he's already wise to us, trying to pre-emptively drag our name through the mud so as to make approach impossible. Airing out our past as a murderer makes him think he has us dead to rights, unfortunately for Kume. He's forgotten just what those rights are.

Ichiban rolls in and immediately hits Kume with the switch-up. The law says he's allowed to run, Bleach proposes utter adherence to the law, so should I be allowed to run or not?

Kume can only squirm, he's immediately cornered.

This is the core argument between Ichiban and Kume, and more broadly the denizens of the grey zone and their detractors. And arguably, the game itself.

Ichiban sees the loopholes in the law as a concession to how people aren't always perfect, the law has to have some slack as it depends on a person's ability to reasonably gauge malicious intent.

To Bleach the law is a sacred, binding text, and all grey zones allow is people to abuse that which is sacrosanct. An opening for rot to spread amongst society. Kume is like Chuck McGill if he got into semen retention, ironic cause all he can do is meekly ejaculate.

The conflict is obvious, the black and white letter of the law versus the spirit, and the statement even moreso: Attempting to strictly follow the letter of the law, as Kume purports to do, is not only a fool's errand, it makes you a homonculus, an artificial approximation of a human devoid of empathy, understanding, or uh, rizz. Earlier on Adachi even called him a victim of Bleach and I think that is the most sympathy for the prick you'll get out of me as I agree with this perspective. Because instead of facing the world and improving himself, he retreated into a group which told him his flaws were virtues to be celebrated. And they told him this because it made him easy to exploit. Why work on yourself when you can work for us?

Fitting Ichiban's core damage type, this moment is incredibly blunt, a political rally is a convenient way to more or less yell your central theme from the vantops. So I think it's about time to give it the spotlight. As ever in this gangster drama we have the usual suspects, honour, brotherhood, fatherhood, revenge, duplicity. Joining the stable this time are as we've seen. Rock Bottom, change, growth, nature versus nurture, and returning from 5 in a fancy new guise are masks and identities, a lot going on, all working together in tandem and all backing up its central theme:

Which if you remember is encapsulated in its Japanese subtitle: The Whereabouts of Light and Darkness. Yokoyama revealed the driving force as this. "The dualities of front and back - hypocrisy and justice, the superficiality and the truth of Japanese society."

This may seem like an absurdly long list of absurdly lofty goals for the series but when you think about it, it's an apparent contradiction Like a Dragon has always trafficked (trafficking clip) in. The heroic criminal and the corrupt cop. The sleazebag who oozes kindness versus the composed conniver, who only appears strait-laced to string you up. Many of the games have examined the characters in these terms. Their fronts versus their back, the mask and the true face. The difference now is applying these contrasts on a societal scale and really digging into what they say about people. This is the most critical, and overtly political game of the series so far.

In its own way, this title is just as blunt as Yakuza 5's unyielding Yume. How many times have the game and I had to mention black and white, light and dark, and make relentless use of contrast? The reason Like a Dragon doesn't get the Yakuza 5 treatment is that it's a lot more shrewd in its subject matter, not to mention harder to sum up in a single word or phrase.

It's not just black and white, it's the whereabouts, the in betweens. The grey zones. And layers within both!

Black and White refers both to contrasting archetypes, which it uses to illustrate the inbetweens, as well as strict adherence to rules. Meanwhile Grey Zones are simultaneously literal, legal, and metaphorical. By having the theme be so broad and all encompassing the game effectively states the world operates in shades of grey, reality therefore can't be black and white.

Ichiban's life was saved by a grey area in a criminal code. Where black and white rules at Hello Work tipped him. A grey Zone was there to make sure he wasn't erased.

Hamako's exploitation of a letting loophole is the reason he and Nanba found a roof over their heads and what finally allowed him to sign on at Hello Work on the dotted line, in black and white. And that's just the start, the entire Great Wall of Muscle is founded on an incredibly grey area. It's an insanely corrupt measure, but Ogikubo appears genuine in his intent. It laid on a moral foundation, but from a legalistic perspective it's just as bad as the Yamato MK2.

The moment which made Daigo decide the game was over came about from Anti-Yakuza measures which are built on weaponising vague organized crime laws. It's not just black and white, it's every shade of grey inbetween! Before you've even hit play this theme is present. The start menu's theme, Darkness in Light, and the main menu theme, Light in Darkness, are inversions of each other, similar, but opposite.

This duality of light and dark is also found in the ultimate goals of the Arakawa's, their public face being the opposite of their true intentions. Masumi Arakawa is a mob boss who had to act out the role of the traitor in order to bring the Yakuza to a merciful end, to free men who couldn't even see the walls closing in around them.

Those walls belong to Masato, under the guise of Ryo Aoki he talks a big game of bleaching the grey zones and stomping out crime. But his real play is subjugating the Yakuza, bending them to his will. The two inverse each other. They are another example of light and dark, and how in this duality light can blind us to cruelty, while dark hides kindness in shadows. A conflict we saw play out before with the nursing home scam.

What I love is how even characters we're meant to root for often have stances they're black and white on until the moment they're challenged, at which point they learn the situation is far more grey than they've ever had to consider. Even Ichiban realises more than once the world isn't as simple as he'd like it to be. The difference between him and Kume is Ichiban is capable of accepting this and incorporating it into his worldview. Kume instead gets angrier and demands the world simplify itself to accommodate him.

While there is so much more to it, one of my ultimate reads of the game is this: Humans are not robots and the law is not our programming. The law can only be perfect when it is imperfect, because we wrote it.

Grey Zones of all forms will always exist, what matters is them existing for the common good, to benevolently account for our imprecision. I do believe most of us, when we get down to it, are good. I try to believe that anyway without becoming naive about it, people try to be good by their own approximation of it at least.

The law in and of itself is not a moral good, an easy path to hypocrisy is mistaking it as such.

What's righteous is doing right by your fellow man. Trying to understand their circumstances rather than reflexively tear them down for it.

Not being Japanese I feel it'd be rude of me to presume I know what Yokoyama is truly pointing at when he says "the hypocrisy and truth of Japanese society". So this is from an English perspective when I say. I think the biggest hypocrisy of society, one I'm guilty of if when I'm in autopilot. Is a natural drive towards solipsism. How we judge others in black and white, and ourselves with shades of grey.

We think we know all of our own motives, and remember at least some of the experiences which shaped us, or are at least capable of assigning blame. We absolve ourselves of circumstances while holding others to theirs.

The tragedy is if you try to treat other people with the same grace you give yourself, you're put at a disadvantage. You're moving at 10mph on the autobahn of public debate, and the less patient are going to smash right through you for daring to take your time. Being fair, being thorough, has always been a handicap.

Lets return to Ichiban's core goodness. His kindness seems as fuzzy as the hair on his head. But that's because he's not a hardline man. He's seen and often been victim to too much of the breadth of human experience to completely disregard someone out of hand. The fantasy of this game is that kindness being so strong, so compelling, and so unshakeable.

And it's this which allows Ichiban to practically tear Kume apart the moment the two get to talking. Ichiban has real human experience. Kume has Bleach's inhuman rhetoric.

Now, Is Kume a strawman? More than a little bit yes. But strawmen are weak to fire and Ichiban won't stop bringing the heat. So Kume throws what little pride he has to the wind and retreats on live television! And this does nothing to hurt Aoki's numbers!

5. Like Father, Unlike Son

And it's in his office we find him berating Sawashiro. A far cry from the defiance he showed to the officers, he seems genuinely hurt by Aoki's disappointment in him.

(*"The reason you had power wasn't because you were competent"* → *"You followed me around like a lost puppy"*) If Sawashiro wishes to be Chairman of the reformed Omi, he'll have to carry out a hit.

Back in Ijincho we're still hunting Kume. Having learned he's making a speech in front of Jinnai Station we're off to go see the loco-commotion! Make some noise! (*gunfire*) And this time we're inches away from having him, before Han gets word the Seiryu are under attack!

At HQ we find a massacre, a wounded Takabe tells us the Omi are headed for the chairman, and we arrive all too late. (*Hoshino dead* – *"You've always been too late"*)

Saeko asks why kill the chairman. Well Killing Ichiban would have been Jo's preference, but he's too public, taking away his greatest support was just the next best option. (*"Why does he always sink lower."* → *"Is he so afraid of losing."* → *"When did he become like that?"*) Sorry to say you were there bud.

Still this is a great moment, Ichiban has the full measure of Masato, and that actually seems to get under Sawashiro's skin, even if only a little. (*Ichiban punches, Jo catches – Plays coy about killing Arakawa*) So we get a rematch. 2nd best dynamic intro in the game as he toys with Ichiban, which plays into the big mystery of Jo. Was he just holding back last time? Did he let Ichiban get past him and into that officers meeting?

His gigantic level leap and much greater danger in this fight is a great way to reinforce his ambiguity as a character mechanically. Ichiban further muddies the waters by saying getting his hands on a weapon just powers him up this much so you can read him however you like.

The guy goes through three phases in this fight, and his heat aura is sick. Would it be reaching to say purple is the mix between Ichiban's red motif and Aoki's blue?

Beyond that however, this fight is pretty simple, after the Jima's it'll take a whole lot more to feel like another step up. His ability to regenerate hitpoints does force the player to prioritise damage over healing, but in a 4 on 1 you have so much more room to move compared.

Defeated, Ichiban demands answers. Sawashiro tells us he wasn't Masumi's killer. Aoki made the order, but Arakawa was a no go for Jo, coming here. Killing Hoshino, that's a one way trip, punishment for insubordination.

To explain why he couldn't kill Arakawa, he tells Ichiban something he'd never told anyone. The two of them came from much the same circumstances, scraping by on the streets and scrapping to survive. Only he had a companion. (*"What was her name? I can't remember."*) Find out all too late he'd gotten her pregnant, he just hoped the problem would go away, and when it arrived. He made sure it would. Convincing her to dump it in the coin lockers. But when the guilt got to her she rushed back. Returning to find Arakawa busting it open and taking their son. Taking Masato. Jo was overjoyed, problem solved! It was only years later, now alone. Jo spotted Arakawa, out and about with *his* boy. It was shortly after that Jo signed up with the family. Saying if there was anyone he'd throw his lot in with, it would have been Arakawa. (*"But that's not why you did it?"*)

I've told the story pretty bluntly because that's how Jo presents it. That's what's so fascinating about this reveal to me. This story, his actions, are utterly repugnant. But he presents them casually, matter of factly, never sugarcoating his worst moments nor acting like his best ones even begin to tip the scales. He doesn't even pull back the curtains, he rips them down, and yet even then the man remains a total mystery by never expressing any opinion on what he did.

What would for any other character be a moment to ask for forgiveness, or condemnation, or even a lame "we're not so different" which I'm sure Sawashiro would sooner bury himself alive than say to Ichi. Sawashiro just sees as something which happened, he dumps it on Ichiban, on the player, and our opinion is worth less than shit to him.

We also see in this flashback a rather tragic sight. While he was surrounded by people who loved him, none were equipped to deal with his problems. He was, in his head anyway, crippled from birth by the Tojo, then brought up amongst them. Raised by able bodied criminals who prized strength above all else. Earlier I joked about not measuring how good a life is by the amount of violence it takes to get by but that is the world Masato was raised in, by his only yardstick for strength he came up very short. When he expressed frustration over his condition. All Masumi could do was avert his gaze. His role as a stony faced Yakuza prevented him from reassuring the boy, assuming his guilt would even allow him to broach the subject.

Jo meanwhile obviously had to keep his distance, again, assuming he's a man capable of providing the care Masato needed which I doubt. But this must be as close as he can come to expressing remorse. Giving up his strength to the son he stole it from.

So Masato was never punished, never told no, never made to feel like he's anything other than a person who would fracture under the lightest pressure. On the night that pressure was finally applied he shattered, and this created Ryo Aoki. A persona who had the strength Masato lacked, and turned all of that boys bitterness back on the world which made him.

But that's not all. Akane had to have made the call from somewhere, Jo figures it'd be from the soapland she used to work. Shangri-La. As Jo and his girl milled around by the lockers, unable to comprehend what just happened. Some soapland employees turn up and rescue a second baby, the boy who would have been Masato. (*"Then... You're Masumi Arakawa's son."* → *"That's stupid, there's no way."*) This is a huge reveal but keeping the lens on Jo for a moment, if he truly hated Ichiban, why tell him this, especially without joking or rubbing it in his face? Is this him showing deep down he feels some shred of connection to Ichiban? Or is it stunning him into silence so he can attempt a half-hearted escape. Something the rest of the gang isn't so shaken up they can't easily stop. (*Atonement*) I don't know what's going through your mind! And I mean that as a compliment to his characterisation.

As Jo is taken away. The last thing we learn is who called in the tip, the man himself. (*Ichiban chases*) I gotta say I love Sawashiro, we learned his whole life story yet he remains impossible to nail down, in a game about shades of grey he's the greyest and greatest motherfucker there is. Words probably can express my true feelings on Jo Sawashiro but I for the love of me can't find them under the layers of muck Jo has spread.

Having both Ichiban and Masato's origin be from the coin lockers obviously makes both of their beginnings about as close to rock bottom as you can get, as well as representing a societal ill with incredibly complicated and hard to fix root causes. Sure this game simplifies, dramaticises the incident, but only by half. Masato's origin is practically a collage of the causes of coin-locker babies. Masato's unnamed mother is one of the most tragic figures in this story and I think keeping her unnamed was a conscious choice to make her a sympathetic stand in for some of the hows and whys which lead to such a decision.

As for Ichiban being Masumi's son, it's a truly interesting twist, both for the story itself and on Kazama, not to mention a tragic reveal.

What I love is how bittersweet it is. That all his life Masumi only showed his fatherly side to Ichiban. The kid who he unknowingly shoved into the locker and later the lockup.

It's ironic that only Ichiban got to see the father Masumi could have been if misplaced guilt didn't stand between him and Masato. Perhaps this is the father he was about to become, all too late for both of them.

I adore how Ichiban inherited his approach to forgiveness. An almost genetic need to turn the other cheek, but with all Ichiban has just been put through. Forgiveness is the furthest thing from his mind.

6. Passing the Torch Back and Forth

Chapter 14 begins much like the last. Ichiban sat alone at Survive, memories of the past weighing down on him. Having been pushed to breaking point he storms the Bleach Offices. Demanding Kume's whereabouts from the first poor thug he gets his hands on. When it becomes clear this guy knows nothing. That doesn't stop Ichiban from turning him into pulp. Having regressed to the angry teenager he'd become after he lost Jiro Kasuga.

It's a shocking reminder of just explosive his childlike anger can be. It's affecting to see the band genuinely scared of him. And then it happens. (*Kiryu stops him*)

(*"Why are you in Ijincho?"*) Good question Ichiban, a better question than you could possibly know! (*"I was just passing through."* → *"Passing through my ass"*)

He knows Aoki's next move, and he was going to tell us until he saw what we were about to do.

But there is still time, meet him at Geomijul. He then turns to Han for a very weird stand off.

He says he saw this man die. Han explains that he replaced him, and one day, another will replace him. Han Joon-Gi is eternal, which would be impressive if Kiryu seemed any less so.

Look I may seem a little hesitant to be happy Kiryu is here, but Ichiban confronting him at Geomijul is top shelf shit. Kiryu doesn't just invite his anger, he outright stokes the fire. Being on the other side of it, I'm starting to get why some villains found Kiryu so frustrating. Even before the fight begins you're up against a brick wall. (*Kiryu irritates Ichiban*)

The choice is learning about him or Aoki's next move. Ichiban chooses right, but that's only the first part of the test. (*"I want to see if you and your friends are worthy."* → *"I get to know someone through my fists."*) Yeah I'm kinda the same way. Ichiban pleads to skip this part, worried his anger won't let him hold back. (*"In fact... I might kill you."* → *"All the better then."*) Kiryu is so fucking cool, and man Ichi, that's the funniest thing you've said all game. I love dramatic irony, especially when it's about to literally smack me in the face. (*"The treasure you're after is up ahead."* → *"I'm the one guarding it."*)

Which brings me to a chance to return to the English Dub, and returning for the English dub is Darryl Kurylo, putting on a great performance which goes to show how poor direction really hobbled him way back in the old days!

An odd sidenote but I've been playing a lot of PS2 beat em ups lately, and Kurylo's voice has that vintage tough guy quality which means even in a game where everyone is putting gravel in their voice he can rock the mic better than anyone.

He feels like a piece of the old guard and it adds a ton to him facing off against this new generation with a new generation of voice actors to boot. Not to mention I really like how they adapted this line. (*"I'm the Dragon guarding it."*) Come on you know he'd say that.

Sickest dynamic intro in the game LET'S GO (*punch fails*) Okay now you're just showing off. Little delayed Komaki parry and man, you ever been so excited to know you're absolutely fucked? I don't think anyone would argue if I called this the best fight in the game, I'm not going to but you wouldn't argue. Hell of an exciting scenario, Kiryu is the Dragon Wall Ichiban needs to Climb and the taste is more than enough! *Rolling Eyes Fall Down the Dragon Wall* is a fantastic boss track which drives home just how out of your league Kiryu is. It sounds like you're fighting a natural disaster and we're not even talking about the mans life choices!

That aside, a genuine highlight, a showdown where I feel like the turn based actually shows some of its strengths, which is ironic because it does this via Kiryu breaking the rules.

He'll stance change forcing tactical changes throughout the fight. He'll counter attack without warning because he's Kiryu, what are you gonna do? He'll at times just take multiple turns because he isn't playing your stupid game. You're like a dragon and this dude is yakuza.

It really sells the idea he's beyond you, he's not bound by the same limitations as Ichiban and crew.

This battle also has a genuinely unique and kind of hilarious gimmick. Nagoshi hates the idea of Kiryu hitting women, so he just won't do that. We all know Majima has experience in that area, Kiryu though, not a chance. This actually adds a novel complication to your party composition, as every female party member increases the odds of Kiryu focusing his incredibly powerful fists on Ichiban. Though in my experience he hated Han. (*Han blocks, laughs, attacks, gets countered*) He really, really hated Han. (*Takes out Han parrying Ichi's attack*)

Even on a replay where I was way overlevelled, this battle was still a twenty minute showdown and it remained exciting throughout. By the end of it the entire party should be low on SP, creating a feeling of genuine exhaustion, also yeah you can totally call Kiryu on himself.

And naturally. This is another fight where you're only winning the winners blessing.

Ichiban is pushed to his limits, and one last blow from Kiryu sends him over the edge. Knighting Ichiban and Reigniting his imagination. Kiryu taking on the form of a literal dragon in what is one of, no matter how much I love it, one of the series hokiest moments.

Ichiban stands tall through Kiryu's fire, but then he looks back and sees his allies scattered. The horror of this gives him pause, it forces him to remember what they've been fighting for.

This isn't about bringing evil to heel, but standing up for good.

His anger is literally burnt away, and he slays his dragon. Levelling beyond his confusion. (*level up*)

Kiryu approaches, he allowed Ichiban to vent his anger to show him just how futile an approach it was. The rage having left him, Ichiban has returned to his senses.

(*"Ichiban blind with rage" → "Think what your enemy fears most, and then do it."*)

It's pretty rich for you to say that when your enemies biggest fear is you. It didn't take much thought to be you Kiryu, and it's gonna take what little brainpower you have left to be someone else.

Okay lets rewind, after that you may be wondering what my issue with Kiryu is. Well we can get into that as well as the rest of my feelings on the assembly hall brawl.

The big thing is this, it hasn't even been *one game* since this guy was meant to walk off into the sunset! The ongoing retirement of Kiryu which started in Yakuza 4: Successor of the Legend continues against Ichiban, the real successor of the legend who debuted 4 games later! In a chapter called Passing the Torch, where come next game Ichiban is gonna hand the torch right back!

It's a good thing that game is called Infinite Wealth cause this shit's rich!

It's especially bad because 6 was so emphatic about it, the guy looked into the camera and said he'd disappear! I didn't much like that ending, but what I like even less is backing down from it. This goes back to my frustration with Kashiwagi, Lau Ka Long, even Han to an extent, and it's an issue that's only gotten worse in the years since.

If this series can't stick to its guns and the people they kill. Why should I believe in anything that I'm told? Actually no worse than that, can I even believe what I see?

Kashiwagi surviving is something I've come to terms with, him doing that then disappearing to a bar for years raises a ton of frustrating questions. Questions I know will never be properly gone into because the answers will be unavoidably disappointing. But now the series has turned it into a running gag of dead characters reappearing in minor roles.

If I can't trust witnessing a character dying as proof they're dead, can I grant weight to anything that happens? I may as well withhold my feelings indefinitely. I'd be a fool to trust you, and I really don't want to feel that way about this series! I want to be wrapped up in it, I want this shit to mean something.

I give this series the benefit of the doubt, but doubt remains, it builds emotional distance and I've had to take a step or two back. This isn't fan service, it's fan disservice. It undermines your own stories! Kiryu reappearing one game after his retirement has the same chilling effect because it makes developments feel utterly weightless.

There is another aspect to these scenes which wasn't an issue on release, but is today.

The semi-self contained nature of these titles is over. You may have noticed I've been far more liberal about referencing future games in this video. Something I've strained to avoid before now to best tackle each game as they came.

This is because it's impossible to feel how I felt about Like a Dragon in 2020 in 2025, and that's not because I've changed, but the series has. When Yokoyama said he wanted Ichiban to be a catalyst for change he meant it, and the nature of that change goes way beyond the man himself.

Later entries have worked backwards to heap additional lore and context on what Kiryu was doing here and why. And it feels like an unnecessary fixer job.

Sequels are now far more sequential. No spoilers when I say the recent Pirate Yakuza even ended with a 'To Be Continued' screen instead of the traditional Fin, very fishy. I'm ultimately ambivalent about this, but I am worried the series is tossing away one of its great strengths. How each title worked as part of a whole, but also stood pretty much alone.

Links between stories were present, but they were not the point, chronology was subtle, the state of the world advanced in ways which were clever but not need to know, bonuses for the attentive player and informed by the state of the real world.

Character developments were similarly understated, playing out like the natural passage of time.

Surprise was high as each and every one was its own adventure. Each game does still manage to tie up its own plot, sort of. I think we're in the danger zone when that stops being the case and we get a multi-game main plot arc. My worry now is at any moment we can be told that what we were seeing wasn't what was really going on. Something Gaiden and Infinite Wealth do with multiple scenes in this game to weird, arguably needless effect, and I say that as a guy who likes Gaiden and loves Infinite Wealth, because that game is Yakuza 5 2.0, warts and all.

The series has changed from building off of prior entries, to building on top of them, when I honestly just prefer forward motion and exploring new possibilities.

My biggest worry is stagnancy, if fans don't totally agree with a reveal, are RGG just gonna go back and lather it with additional details until it works? I would much rather the series roll with the punches and focus on moving forwards rather than looking back. Cause honestly, it's starting to get a little stuck in its own past and lose its confidence and energy.

Putting this cynicism aside. Kiryu's reappearance does in some ways reflect the newfound optimism. First it allowed him to come back and free Daigo of the burden he placed on him all the way back in 2006. He got to be the father he talked about in his letter and finally do right by the kid. In a metatextual sense. Given the shared voice actor and similar irezumi, Kiryu gets to save Nishikiyama. He sees a good man going down the same self-destructive path, only this time he gets to step in and correct him before it's too late. For how much the last few games have taken from Kiryu I love this for him. It's such a great kindness to his character and demonstration of his growth. I find this fight an incredibly contrived affair, but on a subtextual level and in terms of sheer excitement there is so much going for it.

And part of me can't help but read this as trying to take some of the sting away from how *The Song of Life* ended, this little encore allowing him to end on a less bittersweet note, but we know it isn't his end. Because the series has changed as much as it has stayed the same.

7. The Mirror Breaks

Anyway, the torch is passed. I suppose, I didn't feel a hand off was necessary but there we go. Kiryu reverts to his Yakuza 4 self and these two have a chat angled more towards the audience than each other. (*The Real Deal*)

With Kiryu out of the way it's time for Like a Dragon's stupidest moment. The man tapped Geomijul for info on Aoki, and found they have an assassin en route to take out Sawashiro. So after making Ichiban face himself, we gotta look into a mirror... Face! In an abandoned building we find Ishioda, and we're ambushed by the hitman! (*Adachi – he can mirror his own strength*) Man Mirror Face is so fucking stupid.

Okay look I've stuck up for a lot of moments in this series people have derided.

I often feel the complaints come from overly literal, asinine, and/or tedious readings of events where any amount of suspension of disbelief or being able to read subtext or nuance more than covers what the game is going for. But I am not going to bat for Mirror Face and that's not just because I've got Ichiban to do that for me. (*smack*) Okay obvious complaint first, this guy should have matched your Adachi's job and level, but then I guess the cutscene showed he wasn't totally up to speed on our loveable old traffic clerk. This is the best defence I can think of for his character. That he's not really as destructive a force as naysayers say because he's got blindspots, how ironic. Sure he could fool the local constabulary, but he's not gonna trick... Uh, Okay is there anyone in this series who isn't stupid?

Okay so I was trying to stop myself from having a second point but second: We're introducing Decoy Octopus into Yakuza? There's a handful of problems with that.

The only way Mirror Face works as an entity in this story is from a thematic angle, white and black, light and shadow. A twisted reflection of someone we know. The problem is everything he *could* bring to the story is already perfectly served by Han Joon-Gi, he's at best an entirely redundant entity. The only reflective quality Mirror Face has is when the screen cuts to black and you look at yourself asking "what the hell was that about?"

That would be if the game wanted to ask questions with him, but he isn't a character, he is like Nick Ogata, a convenience, or an inconvenience anyway, the one stain on what will be a fantastic ending. If his quarry was the narrative then this man is every bit the hitman Ishioda supposes.

With the two defeated. Ichiban interrogates the guy. He did go to kill Arakawa, but something, or someone, got in the way. That night Tendo met with Arakawa, and had people in place to ambush Ishioda, he gathered them all in one place before making his own play. (*"Some people find their big chance when the situation changes."* → *"Shouldn't a guy like me take his chance to make it to the top?"* - Bang) The group is perplexed! And it seems, just as predictable! (*Tendo: "Go for it."* - boom)

Mirror Face is a fitting inclusion for a chapter which feels like a bizarre failed magic trick. Kiryu feels simultaneously like a distraction from yet also another reason why this penultimate chapter is also the games flabbiest.

Chapters 13 and 14 start on almost the same beat. Ichiban despondent over recent losses and revelations before an old school Yakuza helps him remember what's important which makes Kiryu's cameo feel a little superfluous.

That aside what's actually achieved in this chapter? Not much other than the game hurriedly tying up Ishioda, a man who the game has repeatedly forgot. Then again maybe the explosion didn't kill him, maybe he was just forgotten once again? I actually tracked down Ryosuke Horii to ask if he really died here, his response: "Naze watashi no kaidan ni iru no!" Which I found to be a bit formal but there it is.

Then there's mirror face, who exists because the game has, at the very last moment, forgotten that putting Ichiban in a corner doesn't necessarily mean its written itself into one, one which it imagines only Mirror Face could save it from. Chapter 14 is an awkward and unfortunate, if momentarily exciting stumble right before the finish line.

PART 10: To the Pinnacle

1. The Counter-Plot

So we arrive at the final chapter. We see a CLP van rolling lazily through Yokohama, the streets lined with Bleach bastards. A message of endorsement plays over the grey zones they seek to destroy as well as the wreckage they've already created.

In Kamurocho, at the end of Nakamichi street Aoki prepares for a speech. There's a moment here which sits with me. (*I had to break some rules*) Even if slathered in justification, this is the first time Masato reveals any capacity for guilt. He says this to an assistant, a true believer who immediately vindicates Aoki. Says no matter what, he must have been justified if he had a noble goal. Uncaring if not outright blind to this undermining Bleach's entire message.

Aoki is actually shocked for a moment, by getting exactly what he's always wanted from people. Adulation, unconditional love and respect.

Whatever guilt he had is immediately assuaged, he has exactly what he needs to keep going. It's an interesting moment both because we see there is humanity in him, a capacity to admit wrongdoing, but he is now in a position to have his worst aspects so easily reinforced. He has destroyed everyone who could tell him no...

(*Ichiban makes his announcement*) Well, there may still be one. (*Ichiban pulls off the cloak*) And he's number one! Ichiban makes an explosive entrance, ambushing Aoki atop his van. He makes an address to the crowd, or the snipers anyway. (*"Take all the pictures you want!"*)

Look at this fucker pout, aww, sad I didn't die in your little boom. Knowing he can't back away, Ichiban pulls him in. (*"You ordered Sawashiro to kill Arakawa" → "You're going down in flames, young master."*) Aoki says it's a bluff, Ichiban keeps his cool, he knows Masato can't let this go.

Ichiban leaves him with some parting words and returns to the gang. From here we get a clumsy little sequence. The gang convenes with Nick at Earth Angel to hide out. Ichiban lets us in on the plot. There is no recording, but Aoki's paranoia won't let him leave it alone. He'll have the whole family tearing that office apart until he has to come see to matters personally. We then get a scene with Aoki where he more or less confirms Ichiban has him nailed down. I've skipped a couple of these cause while they're fine, they keep Aoki in mind, they don't offer me much to say and here it's just a bit of banter.

Still I love this course of action, this is something Kiryu could never conceive of, in fact this is the kind of scheme later entries were using against him. Banking on his predictability.

Kiryu was a reactive character, he never really fought for change but to maintain the status quo. To return the Yakuza to a former glory which thanks to 0 we know he never experienced.

He's the Dragon and he fights for what's he sees as right, (*"Only kids believe in Dragons."*) Only issue is it is something that has never sat right with the world.

Ichiban is proactive, he fights for change. True to the Ryuugyo on his back it's better to pursue the dragon than make it there and stagnate. Using his own reputation as a bad liar and his familiarity with Masato to set a trap. It's awesome how the finale is brought about by setting Ichiban and Kiryu so far apart.

So what's clumsy, well I adore that after this, I think someone realised they could cram in a cameo. So despite calling this place a hide out, I guess Earth Angel isn't hide outy enough. Because Adachi says we can actually hide out at a much better place called New Serena! Sounds swanky and wanky so lets go! And it's there that Date says hello!

(*"Good luck, Ichiban Kasuga."*) Lovely to see ya Date, it was pleasantly uh... Perfunctory!

Then we're dumped into the finale freeroam, one last chance to tie up any loose ends.

2. Dragon Kart: Drifting into Last Place

There's a few reasons why in the minigame line up I've left Dragon Kart for last. It's because in many ways it's the antithesis to our first side activity. Can Quest. One was resigned to the Southern end of the map. The other sits at the northern tip. One was the poor struggling against one another to survive. The other is a playground for the rich to compete for the sake of competition. One is great fun, the other, is Dragon Kart!

Sorry, bit dramatic, couldn't help myself. It's a smart use of the greater space offered by Yokohama and really flexes just how much grander in scale and just plain smooth they can make their side content now. The issue is what Dragon Fighter's latest escapade has in scale and arguably style it loses in substance.

Ichiban is drawn in by well, the most Ichiban aspect of Dragon Kart. (*"I admit, I perked up when you got to the part about being able to attack people."*) This is Dragon Kart's unique selling point and to be frank Fighter is overselling it.

Over the course of the 15 or so races you need to take part in to win all the cups and defeat the rival racers. I had about 3 engagements. Not to brag about being too good at baby's first kart racer, but I honestly may have had a better time were I worse at the game. Being good just means, more than my competition, I can easily outpace the fun part of Dragon Kart.

A lowly two tracks have bottlenecks which force racers into tight quarters, the rest are too open, their layouts too wide and too full of straightaways which allow for racers to too easily scatter. Only the first lap has any real degree of interaction between participants, and interaction is where all the action is!

Taking and maintaining the lead is easy and at the head of the pack there's very little to do.

The small arsenal of not terribly inventive weapons offer only a handful of defensive options. But all fall far behind the boost, which is too useful both offensively and defensively.

There's no enjoyable insanity or unfairness to the weapons, they're all overtuned to not be all that threatening, none are able to turn the tide in a moment, I think a kart racer needs that element of unfairness to keep it an actual conflict between karters. None of this is helped by the AI being incredibly passive, which makes passing them all the easier!

There is a bit of fun in learning pickup locations and how to best thread boost pickups between boost pads while hitting the most rings for bonus items in this mode's own scrip shop.

But it goes to show how easy the mode is that doing this is me occupying my mind while drifting, sometimes literally, to the finish line.

The kart physics can be called, at best, unobtrusive, not exciting, not fun, not rewarding to master. There's nothing to it. It's a bit annoying how they can snag the sidewalk, which proved a greater foe than my fellow speedfreaks ever quite managed.

It's an ultimately shallow game, going from pocket circuit to the city streets is an advancement in size and size alone. It lacks the addictive loop and rewarding victories of the game it spawned out of. The upgrade menu even depresses me a little. No tuning to figure out the puzzle of a race, just the puzzle of how long at the office will I need to max everything out?

In lacking Mario Karts mix of unfairness and mechanical skill. This is a mode with no character, no vibe, no excitement. It's at best, a way of showing off what RGG can now achieve when really, it shows how less can often be so much more.

In story terms it's not much better. Fighter has nothing to do other than say at the end "By the way, I'm Pocket Circuit Fighter." Which, cool man. Glad to see you're doing well but I preferred you when you had inner turmoil.

That aside it's Ichiban defeating a cast of kooky characters one by one, and by eating his dust they learn the true meaning of competition. Why, if this lowly peon can go from prole to pole position, I too must try harder!

This brings me to why I've left it so late. Another parallel with Can Quest is how they're both hamstrung by story. Can Quest is stuck to the starting zone. Meanwhile after a mid-game opening, Dragon Kart breaks down until the final chapter.

After clearing all of the races your penultimate rival is hospitalised until you make it to Kamurocho. If done early, this can be tens of hours away and his release from hospital isn't even announced! I missed this entirely on my first playthrough!

Which, to be clear, isn't missing much. There is some charm in blazing through this place. Though mostly I'm thinking about this in plot terms, I like the thought that while Tendo tears down the Arakawa office I'm out here tearing up the streets!

And that's Dragon Kart! I'm sorry to say, if I was ranking the minigames in Like a Dragon, this one would not make a podium finish!

3. The Romance Substories

At the end of his substories Kiryu had to defeat the Amon Clan... Well Ichiban has an even more terrifying foe, the W-amon clan... Wamon wa-... Women, there are six women to seduce! While this can be done early on, these women have pretty high standards... Actually that's not quite right, it's more accurate to say they have high requirements.

Each of them has three objectives to fulfill to begin their romance substories.

First up is a bespoke requirement tied to which aspect of the game they represent.

Romancing Sumire takes maxing out the Romance Workshop. Cucking Ikari takes far more brainpower than I'd have expected, getting all the Ounabara certs.

Ririka has us try out the joblot of the job centre and somehow this makes us look desirable instead of workshy. Iroha takes hearing 40 party chats for some pillow talk. Eri needs us to climb to the top of the business world before she'll climb atop us. And Saeko needs us to drink link to oblivion which is the first sign we should be worried. These broads stand in for how broad the game is.

4 out of 6 of them also have a favourite flower. First we give them one bouquet, then 5, then 10, and rather than looking like a crazy person, we look like a very thoughtful crazy person.

This can be done by growing flowers and having Kashiwagi craft bouquets, but the game lets you skip this. At Hamakita Part are what I call the Give-up-Carts, or the shops of surrender. Where for extortionate fees you can just pay your way past several in game crafting systems. It seems in this world money can buy both taste, and love, it's just sold at a pretty steep mark up. I should mention that once the Ichiban Holdings Office moves it sits at the southeastern edge of the park. Essentially the business minigame lets you buy your way past most other forms of crafting which I think is a fair late game trade, it adds value to clearing Ichiban Holdings, while leaving super rare high end materials to the completionists where the extra effort is a reasonable expectation.

Lastly, each girl has a personality requirement. At this stage of the game I still hadn't maxed out all of the stats, yet I had exhausted all the best sources of personality. I started scraping the bottom of the barrel looking for any last drops of personality I could find, is desperation a personality trait that women like? I've heard they love it!

I always consider it a bit of a loss when I need to break out a guide for a game cause I want these to be my experience, I consider my stumbles part of the adventure, but I gave up, I sensed a grind ahead and not the kind Ichiban was after.

On Trueachievements.com I found a method called The Sotenbori Sprint. There's a route through the town rich with item drops, with good odds of personality boosters turning up not to mention one or two honk honks, because prostitutes raise your social stats, among other things.

I can't believe Saeko still slept with Ichiban after watching the guy rail this old woman in a back alley 5 times in a single day, then again maybe she was impressed.

So yeah, after doing laps of Yokohama and Kamurocho, I was now running laps around Sotenbori too! I've heard about birds giving you the runaround but this is ridiculous!

And it worked, before long I had maxed out my personality! Travel truly does broaden the mind, and the bloody calves in Ichi's case!

And well, not a word of a lie, I've got to say, I've never in all my life put so much effort into a game just so I can have my character repeatedly sexually assaulted! These are awful, terrible stories! I'll give it to Sumire, Ririka, and Miyakoshi, at least they don't jump Ichiban's bones while he was asleep. Which is a low hurdle to clear but when only 50% of people make it you gotta give em props. After this we get the final substory where the six women learn of Ichiban's sleeping around, half the time literally sleeping, and team up to take their revenge.

I can only imagine this story coming from a drunken meetup between RGG and Atlus where a Persona scenario writer drunkenly scrawled this shit on a napkin because it's the most trite joke of the harem punishing the boy for his perverted behaviour. I know this game is taking influence from all over the spectrum of RPGs but when it comes to writing romance aping persona is like aiming for the toes in a shin kicking contest before kicking the concrete. It's such a vile ending to an absolutely noxious series of substories.

What's especially crazy is these women are real. Contest winners where the prize was portraying themselves in the game. These lot can lay claim to Ichibanging a virtual character, and while this wouldn't be literally true. It's not technically a lie either.

What's even more crazy is I'm how many years into covering this series and only now realising just how many real life women can say they've slept with a Yakuza character. I've probably inspired some jealousy pointing that out! But I think there are fewer jealous of those who can say: "Oh yeah, they put me in a video game. What did I do? Oh, well, I raped the main character."

The cherry on top of all this is Kashiwagi stepping in to tell us lore we already know as if it's a big reveal! He may as well say "You know what Ichiban, women are like miniguns, they spin around and kill you!" And it would have said just as much as the game does in this moment.

I never would have guessed in all of these romance substories, Kashiwagi would be the biggest tease. Add this to the list of bad shit in Ichiban's life he remains chipper in spite of.

I am so sorry to end the side content on such a low note, but this is how the cookie crumbled for me. For a game I love, there are vast swathes of it I am indifferent towards or actively dislike. And much of that content is backloaded.

Speaking of, there really isn't much of note in Kamurocho either. It doesn't have the air of cold or disconnect from prior games, which is because Ichiban's separation is a lot cleaner.

Much of what I enjoyed were party chats. The group reflecting on and bantering about the town.

Ichiban may have lost all ties to this place, but it doesn't have the same melancholy it does with Kiryu, because he's surrounded by what matters to him now. (*Shangri-La chat*) I mean okay there is some melancholy.

So, while I can't go and get an icecream before I face the final boss because man, times have changed. I can at least go back to where this journey chronologically began so, so many years ago.

(*Eat at Kyushu No. 1 Star!*)

4. Tower Battle 2019

As the election results are unveiled, it seems Kume is going into office! Well congrats Kume, but so are we. (*Nick warns us → Demon tower*) That's awesome.

I am happy to say this dungeon is a winner. I mean gameplay wise yeah I'm still not into this but everything else about it is so cool I can't help but get swept up in it.

In this games arc of power the growth from bumbling through the Seiryu HQ to now is so strong. The gang have gone from comedic farces to struggling to survive, with each long battle you really do feel them becoming more of a force to be reckoned with.

When they approach the Millenium Tower filled with determination and grit, they've more than earned their tower battle.

The key feeling of this section is triumph, which is captured so well in the music. I love Reiwa Labyrinth. There's so much less trepidation in this track than what we've been hearing up until now. The constantly rising action matches Ichiban's own relentless ascent through the tower. The percussion is like an elephant stomping up the stairs, the one everyone ignored until it was too late to stop.

This time there's no sidetracks, no whacky scenarios which throw off the groups plans. They're in control here and it's an unbroken straight shot to the Arakawa office, as a location and in the way its handled this captures the feeling of climax so well.

Running in parallel with that is how the Millenium Tower Dungeon is an example of asset rescue done spectacularly well. Much of it follows the same path Kiryu took in Yakuza 6 with some deviations. Demonstrating how all along the path Ichiban follows is similar but distinct.

It wasn't just the intro. Like a Dragon is a very loose retelling of Yakuza 1. The very broad strokes are the same, but the tone, the mood, the context, the outcome, and the messages are vastly different. So the game went, so the last dungeon goes.

And the way it ends is so understated. We come across a familiar room. The one where Kiryu's last Millenium Tower raid came to an abrupt and bloody close. Kiryu's methods were no longer working, thinking they would led him into a deadly trap.

This time the roles are reversed. Ichiban may not make it to the roof, the time for such showdowns has long since passed, Ichiban's approach is the one the modern world needs, and in this moment, in this way, he can take one step beyond Kiryu. It's a wonderfully understated moment.

This, to me, is a far better symbolic passing of the torch, we've surpassed one dragon.

But there is another left to slay.

5. Overcoming a Dragon

(*gang opens the door for Ichi*) Arakawa rolling in. Such a sick entrance. In the office Tendo awaits, no data, but he's found the drink at least. (*"It wouldn't prove anything" → "So that was it all along."*) It dawns on him, he's fallen into Ichiban's trap. As the two argue he mocks Masumi for not realising he wasn't the only player in the game, stoking Ichiban's fury. (*"His last sight on this earth was my beaming smile."*) This shit does such a great job just hitting all the notes to get you pumped for this final showdown. Looking down on Ichiban for his beginnings is perfect, reminding us of how far we've come. Meanwhile his smug, cocky attitude makes you want to wipe that beaming smile right off his face.

Tendo has a small role but he leaves a big impact for me. (*Tendo speech – Dynamic intro*) Man, if my fist made a noise like that when I squeezed it I know I'd feel powerful, or a whole lot of pain.

So we make it to the mechanical final boss of Like a Dragon and sadly it's not that impressive because gameplay wise this guy isn't that oppressive. It's one guy, without much crowd control potential, and his trick of occasionally taking more than one turn isn't as surprising the second time around. His combos are a bit tricky to pick up the block timings for though again... Not all that impressive.

There's no new spin they can put on the gameplay to set Tendo apart besides testing if you've learned to use Ichiban's Peerless Resolve, allowing you to tank his heavily telegraphed one hit kill. It's a shame this doesn't quite for me and it'll become clear why in a moment. The issue in play is it's testing one very specific move, one which is easy to forget given how easy the game has been up until this point. I guess that could be called a skill issue given one of the skills here is memorising your skillset but it's still a really flaccid escalation to end on, a shame for the skill that keeps Ichiban erect.

Funny thing, given I'd had a whole one game over on my first playthrough I don't think I even knew Peerless Resolve existed, but still beat Tendo first time thanks to sheer dumb luck.

So if you're stupid like me this fight is a roll of the dice, you're not up against a boxer but boxcars.

Narratively I wouldn't call this fight a knockout but I'll at least say it's a TKO.

Tendo has few appearances in the game but he does have presence, dominating pretty much every scene he appears in. He still lacks a certain level of involvement which makes him a little underwhelming as a final boss dramatically.

But he is a suitably daunting opponent physically and we've got no shortage of symbolism going on. A reversal on Yakuza's 1 and 5 sort of in that we're now closer to a carp facing off against a dragon. Kiryu's fight ends with Ichiban failing to tank a haymaker, this one opens with Ichiban surviving the blow. So we've clearly grown since then but we're still very much the koi swimming upstream. Except for arguably Ryuji, a fellow dragon. Kiryu has never been framed as the underdog even against his ultimate rivals.

This also fits Tendo's exaggerated appearance. He's reminiscent of a classic moustachioed aristocratic type, the kind of guy who should be standing like this. (*classic boxer*)

It's really distinctive and gels with him showing his true condescending colours and reminding of us how polite society sees Ichiban, all of this goes some way to overcoming his lacking screentime.

And in JRPG terms Ichiban gets his Dragon Quest ending! an azure dragon! (*tattoo shift*)

So while in raw narrative terms Tendo feels a little shakey, aesthetically he tells more than enough of a story to makes up for it, there's a lot going on and it's all the coolest shit possible.

His boss track Triplet After Triplet hits just as hard as he does. It's a relatively slow paced track which really makes it feel like you're only gonna win if you can go the distance. Ichiban's synths are practically only on the fringes of the song, having small bursts of energy when the instruments relent for a moment. Making Ichiban and the player out to be mere specks when set against the Titanic Tendo, and makes us want to sink his aspirations all the more.

The party banter too is great, the gang are all talking about how absolutely terrifying this guy is while Ichiban is literally too angry to die. (*"I don't give a single fuck about his boxing record."*) Ichiban is too determined to be afraid of who he's up against. At this point there is nothing which can possibly stand in his way, by tricking Masato and Tendo he's already overcome them.

This is why it's a shame peerless resolve doesn't quite hit for me. Ichiban's life story is the entire world conspiring to put him at Rock Bottom and he refuses to stay there.

He's getting back up and you know what he's bringing some friends along for the ride. (*revive footage*) The final boss spotlighting this as a literal mechanic is so cool, it's just a shame it feels so understated. (*Fight ends*)

6. For His Sake

While our victory is in doubt, Aoki's appears to be anything but. A historic sweep for the CLP. The man is on top of the world, unaware it's about to come tumbling down. (*Crowd worries → warrant issued for arrest*) With the crowd in disarray, our man steps up to deal the killer blow. Revealing his true identity and connection to Masumi Arakawa as Aoki is hurried off stage.

Enraged, he rushes for the office, trying to get any information he can out of a confused Hourinochi, who practically begs him to stay away from the tower.

Naturally, Masato is incapable of listening to the man he's done much of this to show up, for a slight the man likely hasn't the slightest recollection of making.

(*"Ichiban did this? That Ichiban."*) He's number one, chief.

(*Ichiban down*) And down for the count. It seems matters have been Tendo'd uh, tended to. And with that, Aoki drops his guard. (*Aoki tricked – "Ichiban, why?"*) The mastermind behind the Kamurocho 3k plan is caught in 4k! thanks to the help of... Mirror Face. I'll give it, he didn't get Tendo's accent right, this is Aoki's greatest flaw blowing up in his face... It's a shame this character is what gets us over the finish line.

Aoki is actually flabbergasted to be outplayed by Ichiban, but as we've seen, while Aoki would flip through the pages, Ichiban could read him like a book, uh kinda. (*"This is the only way I could think to stop you."* → *"At some point you forgot how to stop yourself."*) I'm gonna be real Ichi I think the last time this guy knew how to stop himself was when he had breaks.

One really cool aspect of this ending is how Ichiban spent the whole game tearing the mask off every character. Revealing they're more complex than they let on. What's great is how the big mistake the villains make is assuming Ichiban is exactly as simple as he appears until it's too late. (*Ichiban smirks*) If you think Ichiban stupid you're falling into the same trap as the antagonists.

Ichiban lays out Masato's every last flaw, and Aoki even admits true or not, the only way is forward. Going back to Yakuza 1 parallels I do like how this moment composites two of the bossfights with the slimy politician and the brother we're fighting to save being one and the same, but also not considering we're here to stop Aoki and save Masato.

And hey, he even gave us some evidence just like good old Jingu! Fight's far less annoying to boot. (*Aoki retreats into wall*) Hey you ran into a wall! That's a failed retreat, 0/10 game!

The gang are on their last legs, but they urge Ichiban to go on ahead while they hold the line.

(*"You're the best friends I've ever had"*) One cheeky snap to commemorate the camaraderie, and we're off! (*Fight Intro*)

Okay so, the game has saved the best for last. It may seem like a backhanded compliment to call what is in essence an interactive cutscene the best fight in the game but *it my video*

First off I need to return us to the games opening. Masumi's old life on stage. Ichiban and the two bosses all carry a major Kabuki colour motif. Ichiban's red representing passion and heroism.

Aoki's blue demonstrates not only villainy, but sadness, jealousy, and fear. Emotions which he used to rule and which in turn ruled him. Bro it's just like Devil May Cry (*cut self off*)

Tendo's brown meanwhile is the colour of ogres, monsters, and spirits, foreshadowing his grim nature and probably not him being a ghost. His dragon having both red and blue, commanding fire and water communicates this was a man playing all sides in this conflict.

Much like Masumi performed under a false name and hid his scars history repeats here with Masato. In that first scrap we fought "Ryo Aoki: Governor of Tokyo." Up here his name is changed out for Masato Arakawa, no family affiliation, no job title, no CEO of Iwami shipbuilding.

The artifice is further stripped. There's no screen pop to indicate Ichiban's imagination flaring up, we're returned to our freelancer role. This isn't something Ichiban is hyping himself up for, it's a fight he didn't want to have to pull his brother back from the brink. So he's not playing this up as some heroic showdown but something he has to do for his sake.

The turn based gameplay actually takes on a new angle, it makes me feel like Ichiban is hesitant to hurt Masato and it's something he has to will himself to do. (*Wrestling move*) Picking a move like that does undercut my point a little doesn't it?

And the music is perfect! Ism is Amazing! It's not some epic sweep, it's a deeply melancholy song for a man who's thrown everything away in vainglorious pursuits and self-justification!

For long stretches Ichiban's synths and Masato's orchestra aren't even in contest, they merely run alongside each other. Representing how these two came from the same place and how their lives ran in parallel. Eventually the synthetic sounds fade as Ichiban disappeared from Masato's life and the song for a moment spirals into deeper sadness. Before kicking into high gear, we even get some distorted guitars to give it a classic Yakuza feel, this is a tragic showdown between brothers, the kind we've seen play out before. I've seen comments saying there's even some traces of For Whose Sake in here but I can't pick them out.

The song then returns to where it began, the orchestra and synths in their original parallel. Just as we've finally unmasked Masumi Arakawa. Ichiban never truly lost himself.

The illusion is further dispelled as we get our one and only boss QTE. I love that even as we see a more accurate representation of what this must look like the turn based nature of the fight is still there. The two trading blows one after the other, just going to town on each other, that's until they simultaneously break order and from there it just devolves into a scrap. Years of anger and frustration just exploding out of them. But this was never a contest. This is still coughing baby versus crazy baby and I'm betting it all on Red (*Ichiban ends the fight*)

7. Returning to Rock Bottom

With one last punch Masato is done. (*Punch*)

But Aoki still has some fight left in him, one last desperate attempt to get Ichiban to see things his way. Ichiban is so great in this moment, you can see how absolutely tired he is of this childish, self congratulatory parade. And one last smug patience testing comment is all it takes. (*Used and the useful – sink in – Ichiban screams at him*)

Out and out screaming in his face, we actually see Aoki back off in terror. Ichiban follows with a pretty powerful speech, one which I find is a little purposefully off base. (*Light and Shadow speech*)

The two could only ever see in the other what they lacked and longed for in themselves. Ichiban saw Masato as having a loving family who would always look out for him. Masato saw Ichiban as able bodied, powerful, able to assert himself in the world. What Ichiban took for granted Masato longed for and what Ichiban longed for Masato only ever saw as part of his restraints. When Ichiban promises to help him rise up back from rock bottom, this is what rock bottom meant to him, it's something Ichi couldn't fix for him back then. But Aoki is finally silenced, though as the cops file in and are told what's going on, it's made crystal clear he isn't going quietly (*Hostage taken*)

Ichiban's tone immediately 180s as he pleads with Masato not to get himself killed, but he doesn't care. All he has left is making sure Ichiban knows exactly how much he hates him. (*"Everything about you is just like dad... That's why I never liked you."*)

He drags the cop into the elevator and as the adrenaline wears off it dawns on him just how screwed he is.

The will having left him, he stumbles down Nakamichi, where hours ago he made a speech to an adoring crowd, the massed bystanders are shocked to see the real Aoki, so much so they can't see the shattered man stumbling down the street.

He winds up drifting to the place where it all began, seemingly surprised by himself, but not a surprise to Ichiban. (*"I told you, I know exactly what kind of person you are."*)

Now, each game has a scene or two I'll just come back and rewatch occasionally. Most often it's the hype moments, the highs, when I wanna get myself pumped up. But there are a handful of emotional scenes and it's this one I keep coming back to when I just want to really feel stabbed in the gut.

Masato realises he doesn't have it in him to kill Ichiban. He thinks on the locker, where he began, and on the night he learned Yumeno's true feelings towards him. The night Ryo Aoki began. She wound up marrying Hourinochi, a young Aoki was invited to a party to celebrate the man's promotion to commissioner. It's there he ran into Yumeno again, totally blind to who he truly was. Masato breaks down at the memory of her calling Aoki bright and sophisticated. (*"That's how fragile it's been"*) He's lost it all, all over again, but there is one thing, and one person in this world he still has power over. (*Puts gun to his head*)

I'm kind of aware my talking over the cutscenes in this game is in a way, unavoidably making them worse. So I'm gonna let this play and then spend way longer talking about it. (*Ichiban's speech → Masato lowers the gun*)

Ichiban did what Kiryu couldn't way back when. He talked his brother down from the ledge. There's so much about this I love. Nakaya's performance is impeccable. One of his great talents which we saw him pull off back in Yakuza 0 is how he's able to weave so many emotions together. After one last snide comment causes Ichiban to finally snap, to finally let Masato Arakawa know exactly how he feels about him.

So much love, anger, and pain is threaded into the speech. The way he pauses to find the right words and at times explodes into others, slowly losing the energy until he's just out and out begging Masato to please understand him. To not just shrug this off like everything else. It's a lifetime and a rollercoaster of emotion in what is some of the series best acting. If the player has been invested in the story they've likely experienced a ton of frustration towards Masato, seeing Ichiban show he shares that frustration before bringing it back to just how much he cares for him is such a great way to handle it.

The reason I believe this finally gets through to Masato is two fold. Ichiban forcing Masato to realise his, Masumi's, and Sawashiro's love was never founded on logic finally manages to rattle his worldview. His conception of himself that he was kept around out of obligation, and Ichiban's devotion to him was only ever out of devotion to someone else.

What finally makes it sink in however is Ichiban begging for his life here. At any point before now, he could file away anything Ichiban did as somehow self-serving. Before when Sawashiro and Masumi tried to save him from himself and drag him from his evil path he thought they were acting against him.

He can't think that way now, Ichiban has nothing to gain by begging for him to live. If all Ichi cared about was winning he'd be up in the Millenium Tower making a statement, but he's here. There is no conceivable ulterior motive, there's no angle, there's no play, there's no logic, all that leaves is love. Masato can't rationalise his way out of it.

It's a classic tragedy and it lands so perfectly, he had what he really wanted all along but he had to hit rock bottom to see the light.

I even like the English dub of this scene! And it brings with it's own dramatic resolution. In the Japanese Ichiban pleads with Masato to understand he truly does care for him, the English plays this beat differently. With Ichiban begging Masato not to kill himself because he couldn't bare to watch him die. This could be the first time anyone has actually *asked* anything of Masato.

All his life he's had people wait on him hand and foot, which only solidified his self-image of being weak and useless.

This makes it an especially poignant thing to ask, Ichiban begging him to live in this way shows that he always saw him not as a burden to be put up with but someone with innate value. He never needed power and dominion to have worth. Seriously I come back to the English dub from time to time because it's such a powerful take on the scene and lines up perfectly with both characters.

Like much of the English dub there are parts in this scene I find a bit much, but Tang takes the edge out of his voice exactly where he needs to for the emotions to cut deepest, it's a great performance for a really demanding scene! I worry I just say "I love this" "I like this" "What I like here is" a bit too much, but man, I love this scene so much and I feel like I've undersold just how much it hits me.

Masato puts the gun away and calls his secretary. He's about to make an order, but then he thinks better of it. For the first time he chooses to trust in another's judgment. He looks at Ichiban with a smile finally free of guile, deserved pride for taking his real first step as Masato Arakawa. And then it happens. *(Stab)* We should have killed him. *(Kume speech)*

Kume takes his leave as Masato collapses. Dying in Ichiban's arms after giving him some last words with an actual look of contentment on his face. Ichiban steels himself, picks him up, and makes the same run Masumi made all those years ago.

That's our ending and it's one that really does me in. It's a gutpunch every time. Aoki's actions catching up to him the moment he's about to turn over a new leaf. He's about to face true justice, but one of his misguided former true believers snatches that away. Makes a grey matter into a black, white, and red one. It's one of Like a Dragons absolutely perfect scenes, the culmination of a games worth of themes, character relationships, and bookends all crashing together at once and sweeping Aoki away with them.

8. Ending at Rock Bottom

Over the credits we get Ichiban-Ka by Shonen no Kaze. Who if you'll remember did Born to be Wild for Kurohyo, as well as Bubble and Kurenai for Yakuza 0. So hey holy shit we're getting the licensed tracks now! Cool.

Ichiban-Ka makes me wish these games still had intro videos like the PS3 era, it's a good credit song, if a bit of a tonal whiplash after that absolute gutpunch of ending being as celebratory and upbeat as it is. But this track is welcoming Ichiban to the series! Credit for AU-19 for the translation as the chorus goes "Taking Flight, heated as hell, for whom we celebrate, welcome Ichiban! Go forth and lead a wonderful life!"

And you know what, after all this shit that's exactly what Ichiban deserves! And hey nitpicks aside it is an absolutely fantastic song, a perfect hype piece outlining Ichiban's determination and drive, letting us know what he's ready to deliver ruthless justice and cut through this new era.. Oh yeah this game is also the first of the Reiwa era.

But we're not quite done, back in Kamurocho Adachi confronts Horinouchi atop the new police station. The Commissioner tries to hurry Adachi along, come on, out with your business.

But Adachi is going to take his time, he wants to enjoy this. He produces evidence of his ties to Aoki, already sent to the necessary authorities, naturally. And he outlines just how deeply caught Horry is, savouring every detail. (*you handed out your own bribes → Ambition is one thing, but damn! - I've been waiting a long time to see that face*)

As he's about to be taken away, Adachi calls out one last time. He's about to bring up Masato, how that young punk he once insulted at the club is the reason for his downfall.

But Adachi stops, he realises how much of an insult it would be to all that Ichiban and the young master went through. He lets this part of his vengeance go, not tainting it with this bit of needless cruelty.

It's very easy to forget this was part of the plot, as the party's own motivations so easily fall into the background from chapter 5 onwards. We don't see Nanba at his brothers wedding, or Saeko attempting to reconnect with her family or else find a better work life balance with friends. Only Adachi gets a conclusion. But it is a sweet note to end his arc on. He hasn't become some paragon of virtue, he's still the loveable old fart we've spent most of the game with. But Ichiban and his struggle did come to mean something to him, his respect shines though.

Back in Yokohama, Ichiban offers a prayer to the Arakawa's. Nanba asks if he wants to confirm his lineage with a blood test. When Masumi asked Ichiban if he wanted to meet his real parents he hesitated, but now he has his answer. ("Nah man, I've got my two dads.") and Dragon Quest. As ever the series themes of found family remain strong, both these men, and Dragon Quest, shaped him. A DNA test would mean less than nothing.

Saeko rushes in to hurry them to the funeral and thank god, he remembered to change. (*Saejima*) Talk turns to Daigo and Watase's new business venture. Ichiban is invited to join them. Majima mentioning it's the boss's unfinished business.

But Ichi decides to stay, he has to repay the people of his town, and finish Arakawa's work in his own way. Much to Nanba and Saeko's relief.

Out on the street finding himself surrounded by all the friends and allies he'd made along the way. Worried he was gonna skip town, not wanting to repeat such a hokey speech, he leaves them to it. They laugh and joke, each hoping they're the reason he's decided to stick around. As Ichiban looks down on the bridge. Masato's last words echo through his head. (*Keep Living – Fin*)

What's powerful is looked at in a certain way, Ichiban ends the game right back at Rock Bottom, and I don't mean literally. Back at the start he expressed terror at the thought, losing his life and his family and having to start over from scratch.

Now, he's changed the face of Kamurocho, Sotenbori, and his new home of Yokohama, played a part in destroying the institution he committed his life to as well as its lifelong rival. He has lost every tie he had. His family is gone, Masato's passing severing the one remaining link to the life he started out fighting so hard to maintain and then return to. Not bad going for his first time in the protagonist role.

The very thing he feared all the way back in chapter 1 has come true. Yet here he is, looking up from rock bottom with a winning smile, ready to face whatever may come, and this time he isn't alone. He's surrounded by the people whose own lives he helped raise up, now there's nothing stopping him from climbing right up alongside them. It's an absolutely beautiful end, and bookend to the story. Go on Ichiban, go forth and live a wonderful life!

9. Fin

I love Yakuza 7, story wise this sits along the series greats. It has one of the richest, deepest casts going. The plotting is smooth, the twists are thrilling and the intrigue is relentless. The themeing has the all encompassing nature of 5 but with a much slicker and thoughtful edge, which is impressive given the much heavier subject matter. The ambition just leaks from every pore.

Ichiban makes such an amazing debut. He immediately shows us what the series can explore beyond Kiryu. I hope I haven't put people off with constant allusions back to the old Dragon but I find how inverting the character resulted in such a rich one, and I find those connections endlessly fascinating to delve into and talk about.

If there's a last tie between the two I want I want to end on it's this. How I simply look at the two. Kiryu is the impossible ideal. He's the man I know I could never be.

When I'm playing an Ichiban title I view Ichiban as the man I'm failing to live up to.

Kind, accepting, charismatic, a joy to be around. Silly as it is there's no small part of me that wishes I had the confidence to strive to be like Ichiban, or at least his best qualities.

This series has always found light in darkness. It's something I've always prized about it. Its optimism feels so genuine because it doesn't sugarcoat how rough life can be. Ichiban exemplifies that, he's a guy who has every reason to hate the world, and it's not that he's too stupid to realise it, but doing that would be failing himself, and it's why people gravitate towards him. The party are all loveable, building from the ensemble cast writing of 4, 5, and 6 and giving them rich personalities, each minute spent with them a joy. I just want to uncover more about them and the game offers plenty to learn.

As a game, I do actually find Like a Dragon lacking. Its combat mechanics are ill balanced and simple. I struggle to connect to the narrative via gameplay and often find it saps energy from the moments which require excitement. I respect the change and think it was cleverly handled thematically, but man, this game for me survives on the strength of its writing, and in that field it is herculean. It does help much of its gameplay is in getting more of that sweet, juicy story because that's exactly the carrot on a stick which motivated me through it three times!

10. To Be Continued?

As for writing about it, I hate to say this has been one of the trickiest scripts I've ever done.

More than ever I felt a need for this to be perfect, I can't do perfect, but my brain will always trick me into thinking it's possible.

A big part of that was that for a long time I had intended to leave the series here. So even if that was no longer something I was sure about my brain had gone into grand finale gotta be the best it can be mode. Putting that aside we're 8 games deep, even if this was grand finale mode in my mind this was always a far off thing I'd never actually make it to.

The goal system I used to set these videos as milestones I blew through much faster than expected, I don't even remember if Yakuza: Like a Dragon was one of them! But I do remember figuring this is the perfect end point. I'll have completed the Kiryu Saga! I naively assumed, I'll ring in a new character, and the series can go off into the sunset! And I can return to a more casual Yakuza fan. With the series name change to Like a Dragon it felt even more perfect! I did it, I completed the Yakuza series! And I am proud of that.

I'm at the stage where I panic that each new video will be the one where I hit the wall, I burn out, run out of new observations, get stale and boring, or maybe come to resent the games.

I'd hate for the energy and my passion for the series to crash and burn in that way. Writing these videos takes months, I like to take my time with the game. Then to let thoughts percolate, research.

Each time I've only grown a deeper appreciation, but the worry never leaves, and it has also meant at this stage falling behind with the series.

Part of the reason I haven't done Judgment is a mix of the two. I've never found time to play it all the way through, and spending months of the year thinking about Yakuza, I don't want to burn myself on it. Covering spinoffs started to feel like a risk.

And well, when I started these videos. Yakuza wasn't as big. Wanna see my earliest Yakuza related upload on this channel? (*I needed it*) Uploaded May 12th, 2014. To anyone who got into the series in recent years. You may not know just how small this thing used to be. It was a group of enthusiasts importing copies of games Sega had no intention of shipping over here. The series had flopped in the West. It just wasn't connecting with us on a scale which made it worth it.

It's a different world now, they took a punt on 5, it did well enough to get us 0, and it came at exactly the right time to explode in popularity, on this, the series 20th anniversary, that game will be re-released which... Fine. On a bright note, the series is now safe, popular, and much as I still love it. It's a very different scene than when I started.

It doesn't need me saying anything about it because the conversation is pretty spirited. I hope I can still offer a new way to look at the games as well as put new eyes on the games. That's what I want these videos to do, to help you appreciate them all the more, not just in the way I'm talking about but to do your own digging and see there are themes to be read into and characters to be turned over and examined.

If my thoughts can bolster yours, that's what I'm after. The series has changed, in some ways I like and in a few I don't, but when I look at me 11 years ago, tossing an imported copy of 5, probably my favourite entry, onto my bed. I know I should be grateful the series pulled itself back from that. Even if there is some romanticism in being in on something small.

But the series has changed, as much as it has stayed the same. The Kiryu Saga was only over for a minute and Infinite Wealth makes me feel like I have unfinished business. I've slotted more thoughts on future entries into this video on the seemingly slim chance this is my last outing with the games cause more than anything I want to end on a high, and not do these games a disservice. But god man, Infinite Wealth is exactly my kind of heart bigger than its head entry in the series, which more than the cleaner entries, I really relish. That's what I love about these games when looked at in the bigger picture.

Sometimes the stories are super clean and well delivered. Sometimes they go full throttle into stupid town and somehow that's often where I feel they're all the more thoughtful even if those thoughts are scattered and messy, like the games are filled with so much they want to express they're not gonna waste time putting those thoughts in order. These games are human in that way, messy and weird. They have their moments of composure and moments of passionate insanity and I love it for both.

If I'm not done now and I do make it to Infinite Wealth I do ask for some time on that.

I want to apologise to the people who have asked me about Judgment over the years and I've always given wishy washy answers before just deciding no, it has to be mainline. It's a strength as much as a weakness to not tie yourself down but I get how frustrating it is to be on the other side of it. It's not a slight against Judgment, it's me trying to be prudent.

I did wonder what other series I'd do, even if milestones are no longer a thing, Kojima was my first thought, anyway, sorry for ending this on an awkward ramble.

What I'll say for now is I don't know if I'll do Infinite Wealth. Because this feels like such a clean stopping point, but if I do it will be a while away. I really want to focus on jank and take a mental breather with some easy vids for a while.

Names have been scrolling by for a bit now, these are my wonderful patrons. I thank each and every one of you for your patience, and your faith in me. I've been recreating the old per video system as much as I can since Apple bugged it up for all of us. Everyone gets thanked. At 3 dollars you get access to scripts and notes. They are massive this time, and feature me going crazy wondering if Ijincho fin-sake was part of the games themeing of the rich taking from the poor where even I stopped and realised how insane I was becoming. At \$5 you get access to afterthought videos where I go over anything that didn't make it in the video, and primarily Q&A, answer viewer questions and so on.

This is TehSnakerer, and I haven't hit Rock Bottom just yet! I wish you all much greater fortune!

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