

## **Kamurochō, Kazuma and I: Experiencing a Ludofomed District in the Yakuza Series**

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### **Abstract**

Videogame cities and places can be as memorable as the characters we control. From *Final Fantasy VII*'s Midgar, to *Spiderman*'s semi-fictional New York; the futuristic version of Detroit in *Detroit: Become Human* and the remnants of *Bioshock*'s Rapture; cities play a major role in the player's play experience. In this paper, I discuss the fictional district of Kamurochō, from the *Yakuza/Ryu Ga Gotoku* series, exploring how this district, a ludofomed version of Tokyo's Kabukichō, may inspire the player to experience the transition of space into place discussed by the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (2011). Based on a review of the literature regarding space and place in videogames, and Golding's claim that a study of gamespaces should have a perspective that comes "from below" (2013), the analysis focuses on the author's in-depth gameplay and analysis of seven games in the franchise that construct the Kiryu Saga. The findings indicate that *Yakuza*'s Kamurochō offers a spatial-temporal experience in which players are invited to construct with it an affective relationship grounded on familiarity with the space and its consequential turning into place that is constructed via player action, nostalgia, ludofoming, and permanence.

### **1. Prologue**

Videogame cities and places can be as memorable as the characters we control. From *Final Fantasy VII*'s Midgar, to *Spiderman*'s semi-fictional New York, the futuristic version of Detroit in *Detroit: Become Human* and the remnants of *Bioshock*'s Rapture; cities play a major role in the player's play experience. The fictional district of Kamurochō, from the *Yakuza/Ryu Ga Gotoku* series, serves as a research object to explore how the district may inspire the player to experience the transition of space into place discussed by the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (2011). Place, Tuan argues, is space to which we give meaning, imbue with values, and in which we live experiences. Kamurochō is as much a protagonist as is Kazuma Kiryu (and other playable characters in the franchise) not just due to its environmental and indexical storytelling elements (Fernández-Vara 2011; Domsch 2019), but also due to the connections it forms with players through its lively inhabitants and ludic architecture.

The franchise is still under-researched at least in the western, English-based literature. Most of the published works come from scholars preoccupied with the matter of Japanese games' reception in the West. Approaches range

from translation and localization of Japanese games in the western market (Pelletier-Gagnon 2011; Mandiberg 2012; Mangiron 2021); nostalgia, tourism, and videogame remakes (Hoch, 2020; Dong 2021); Japanese players' preferences regarding game characters (Shibuya et al., 2019); cross-cultural comparison of player experiences of Japanese games (Brückner, 2020); to the representation of the "Asian Other" in the franchise (Hutchinson 2019, p.244).

This paper incorporates Golding's claim that a study of gamespaces should have a perspective that comes "from below" (2013), centered around the use and exploration of that digital space by the player, reading the gamespace as a navigable text, open and whole rather than a set of preordained possibilities encoded by the strategist/developer from above (Golding 2013, p.118). As player and author, I approach Kamurochō as a living, experiential space-place with ethnographical and affective curiosity. Alongside the avatar of Kazuma Kiryu, we fight drunks and gangs; play darts and arcades; visit cabaret clubs; solve the problems of Kamurochō denizens and eat sushi at a place he once owned. Kazuma and I stroll, observe, live and experience Kamurochō.

The paper is organized in five main sections. First, I discuss the concepts of space and place as informed by



Tuan (2011) and Lefebvre (2013), followed by games-specific literature that investigates gamespaces and their particularities (Fragoso 2015, Aarseth 2019, Vella 2019, Nitsche 2008), and the “evocative narrative elements” (Nitsche 2008, p.3) manifested through indexical and environmental storytelling elements (Fernández-Vara 2011; Domsch 2019). Then, I discuss the concepts of nostalgia and *saudade*, similar in their definitions but referring to, respectively, (commodified) experiences of a past time (Boym 2002; Reynolds 2002); and a joyous yet melancholic yearning to relive experiences (Teixeira 2019).

Subsequently, I present the case in study, *Yakuza*, allying its gamic representation to the literature surrounding the Japanese mafia (Hill 2014; Kaplan and Dubro 2003) and its portrayal in yakuza-genre cinema (Standish 2000; Varese 2006; Coates 2020). The methodology section explains the adoption of a “from below” perspective through the methods of in-depth gameplay and close reading (Fernández-Vara 2011, Hutchinson 2019) allied with a configurative analysis framework (Lima 2019). Lastly, the analysis section presents the findings of this research that indicate *Yakuza* provides a spatial-temporal experience of play experienced through ludoformation (Aarseth 2019), dwelling (Vella 2019), and the development of “familiarity through permanence” in the transformation of Kamurochō’s space into place for the player.

## 2. About Spaces and Places

Studies on space and place, or a “spatial turn”, marked a shift in our understanding of sociality and sociability, highlighting their role in our experiences of everyday interaction (Günzel 2019, p.13). Markedly, Lefebvre’s (2013) work influences how we study space and its relational characteristics. His perception of space as a product of human action is remarkably pragmatic and dialogic – by acting upon the world, we change it and shape it, and then our daily lives are affected by these, altering our experiences of the space (Lefebvre 2013, Tuan, 2011).

Lefebvre (2013) develops the concept of thirdspace – the representational, lived spaces we inhabit. These are constructed alongside and enabled by the perceived space we practice in and engage with; and the conceived spaces that help guide us through cartographical and topographical representation (Lefebvre 2013). Thirdspace

has also been a concept used in game studies to represent virtual worlds such as Second Life or MMORPG’s that we inhabit outside of our “real” world. Said thirdspaces are also perceived – the coded environmental design, the mountains, cities, and characters we engage with – and conceived as cartographical representations that guide the player (Günzel 2019).

The nature of representational, lived spaces, is made more explicit in the work of Yi-Fu Tuan (2011). Tuan draws parallels between our human experience of growing up and our experiences of space. As we grow, so do our perceptions of what surrounds us: colors, sounds, smells, shapes, textures, and all sorts of sensorial experiences expand our “geographical horizon” (Tuan 2011, p.35). Our explorations of gameworlds are not that different. Through elements of game design, such as tutorials, visual cues, and 2D or 3D rendered spaces, our geographical and ludic horizon of that gamespace is slowly enhanced (Domsch 2019; Fernández-Vara 2011). We get to *know* more about it the more we interact with it. We experience these worlds and “have intense feelings for the space and its spatial qualities” (Tuan 2011, p.13). Affective connections with spaces transform them into places, and said connection, argues Tuan, happens when we pause our movement through space, and imbue it with values (Tuan 2011, p.153). What does it mean, however, to form affective connections with a space? Or specifically – what is affect?

According to John Dewey (2005), to be affected is a consequence of an action executed on us. We are affected by art pieces when we wander through a museum; by the audiovisual, kinesthetic experience of live music; by the shared passion we feel as fans of a game we love. Being affected, from a pragmatic perspective, is always connected to acting (Quère, 2003). It may be represented by cosplayers, protesters, religious catharsis, or the joy of beating a tough raid boss in a MMORPG – it is the materialization of the emotional, sentimental, and cognitive load of that which affects us. Affect presupposes some form of change, an internal movement tied to emotions and feelings, to biological and sociocultural patterns (Ahmed 2014; Lima, 2019). Space becomes place when these elements conflate through our experiences of the former. This also happens in games – how many hours have players spent on virtual worlds, be they multiplayer or single player? This is possible because we create affection for those fictional universes and their inhabitants, and, as such, we transform those gamespaces into

gameplaces, safe havens to which we constantly return to entertain ourselves, to meet friends (fictional or not), and to experience something different, from the rapid chaos of a MOBA battle, to the peace and quiet of managing a village. Games are, as Moukherjee says, “story-spaces of possibility” (2019, p.168), and to better understand these possibilities it is important that we shift our focus to some concepts of space and place applied to digital games.

## 2.1 Gamespaces and spatial stories

Digital games are spatial experiences and have been studied as such by several researchers (Aarseth 2001, Nitsche 2008, Wolf 2002, Jenkins 2004), to the extent a sort of “spatial turn” in the study of games has been discussed (Günzel 2019) and contested (Golding 2013). Aarseth (2001) and Murray (2017), albeit from different perspectives, argue that spatiality and navigability in space are defining qualities of digital games, a perspective also shared by the later work of Wolf (2002), Nitsche (2008) and Calleja (2011). The player navigates the digital space where she exerts her agency on fictive narratives, deals with rules that constrict and enable gameplay, and as she experiences and understands it, she “generates new meaning” (Nitsche 2008, p.3).

The space analyzed in this paper, that of Kamurochō, is one in which the player experiences the narrative of an ex-yakuza and his conflicts, through (mostly) beat'em-up mechanics and long narrative exposition intermissions. The player's experience and meaning making is enhanced by a navigable space that, through affordances of the medium (Golding 2013) and storytelling typical of videogames, is environmentally and interactively rich. Three concepts are relevant to understand the richness of *Yakuza's* spatial experience: ludoforming, environmental storytelling, and indexical storytelling (Aarseth 2019, Domsch 2019, Fernández-Vara 2011).

Aarseth names the transposition of real spaces into fictional and ludic versions of them in digital games “ludoforming” (Aarseth 2019, p.127). Aarseth argues that in a ludic landscape the player encounters two “superimposed, but independent” layers of space, the topographical and the topological (Aarseth 2019, p.127). The former is the gamespace as we see it, the virtual landscapes, buildings, and other visual elements. Suely Fragoso's proposal of the utterance space, the “space of the significant, the visual elements of an image” is comparable to this topographical layer but adds to it the

extradiegetic textual and audiovisual aspects of the interface that help guide the player, like health indicators and minimaps (Fragoso 2015, p.217).

The topological layer is what “rules the ludic world” (Aarseth, 2019, p.131), referring to the space in which the player has freedom of movement and interaction. Fragoso (2015) argues that, alongside the utterance space, the spatial experience of games is comprised of an “imagined space” (Fragoso 2015, p.216) comprehending the fictional and immaterial in-game universe the player inhabits through controllable characters or other manifested forms (eg. Tetris' falling bricks); and the material space, where gaming happens – for instance, for this research *Yakuza's* material space was my living room in Rotterdam, the PS4 Dualshock, the TV, the rugged old couch I sat on during long gameplay hours. Interfering with the imagined space, enacting upon the topographical and topological layers, requires the mediation of an interface (Fragoso 2015). It is through the pressing of buttons in the material space that we affect that imagined space. However, Aarseth highlights that the player is limited in their exploration of the gamespace, as only the topological layer is subjected to the rules of gameplay (2019). We can grab pots, open doors, and talk with NPC's – but only some pots, doors, and NPC's are actually interactable. In many games, *Yakuza* included, a considerable part of the elements we visualize are just details of a game topography enhancing player experience by populating that world, while simultaneously breaking immersion by locking layers of that same world to the player.

These elements can be very important to create an enhanced experience of play through environmental storytelling (Domsch 2019). The term, originally coined by Don Carson (2000) based on his expertise studying theme parks refers to the ability to “tell a story through the experience of traveling through a real, or imagined physical space” (Carson, 2000). Domsch (2019) builds upon this scholarship and proposes elements one can identify when analyzing videogames' environmental storytelling.

Evocative spaces, those that “refer to or evoke previously existing conceptions of spaces” (Domsch 2019, p. 106), are widespread in gaming design, with ludoformed cityscapes in *Detroit: Become Human* and *GTA*, or the familiar spaces of transmedia franchises like *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*. An element that augments evocative spaces are visual cues – objects and

signs that guide the player in a game and allow her to better comprehend and experience the gameworld. Visual cues are both part of the imagined space, as these elements are visible to the player, often interactable, and aid in the telling of a history of the game world (Fernandes-Vara 2011); and part of the utterance space, where signifiers of both the imagined space and the software interface merge, providing the player with enough information to “know what he can and should do” (Fragoso 2015, p.223) – for example, quick time event buttons during *Yakuza* fights lead to the use of its signature “heat actions”, brutal combos that deal considerable damage. Domsch argues that visual clues are not sufficient for environmental storytelling and are aided by landscapes that “can also reflect, directly or indirectly, the player’s actions and tell of their consequences” (Domsch 2019, p.111). Changes in light, color, weather, and hue, all can add a visual narrative texture, and may affect what a player can or cannot do in-game.

Another layer of environmental storytelling is manifested through embedded narratives (Jenkins 2004, p.126), elements in the gameworld where the player encounters and activates meaningful narrative events. Some of these are mandatory, they move the story forward, while others may happen by chance or once some criteria have been reached. Domsch’s “event triggers” are an example of embedded narratives. These occur upon player action and lead to the start of quests, defined as “space-driven content structures” that aid the narrative (Nitsche 2008, p.7). These can be “spatial choices” that trigger when a player moves “to a certain point in space” (Domsch 2019, p.115).

Clara Fernández-Vara likewise suggests that games tell stories through visual elements in space through indexical storytelling, the ability to generate “stories through traces, both on the part of the designer and the player” (Fernández-Vara 2011, p.4). Unlike Domsch’s approach that is focused on the pre-coded game’s content and what the player can do within it, Fernández-Vara’s acknowledgment of player agency in the shaping of that world and influence in creating a story of her own adds nuance to how gamespaces can enact their storytelling possibilities (Fernández-Vara 2011; Mukherjee 2019). These traces, which she draws from Peirce’s semiotics and, specifically his definition of indices, help construct two different stories, one of the gameworld, and one of the players. She argues the latter is very limited in current

games that “insist on dictating the story to the player” and has “underused potential” (Fernández-Vara 2011, pp.9-10).

The move from space to place is, according to Tuan, linked to the development of familiarity; the ability to enjoy a pause in the movement and imbuing values and meaning to space through our experience of it (Tuan 2011). Vella’s (2019) approach to dwelling in games is heavily informed by the theory of Tuan, alongside others such as Heidegger and Norberg-Shulz. Of particular interest to this paper is Vella’s appropriation of the concepts of hestial and hermetic dwelling (Casey 1993). The former is “inward-looking, centralized, and enclosed. It represents a gathering-in, a lingering, a staying”; whereas the latter is “dynamic and decentered, implying outward movement, openness, and divergent lines” (Vella 2019, p.143). Applying these concepts to *Animal Crossing* and *Minecraft*, Vella’s central argument is that studies of space in games have focused mostly on movement, in the freedom of operating in the gamespace and exploring it (hermetic dwelling), but its opposite, the pause, the lingering of hestial dwelling, is seldom investigated. He argues that games often present the player an array of hestial practices that create a homely sense to the player in the game, a place to return to. Although in most cases he refers to specific places such as houses and spacecrafts, I claim later that Kamurochō, despite being an open urban space at first, can also be transformed into place (for the player) and ‘hestially’ experienced.

### 3. A brief note on Nostalgia and Saudade

These words are deceptively similar in meaning; both evoke a feeling of longing towards something from the past. Nostalgia, as operationalized by Aarseth (2019) as a motivation for ludoforcing, is simply understood as “revisiting” by the author. The concept has a longer history of studies since the 17<sup>th</sup> century when it was deemed as a disease of the mind (Boym 2001). Current approaches to nostalgia refer to it as longing for times past rather than a return to a previous space (Boym 2001), while its link to pop culture creates a “pop nostalgia” for the times we did not experience and commodifies them (Reynolds 2011, p.xxvii). Nostalgia is featured in *Yakuza 0* and its 80’s settings, but also in the plot of later games, through character flashbacks in emotional moments, and the often-uttered word *natsukashii*, that indicates “joy and gratitude for the past rather than a desire to return to it” (Hobart,

2020, par.3).

*Saudade* is a word commonly encountered in Lusophone literary production and frequently used by Portuguese speakers. Although its etymological origins are still uncertain (Silveira 2007), its meaning is a poetic conjoining of sadness and longing for a previous experience, the happiness of remembering it, and the desire to reenact or re-encounter that joy in the present (Bertini 2018; Silveira 2007; Teixeira 2019). Teixeira argues that *saudade* is “our soul telling us where it wants to return” (2019, p.102), while Bertini contends that “saudade is the sadness of losing something that was good and that we wished was again with us (...) it presupposes a love experienced before” (2018, p.6). The feeling configured my play experience in its context: quarantined and alone, the game permitted the player (myself) to experience travel and awakened memories of a Japan trip, augmenting the affective connection to the gamespace and its characters.

#### 4. About Yakuza/Ryu Ga Gotoku, and the Yakuza

*Yakuza/Ryu Ga Gotoku* is a triple A (Keogh 2015) Japanese franchise developed by the Ryu Ga Gotoku studios and published by SEGA. In this paper, the focus lies on the games that form the “Kiryu Saga” in Kamurochō.<sup>1</sup> The studio has, however, developed other games that are set in the same fictional universe (*Judgment* and its sequel *Lost Judgment*, and the zombie game *Yakuza: Dead Souls*). In 2020 a new game was released, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, with a new protagonist. In common, they are set, at least partially, in the district of Kamurochō.

Although each entry has a different plot, and connections between the games do exist, we can approach them as somewhat stand-alone stories when it comes to the convoluted storytelling of Kiryu’s continual saving of the Tojo Clan and all the Yakuza-related drama. *Yakuza* is best understood as a journey in the life of its many

playable characters<sup>2</sup> especially of Kazuma Kiryu. From his difficult start in the Tojo Clan during the 80’s (*Yakuza 0*), his imprisonment and quitting of the yakuza life (*Yakuza/Yakuza Kiwami*), to becoming a Tojo Patriarch and resigning in the same day to run an orphanage in Okinawa (*Yakuza 2/Yakuza Kiwami 2/Yakuza 3*), Kiryu is our hero, guide, and friend through a quite long journey.

More importantly, however, Kiryu and I can take a break from all the fighting and drama to enjoy the entertainment district of Kamurochō, a ludofomed version of Tokyo’s Kabukichō. We can eat, sing, dance, flirt with hostesses in cabaret clubs; play “phone dating” in the 80’s and chat with online camgirls in 2016; we can play bowling, baseball, and pocket racing<sup>3</sup>; we can interact with Kamurochō inhabitants to solve their most pressing issues – such as helping a cat café find amicable cats or helping train a dominatrix. It is not just in the ludofoming of Kamurochō/Kabukichō and the parodical incorporation of aspects of Japanese culture that *Yakuza* has ties with “real-life” Japan: it is also in how it utilizes the ‘myth’ of the yakuza – the criminal syndicate – to enhance a sense of (fantastic) realism and of a living gamespace.

##### 4.1 The Yakuza and Kabukichō

Shaw (2010) states that rather than looking at videogames as culture, we should aim to analyze them *in* culture. This difference is significant. It does not mean video games are not a form of culture, nor that they cannot form a cultural group, but rather that they are embedded in society and in cultures, local and global, in varying degrees. As such, cultural contexts configure both the game developed and the experience of playing the game (Lima 2019), making each interaction between player and game unique. To analyze Japanese games, accounting for the cultural, political, and social context of their production is crucial (Hutchinson 2019). The presence of the yakuza in Japan is not solely as a crime syndicate, but also romanticized in literature (Saga 2013; Tendō 2008) and cinema. Several researchers dedicated their

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<sup>1</sup> Following their order of release in North America and Europe, the games are *Yakuza* (2006), *Yakuza 2* (2008), *Yakuza 3* (2010), *Yakuza 4* (2011), *Yakuza 5* (2015), *Yakuza 0* (2017), *Yakuza Kiwami* (2016), *Yakuza 6* (2018), *Yakuza Kiwami 2* (2018). The games *Yakuza Kiwami* and *Kiwami 2* are remakes of the original *Yakuza* released for the Playstation 2 in 2006 and 2008; *Yakuza 3* to *5* had their remastered versions released in 2019.

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<sup>2</sup> In *Yakuza 0* and *Yakuza 2/Yakuza Kiwami 2*, you can also play as Majima Goro; in *Yakuza 4* you can also play as Tanimura Masayoshi, Akiyama Shun, and Saejima Taiga; in *Yakuza 5*, in addition to the return of Akiyama and Saejima, you can play as Shinada Tatsuo and Sawamura Haruka.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive list of the possible side games and activities within the franchise, the author recommends the walkthroughs by CyricZ on GameFaqs: <https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/community/CyricZ>

investigation to the many films that portray the yakuza (Standish 2000; Varese 2006; Coates 2020) and these films inspired the games: actors known for their portrayal of yakuza such as Takeshi ‘Beat’ Kitano (*Yakuza 6*) also played this part in the franchise through voice acting and motion capture. The game incorporates yakuza genre aesthetics, with heightened emotional acting, melodramatic plots, and iconic visuals including tattoos and traditional weapons, alongside nods to the mix of the genre with ‘pink film’ and ‘roman porno’ (Coates 2020, p.351). The game further borrows from Japanese TV shows “outlandish humor” and creativity (O’Hagan 2010, p.70), constructing an experience of “parodic play” of the yakuza and, by proxy, of Japan, that builds upon stereotypes while being critical of them.<sup>4</sup>

Introducing different scholarship to discuss the representation of the yakuza in the franchise, I suggest that the literature on the Yakuza crime syndicates and their role in Japanese society provides adequate ground to better understand the imbrication of culture and play experience. Kiryu, as coded and written, embodies the vision of Ryu Ga Gotoku studios, mainly comprised of Japanese gameworkers<sup>5</sup>, providing thus a local experience and perspective on the many cultural, political, and social issues presented in the game. Moreover, the studio hired a yakuza crime novelist, Hase Seishu, to aid in the writing of the first two games (Hutchinson 2018, p.245), adding an extra layer of literary authenticity to the portrayal of the yakuza in-game.

The yakuza can be considered a crime syndicate akin to the Italian Mafia, in which the idea of “protection” is central: rather than criminals, they see themselves as parallel force capable of offering better protection to businesses and neighborhoods in exchange of monetary fees (Hill 2014; Kaplan and Dubro 2003; Baradel and Bortolussi 2020). Hill (2014) identifies the origins of yakuza in groups of gamblers (*bakuto*) and peddlers (*tekiya*), whereas the protection/chivalry (*ninkyō*) myth that surrounds the yakuza originates in groups of urban vigilantes from the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Hill 2014, p.234). The author identifies the main yakuza activities existing both

in legal and illegal spheres, and Baradel (2021) argues that some grey areas of yakuza business also exist, such as their control of nightlife establishment where prostitution and gambling happens daily but are often disguised.

What differentiates the yakuza from other crime syndicates, however, is their need for visibility among the populace, while remaining invisible to the law enforcers (Baradel and Bortolussi 2021). In sum: how to balance their presence in the *space* and their *places*, while keeping their backdoor activities. A history of (in)visibility determined by socio-political contexts dating back to the Meiji era is presented by Baradel and Bortolussi (2021). They highlight that the yakuza has, steadily, occupied spaces in the cities, and through this occupation they gained social and economic capital as “protectors” involved in aid and relief in the postwar era. These forms of aid are in tandem with the constructed imagery of “protectors”; however, these are turned into perilous activities, as discussed by Hill (2014), especially through the collection of protection money (*mikajimeryō*), one of the core sources of revenue to fund yakuza activity. In recent years, since the introduction of the *bōtaihō* law in 1991, yakuza visibility in public spaces are strictly regulated, including the removal of signs with the families’ crests. Alongside their less visible presence, their perception among the population as a violent group (*bōryokudan* is the word used by the police to refer to yakuza) grew (Hill 2014; Baradel and Bortolussi 2021).

With Kabukichō being one of the most known and dense places of yakuza presence in Japan (Hill 2005; Baradel and Bortolussi 2020), it is no surprise that it is the place of choice to become ludofomed into Kamurochō. Although their presence and control of the region seems to be dwindling, with the growth of foreign criminal activity known as *hangure* (Hill, 2005), the mythos of the yakuza is heavily linked to the ethos of Kabukichō. The district is historically riddled with common yakuza business that are illegal or on the verge of legality. Moreover, according to Hills, residents of the district have a positive relationship with the yakuza: “A typical comment was ‘I don’t have any trouble with the yakuza – because I have a friend’” and according to the author this perception demonstrates a paradoxical relationship between yakuza and citizens (Hills 2005, p.11), one that is also explored and presented in this franchise.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of “parodic play” was suggested by a reviewer and incorporated here. I would like to state my thanks for this suggestion. It fits well with the kind of play we engage with in Yakuza.

<sup>5</sup> A comprehensive list of Ryu Ga Gotoku workers can be found at MobyGames: <https://www.mobygames.com/game-group/yakuza-ry-ga-gotoku-series/offset,75/so,1d/>

## 5. Investigating Kamurochō

Elsewhere (Lima 2019), I argue that "gaming" encompasses three spheres of mutual affectation that are analytically organized in a configurative framework: the "culture sphere" that acknowledges the network of relations at play during play, analyzing games *in* culture and *as* culture; the "medium sphere", that focus on software and hardware affordances of the mediatic device 'videogame'; and the "gaming sphere" that encompasses all that occurs during a gameplay session, connected to the material space (Fragoso 2015), spatial and experiential (Dewey 2005; Tuan 2011) nature of play. They work in dynamics of mutual configuration, and their separation in analysis permits focus on one or the other, although a holistic, comprehensive understanding of any videogame or videogame phenomena would ideally account for all of them and their interconnections. Configuration is defined as a mode of interaction and experience unique to videogames, a "continuous, interactional process of mutual affectation between the medium itself, players/gamers, the videogames industry, societal values and cultures" (Lima 2019, pp.40-41).

In this paper, I combine a configurative framework with a perspective "from below" as suggested by Golding (2013). Through Certeau's "walker", Golding contrasts the strategic view "from above", commonly adopted in game analysis and linked to a prominence of the "configurative" in game studies, with a "from below" analysis, advocating that player's tactical experience of space "can inform spatial analysis and even the strategies of the designer or theorist" (Golding 2013, p.126). Golding argues that rather than configurative, games are a navigable medium. His critique is like my own – that the definition and use of configuration (Moulthrop 2004; Eskelinen 2004; Eskelinen and Tronstad 2003; Woolgar 1991) concentrate excessively on the machine/game, rather than the user/player. However, I argue that since Woolgar's work, configuration included the human ability to configure the machine in a process of mutual affectation (Lima 2019; Woolgar 1991). As argued by Golding, gamespaces are affordance based, offering "possibilities for action" (Golding 2013, p.118). These are configured, for instance, by player skill, previous knowledge and experiences, and affective engagement with the gameworld and its characters. As such, a "from below" perspective should be grounded on a renewed take on configuration that imparts

the player a protagonist role in the experience of play. The combination here proposed contends that by tactically navigating a game, players are mutually and constantly (re)configuring that space and their play.

Following then a configurative, from below experience, I analyze the "gaming sphere" having my own play and player experience as the collected data. Contextually, play happened (and was configured by) during the COVID-19 pandemic and its quarantines. Furthermore, a spatial-textual analysis that uncovers the "relationship between a text and its context" (Hutchinson 2019, p.3), through an investigation based on in-depth gameplay and an affective analysis of this gameworld, covers central aspects of the cultural and medium spheres. As argued by Golding, through walking in the gamespace, the player "encounters the city not as a concept, but as immediate experience" (Golding 2013, p.127). And it is this experience that Kazuma and I want to convey and theorize in the next section.

## 6. Analyzing the living space of Kamurocho

In addition to telling the "history of the game world" through indices, evocative spaces, and other ludic and narrative strategies, this ludiformed space provide three key aspects to the player that are explored in the analysis: sheer recognition value, authentic simulation, and nostalgia - and, I add, a feeling of saudade (Aarseth 2019, p.130). Furthermore, I analyze how this living space enables the telling of stories of the gameworld and the player (Fernández-Vara 2011); and proposes distinct experiences of dwelling (Vella, 2019) for the player and their avatar – Kazuma Kiryu.

### 6.1 Recognition and Authenticity

A key tourist location in Tokyo and a spot known for its yakuza ties, the district of Kabukichō is a good choice of the developers. It is both adequate for the players residing in Japan, providing them a somehow familiar space to inhabit in the gameworld; and players whose knowledge of Japan comes from other media (e.g anime and film), as the game's visual design brings several elements of Japanese aesthetics well known abroad. The *sheer recognition value* of Kabukichō-Kamurochō helps transform space into place as the player lives the district, becoming familiar with it, an element of importance in the making of a place (Tuan 2011).

As Kiryu and I leisurely walk the streets of

Kamurocho in each game, we start noticing familiar sights as the district is riddled with branded content: the omnipresence of BOSS coffee vending machines makes my palate feel their extra sweet taste again; restaurant chains Ikinari Steak and Matsuya; a range of famous alcoholic drinks; and iconic SEGA arcades are some of the most easily recognizable. Of note is the presence of the iconic chain Don Quijote, known for its messy interior and availability of practically anything, a trope that is used in most games as we are asked to buy disparate items from the store during sidequests. One unit of the chain is situated in the same spot in Kamurochō and Kabukichō – a corner one block away to the right of their entry gates. Other places of easy recognition are Kamurochō Theatre Square/Kabukichō Toho Cinema area; the male idol billboards found in a parking spot on Hanamichi-dori street and its ludofomed counterpart, Shichifuku street; and the several *kombini*'s, nightclubs, narrow alleys, and love hotels. Sheer recognition value is not only essential for effective ludofforming, but also for the player experience of space and its subsequent transformation into place.

A key factor in the authentic simulation of *Yakuza*'s game world comes from the “cultural sphere” that configures both the making of the game, and the players experience of it: the representation of yakuza. As explained previously, the yakuza carry a mythical aura in Japanese history, especially in their position as protectors. We often encounter this sort of relationship as Kiryu and I meddle in the affairs of several yakuza families throughout the games, disrupting their daily activities of money collection, scams, and other crimes. Eventually, Kamurochō citizens may even help us in our fistfights against the yakuza, while others create familial bonds with the yakuza rank-and-file members, cherishing their presence and the safety they bring to their community. Additionally, the yakuza families are organized in a similar fashion to Japan's current yakuza landscape, with larger groups situated in Tokyo and Kyoto/Osaka (Baradel 2021; Kaplan and Dubro 2003); internal conflicts are common; and disputes may be resolved with violence. The use of yakuza lingo seems accurate as well. Words such as *kyōdai* to refer to brother-brother relationships (Hill 2014, p.236) are often heard in-game. Yakuza members refer to themselves as members of the *gokudō*, ‘the extreme path’, and rarely use the word yakuza. All these elements are in line with the description of yakuza culture in the literature

(Hill 2014; Kaplan and Dubro 2003).

Examples of the relationship of Kabukichō and the Yakuza are also present, enhancing authenticity. While in the 80's of *Yakuza 0* we can easily spot the crest of the Tojo Family outside their main building, the later games set post 2005 have any public identification of Yakuza reduced to the small pins used by their ranks. This change is significant, as it demonstrates the results of the *bōtaihō* law, adopted in 1991, and its subsequent amendments, such as the *bōhaijōrei*, that forced the Yakuza to hide their institutional presence from the public eye (Baradel 2021, p.75). Consequentially, the games also show the growing presence of foreign criminal syndicates (*hangure*) from China and Korea, providing a historical link with Japanese colonial past and the presence of the “Asian other” in Japanese society (Hutchinson, 2018).

Furthermore, characters having the voices and faces of Japanese actors known for their yakuza movies may increase recognition and authenticity values to those familiar with the film genre. The game's authentic simulation of Kabukichō is presented both via ludofforming and a somewhat accurate portrayal of yakuza daily life, both the one investigated and described by scholars of organized crime, and the one seen in the movies and books that have likely inspired the game creators.

## 6.2 Nostalgia

When I first met Kazuma Kiryu and Kamurochō, they were living the bubble economy of the 80's and its colorful, extravagant, neon-lit aesthetics that serve as inspiration, today, to the vaporwave movement (Cole 2020). The presence of an 80's setting serves the plot of the game, but also capitalizes heavily on the nostalgia-factor – including, maybe, to a time of riches for Japanese citizens. Through minigames such as phone dating, pocket racing, and Disco dancing – featuring a substory with “Miracle Johnson”, a parody of Michael Jackson – game developers set a nostalgia-heavy gamespace that can cater to those who lived the era, and those that consumed it through other media. The addition of a range of Japanese actors famous for their presence in earlier and/or contemporary Yakuza movies enhances both nostalgia and authentic simulation, potentially deepening players' connection to the game.

Another instance of nostalgia lies in the presence of SEGA arcades in every game - the ones from the 80's



carry the extra detail of the now extinct blue and white façade. However, it is inside where the nostalgia-magic happens. One can play games that are an ode to the SEGA classics of the 8-bit era and the early 3D fighting games<sup>6</sup>. With these games-within-games, the studio delivers retrogaming nostalgia, a growing phenomenon within games culture (Heineman 2014; Redhead Ahm 2021) and a consequence of the commodification of nostalgia through retro-aesthetics argued by Reynolds (2011). As a player, it's fun to enter these arcades and spend hours within them rather than moving the plot forward. These optional and entertaining experiences have an allure that helps develop affective connections needed to make space into place.

I still recall being filled with *saudade* when exploring Kamurochō. There are still several places in Tokyo that provide similar aesthetic experiences of that 80's space, and my mind immediately wandered to my days in 2017's Tokyo, before I knew about *Yakuza*. More specifically, the game brought me back to the narrow streets of an area near Oyama station, where I lived, that felt quite displaced in time at night with its range of dimly lit izakaya, arcades with a strong cigar smell, hostess clubs, and other nightlife figures illuminated in neon light.

As Kazuma and I progressed in the *Yakuza* series, my *saudade* was enhanced as the district modernizes and better mimics the current-day Tokyo I experienced, further enabling the player to experience the liveliest night district in Japan. The affective catch was, however, reenacting my many meals at Matsuya and their cheap but delicious donburi. *Yakuza* successfully evoked my *saudade*, accessing affective memories of lunching with my Japanese language classmates and made me yearn to relive those past moments. *Natsukashii ne...*

### 6.3 Stories

My first time exploring Kamurochō in its fullest, was in *Yakuza 0*. As the player, I navigated a lively space enhanced by its visual and sound design, and an entertainment district - Kamurochō - that plays a central role in the player experience, being entertaining beyond the main game story and mechanic. Making good use of event trigger mechanics and embedded narratives (Domsch 2018; Nitsche 2008), you are drawn into the

residents' most mundane problems through quests that start simply as you walk past a certain spot or initiate a conversation with a non-playable character. The feature gives an impression of unexpectedness that affects both the player and Kiryu, creating the illusion of a space that can surprise you and has a life of its own, despite said events being previously configured by the developers. These side quests help us explore the contained open world that characterizes *Yakuza's* spatial structure, which mixes "multicursal corridor/mazes" with a contained "open landscape" (Calleja 2011). Solving quests allows the player to experience parts of the district that may be otherwise inaccessible during normal exploration. It also helps understand the district yakuza-citizens dynamics and the different trope characters of Japanese culture, offering the player an experience that is simultaneously parodical, critical, and realistic of Japan and its everyday cultural components: from kappa folklore and the blue tents of Japanese homeless people; Japan's relationship with sex, sexuality and sex work; the country's aura of a technological, geek-otaku paradise; and the often invisible criminality and corruption found within police and politicians tied to yakuza; the player experiences many facets of Japan and its citizens.

How (and if) we unravel these stories helps create what Fernández-Vara calls "history of the player". Although she argues that the narratives of videogames limit player ability to construct their own story, I maintain that approaching games through a configurative perspective, while exploring the game from the viewpoint of the player and their experience, evidences the possibilities for the player to write their own story of the gameworld even in linear games. The player history in *Yakuza* is written through the transformation of space into place, one that is configurative and experiential (Lima 2019), lived as we enter that universe and are mesmerized by it, enchanted by its lively atmosphere and endearing characters. In *Yakuza*, the randomness of side quests, allied with the optional character of most of its minigames and side stories, transforms each play experience into a unique experience for players. Having spent more time playing the cabaret club management minigame in *Yakuza 0* and *Kiwami 2* than playing the "main game", my experiential storytelling of these games surely differs from many others.

Moreover, if we bring into the analysis the material space or the "gaming sphere", this becomes even more

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<sup>6</sup> Virtua Fighter, Space Harrier, and Out-Run are some of the games one can play inside these SEGA arcades.

personal: having been to Japan myself has changed how I relate to this game, and why it evokes *saudade*, enhanced by the inability to travel there as the play happened during the pandemic. I had a Japan trip planned (and cancelled) for that time, which made exploring Kamurochō a vicarious experience, a way to travel while quarantined. The game transported me to my happy days in Tokyo, and in those solitary pandemic days, my affective connection to Kamurochō grew thanks to the sense of familiarity it provided me with. Hence why I kept dwelling in that virtual world.

#### 6.4 Dwelling

Whenever Kiryu and I enter Kamurochō for the first time, we are placed in the same spot: Tenkaichi Street, almost right under its ornate and neon-lit gate, akin to the one found in Kabukichō Ichiban-gai street. This choice is deliberate – it gives seasoned players an immediate understanding of their surroundings once the game starts (or when the story reaches Kamurochō) that evokes what I call familiarity through permanence. Tenkaichi Street, however, is not the only example of such that we find across the franchise. Earlier discussed elements, like the presence of branded content and other ludoforced landmarks, the use of nostalgia-heavy gamespace, famous actors, and the interactions with citizens via quests enhance not only authenticity and recognition, but also familiarity.

To dwell is to remain, leading to the demarcation of space as place. The process is dialogical: if to make place we imbue it with meaning, values, and experience (Tuan 2011; Vella 2019), a place in exchange “gives shape to our dwelling within it, and to our being” (Vella 2019, p.143). But what forms of dwelling have Kiryu and I experienced in the play of *Yakuza*, a game that needs movement to happen rather than pause? First, let’s explore the “dwelling of the player”.

I dwelled in a specific material space for most of my *Yakuza* experience – my living room. Time also shaped the dwelling, as the games were played during the pandemic and its many lockdowns and impositions in our exploration of the space outside the home. Playing *Yakuza* in such a context configured my gameplay and my pandemic experiences – it became both a way to remain and a way to leave. Whenever I played it, I was transported to a place that became familiar, Kamurochō, one that I learned to navigate and enjoy. The games have the same

map (with a few inconsistencies here and there), with several store locations and landmarks unchanged, enhancing my feeling of familiarity. Calleja argues that this “internalization” of a game map “leads to a strong sense of inhabiting the gamespace” leading the game itself to become “part of the player’s immediate surroundings” (Calleja 2011, p.87). I dwelled in Kamurochō as if I was there, and the designed permanence of the district made me feel at home. I could return there whenever I felt the urge to go outside amid the lockdown.

In *Yakuza 0* Kiryu enters the property market and acquires several locations in the district. These include some key spots that remain in the same location over the years: Poppo Tenkaichi Street, Sushi Gin, and Mach Bowl, among others. When starting a new *Yakuza* game, I would revisit with Kiryu his former real estate empire, imagining that seeing these places and the changes that happened in a district that tends to remain the same creates a nostalgic feeling for him (as it does for myself). Examples are the Millennium Tower that was the ‘empty lot’ that served as source of dispute in *Yakuza 0*; or the long construction of Kamurochō Hills, started in *Yakuza 2*/ *Kiwami 2* and finished in *Yakuza 5*, where once was West Park, home of the homeless.

A second dwelling, that of the gameworld, happens with Kiryu, as I walk with him across the city. A traditional place of dwelling is the bar Serena/New Serena, our hideout during every game, a place we can return to that serves a hestial dwelling function in games (Vella 2019)<sup>7</sup>. However, I contend that the whole district becomes place for the player, because it is already a place for Kiryu.

Kiryu is presented to the player as having a deeply affective relationship with Kamurochō. Raised there within the Tojo Clan, he feels a duty to protect it, to do good for its denizens even when he is no longer affiliated to the *Yakuza*. These feelings are manifested by writers and developers in dialogue and action especially in the first three games. However, *Yakuza 3* presents a different scenario for Kiryu as he decides that Kamurochō is no longer the place he wants to call home. The constant chaos brought upon his life thanks to his ties with the Tojo and Kamurochō gradually transformed his relationship with it. If at first Kamurochō is, for both of us, a place where we

<sup>7</sup> Other playable characters also have their hideouts that can be understood as place, such as Shun Akiyama’s “Sky Finance” office in *Yakuza 4* and *5*.

happily remain despite it all, and brings us a sense of familiarity and safety, from Yakuza 3 onwards that is no longer the case for Kiryu (although it remains so for me). Moving to Okinawa, he imbues a new space with value and meaning, and the Morning Glory orphanage becomes his place of hestial dwelling, while Kamurochō is a burden he must face whenever he is called to enact his hero journey. It becomes, for Kiryu, a place of hermetic dwelling, where he hastily passes through to fulfill a task. This feeling is clearly manifested in Yakuza 6: The Song of Life when, for the last time, Kiryu is placed under the Tenkaichi Street gate against his initial wishes, and says: “How do I always end up back in this damn city?” (Mada kono machi ni kaette kishimatta ka)

## 7. Finale

Through the literature reviewed and the analysis of Kamurochō exploration, we can better understand the potential of space and place as theoretical keys of understanding our experience of gameplay. I argue that Kamurochō offers players a spatial-temporal experience in which players are invited to construct with it an affective relationship that transforms Kamurochō into place. We experience it growing, changing, and paradoxically remaining the same over the span of almost three decades. We are illusory agents in this change, as our actions “from below” have (planned) architectural consequences from one game to another, but nonetheless affect the experience(s) of it and how a player sees and feels that district and its inhabitants. A second argument developed is the matter of familiarity through permanence. In contrast to the high pace of changes usually seen in installments from game franchises, Yakuza invests in the repetition of Kamurochō as center of the action, where we can enact both hestial and hermetic dwelling. To reinforce this central role, the developers keep memorable sites quasi-untouched, and businesses that the player can visit remain in the same place for decades. This familiarity is enhanced by the ludofforming of Kabukichō, its authenticity and sheer recognition value, coupled with several nostalgic elements and a fair portrayal of the Yakuza. Personal circumstances and experiences of players may increase or decrease their affective connections to Yakuza, and future studies that rely on gathering data from several players can enlighten us.

Although limited to my own textual “from below” analysis of Kamurochō, informed by my configured

affectation towards it and the developer’s configuration that limited my actions, the paper proposes a conceptual discussion and a methodological pathway that can be taken forward to explore the games’ reception by different publics and assess their experience of this space-turned-place. Moreover, the Yakuza games are riddled with examples of yakuza activity of all shades of legality and seems to represent this universe with a fair degree of fidelity that can be investigated in further papers.

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