

Of Dommies and Night Queens: Kink, BDSM, and positive representations of alternative sexualities in the *Ryu Ga Gotoku (Yakuza/Like a Dragon)* video game series

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EN Abstract. This article analyses the representations of kink and BDSM in the *Ryu Ga Gotoku* franchise, known in the West as *Yakuza* and *Like a Dragon*: *Yakuza 0* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015) and *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2020). For this purpose, this paper adapts myth analysis to identify recurrent motifs and analyse the discourses that these games generate around kink and BDSM as alternative and non-normative practices within their particular social and ludic imaginaries. By drawing on game studies and sex and sexuality studies, this article provides a reading of the dominatrices in *Yakuza 0* and *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* as contextualised within popular culture, the genres of role-playing games (RPG) and beat 'em ups, and the genealogy of dominatrices in Japanese games. The substories studied in this paper feature Ayu, a dominatrix with a lack of confidence, and Yumiko, a more experienced dominatrix bullied by colleagues and connected to Mr Masochist, a client of the BDSM community who has become immune to pain. Together with the recurring job of Night Queen, a fighting class, these substories frame kink and BDSM through the lens of professionalisation and normalisation. The analysis recognises 20 recurrent motifs that help articulate the discourses proposed by the games and construct a positive vision of kink and BDSM within the queer spaces of the underworld that allows the dominatrices to assert themselves within their communities.

Keywords. kink; dominatrix; *Ryu Ga Gotoku (Yakuza/Like a Dragon)*; video games; queer.

ES De dominatrices y reinas de la noche: kink, BDSM y representaciones positivas de sexualidades alternativas en la serie de videojuegos *Ryu Ga Gotoku (Yakuza/Like a Dragon)*

ES Resumen. Este artículo analiza las representaciones del kink y el BDSM en la franquicia *Ryu Ga Gotoku*: “*Yakuza 0*” (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015) y “*Yakuza: Like a Dragon*” (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2020). Para ello, este artículo adapta como metodología el mitoanálisis para identificar motivos recurrentes y analizar los discursos que estos juegos generan en torno al kink y el BDSM como prácticas alternativas y no normativas dentro de sus imaginarios sociales y lúdicos. Basándose en los estudios del juego y los estudios sobre sexo y sexualidad, este artículo ofrece una lectura de las dominatrices en “*Yakuza 0*” y “*Yakuza: Like a Dragon*” contextualizada en la cultura popular, los géneros del rol y beat 'em ups y la genealogía de las dominatrices en los videojuegos japoneses. Las historias secundarias estudiadas aquí tienen como protagonistas a Ayu, una dominatrix con falta de confianza en sí misma, y Yumiko, una dominatrix con más experiencia, intimidada por sus colegas y vinculada a Mr Masochist, un cliente de la comunidad BDSM inmune al dolor. Junto con la denominadas Night Queens, una clase de rol enfocada en el combate, estas historias enmarcan el kink y el BDSM desde la perspectiva de la profesionalización y la normalización. El análisis identifica 20 motivos recurrentes que ayudan a articular los discursos propuestos por los juegos y a construir una visión positiva del kink y el BDSM dentro de los espacios queer del submundo de *Ryu Ga Gotoku*, lo que permite a las dóninas afirmarse dentro de sus comunidades.

Palabras clave. kink; dóninas; *Ryu Ga Gotoku (Yakuza/Like a Dragon)*; videojuegos; queer.

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1. Introduction: BDSM, queerness, and games

Games and play have always been a vital part of sex. Bo Ruberg argues that the “language of play is not only the language of games; it is also the language of BDSM and other queer communities, where kink and sex parties are ‘play parties’ and individual erotic practices are known by names like ‘anal play,’ ‘bondage play,’ and ‘puppy play’” (2018, p. 543). These intersections between playfulness, understood as the quality of games –from tabletop and live role-playing games to video games –, and playfulness, as intrinsic to human sexuality, often resurface in queer and porn studies. Within these discussions, Susanna Paasonen (2018, p. 2), like Ruberg, interprets playfulness as “a mode, capacity and orientation of sensory openness, curiosity and zest for variation that precipitates improvisation in acts of play” as opposed to play, which is “the means and actualisations of playfulness”. It is in that openness and variation that games may reflect a curiosity, to employ Paasonen’s words, for a queerness that may include BDSM.

BDSM and kink have been connected to queer perspectives in their concern with non-essentializing sexual identities and resistance to dominant discourses about sexual identity (Sprott et al., 2020). Although Sprott (2023, p. 107) explains that kink may be defined as “an umbrella term that refers to a heterogeneous set of pleasurable leisure activities that often overlap with sexual or erotic activities, although kink is not synonymous with sex”, kink may also define a self that exists in the margins of normative identities and behaviours. Brandy L. Simula (2013, pp. 71-72) has, in fact, connected BDSM to the potential realization of “queer utopias” given how participants in the study create what she terms “interrelational resistance” to both normativity and heteronormativity given that in the spaces created by BDSM practices and their associated forms of play “the normative gendered regulation of bodies is suspended”. Arien K. Muzacz (2021, pp: 4; 15) argues as well that “kink and bondage/domination and sadomasochism can contribute to identity development, congruence, and self-actualization”. These ideas can be expanded with Sprott et al.’s findings that in “people who identify as kinky”, kink may serve several functions and can thus be regarded “as flowing into or enhancing sexual interactions, as a form of connection/intimacy, as related to spirituality, and as providing a sense of freedom” (2020, p. 20). Kink may therefore be seen as a practice and identity that allows people to playfully connect with others and otherness and challenge (hetero)normative expectations.

Beyond kink and BDSM being described through playfulness, games and video games also feature BDSM in various forms. BDSM games (Waszkiewicz and Navarro-Remesal, 2025) have been described as games where the exploration of desire is central to the experience. For example, the outfits of Ivy from the *Soulcalibur* series (Namco, 1996–2018) recall a dominatrix attire. The goal of these games is not to directly satisfy the player’s sexual urges. Yet, in other cases such as *Dominatrix Simulator: Threshold* (deviant.tech, 2018), players are mainly drawn to the game for the sexual experience. When such games are considered, some further parallels may be drawn between BDSM and play/games: first, it could be argued that in BDSM, desire is articulated by vertigo, which, as Roger Caillois (1958, p. 44) argued, defines a category of games in which the player “gratifies the desire to temporarily destroy body equilibrium, escape the tyranny of his ordinary perception, and provoke the abdication of conscience”; second, BDSM, like games, is articulated around the struggle for control and is connected to the idea of freedom and a voluntarily partial surrender of it. Games are about enacting a (more or less open) preexisting text via a performance (Fernández-Vara, 2009) that results in a kind of directed freedom (Navarro-Remesal, 2016). Thus, in BDSM and games, “the Slave accepts losing his freedom just as the player accepts acting within the limits of the directed freedom proposed by the system, the Master takes control acknowledging his dependence on the Slave, the same way the player takes control acknowledging her dependence on the system ruleset” (Navarro-Remesal, García-Catalán, 2015, p. 131), which results in the unequal but consensual distribution of power; lastly, BDSM and games are associated to the exploration of limits, to aesthetics and acts that exist in the limits of the forbidden, and, as Jorgensen and Karlsen remind us, “transgressions may have a special status in the contexts of games and play” (2018, p. 4). BDSM, often classified as “*edgeplay*” (emphasis on original), belongs to the category of “*taboo play*”, which “breaks general societal norms, but [] also shows the limits of what one is not allowed to play about” (Stenros, 2018, p. 22). Similarly, queer play is defined as inherently transgressive given how it shows “ways of unsettling or troubling the stability of norms and normality” (Sundén, 2012, p. 16).

Considering the above interconnections between play, games, and BDSM the objective of this paper is to research mainstream games (that is, non-BDSM games) that include portrayals of a particular element of BDSM, the motif of the dominatrix. More specifically, this paper studies the series *Ryu Ga Gotoku* (Sega, 2005–present), translated in the west first as *Yakuza* and more recently as *Like a Dragon* and how they portray dominatrices through the lenses of professionalisation. This paper also aims to establish, by applying the

methodology of myth analysis, a series of recurring motifs around the figure of the dominatrix not only in the Ryu Ga Gotoku series but also within the larger context of Japanese media.

1.1. Ryu Ga Gotoku, queerness, and BDSM

Ryu Ga Gotoku (from now on, RGG) are crime dramas set in the Japanese underworld that combine action-adventure gameplay with elements of the beat 'em up genre (with one character fighting many enemies at once) and role-playing (leveling up statistics, character progression, and, in later games, turn-based combat and party management). They take place in fictionalised versions of real red-light districts of several Japanese cities. The tone of RGG goes from the highly melodramatic to the comedic, often ridiculous. They can be as violent as tender and funny, and do not shy away from difficult topics such as homelessness, racism, orphanhood, political corruption, taxes, and illegal immigration.

The main protagonists are Kazuma Kiryu, an ex-yakuza with a stoic and helpful attitude, and later Ichiban Kasuga, another ex-yakuza who is equally noble and generous, but more socially awkward and passionate. Games starring Kiryu play as beat 'em ups, whereas Kasuga fights are presented as Role-Playing Games (RPG) combats, justified diegetically by Kasuga's love for that genre of video games. The series includes a main narrative that is combined with "substories", optional side missions that are freer in content and tone and often see Kiryu or Kasuga helping eccentric characters through fighting and advising.

The series, as explained by its director Masayoshi Yokoyama, was initially conceived as "Japanese people making a game for Japanese people", but it has reached a wide global audience (Litchfield, 2025). The franchise started as a product aimed at a very particular audience, middle-aged men, and has continued to be so despite its growth in popularity, including among young and female audiences. Current series director explained that:

I think that this is precisely one of Like a Dragon's selling points. In Yakuza: Like a Dragon, everything starts with three unemployed middle-aged guys being like "Let's go to Hello Work [an employment office in Japan]." They have a different air about them than a group of young heroes would, complaining about back pain and the like. But this "humanity" you feel from their age is what gives the game originality (Amber V., 2025).

This focus has not prevented the series from including LGBT characters. Model and TV personality Ayana Tsubaki, who is transgender, plays a stylised version of herself in *Yakuza 3* where she tells Kiryu she is transgender and the conversation on the topic is presented in a wholesome way. Kiryu is generally depicted as open-minded, non-judgemental and calm, which makes the series quite mature when it comes to sexuality despite its red-light district elements; for instance, in a *Yakuza 0* substory, he tells another character: "People all have their kinks. Who are you to shame another person for what they enjoy? You can't judge someone just because they don't conform to society's standards of sexual normalcy!". Moreover, a fan favourite character, Goro Majima, is often presented in drag with little in-world justification, and he shows an open obsession with Kiryu, referring to him using the Japanese suffix of endearment "-chan". Majima has a drag persona called Goromi that works as a hostess in a club and appears in *Yakuza Kiwami* (2016) and in *Like a Dragon: Pirate Yakuza in Hawaii* (2025), in which Majima is the main playable character.

RGG games have been academically explored largely in connection to their Japaneseness (Hutchinson, 2019) and the construction of space and tourism (Borges Lima, 2022). Loh (2024) more specifically analyses *Yakuza 0* through body politics, disability studies, and queer studies. Interestingly, Loh argues that the world of *Yakuza 0* is governed by two principles: "its subordinates are expected to demonstrate absolute subservience to their superiors" and "deviance is punished by inflicting bodily harm upon the offender to uphold the organisation's status quo and ensure future compliance" (2024, p. 44). Loh (2024, p. 46) also identifies an inherent queerness in *Yakuza 0* given the relevance of the substories that work as "narrative middle spaces to generate multiple moments of pleasure that go against the grain of working towards a singular plot climax" and may thus work to "resist[...] reductive readings" of particular topics (in Loh's analysis, namely disability). Given that substories are present in every game in the series, this conclusion can be extrapolated to RGG in general.

The RGG series can be seen in light of Sega's search for "edginess" within the above mentioned target of (male) adult audiences (Mondelli and Hutchinson, 2025, p. 172). But this edginess is rather mild compared with other Japanese narratives involving the intersection of Yakuza and BDSM, which are in general much darker and sexually explicit (see Qiao, 2020; Santos, 2020). Playfulness and humour are used frequently to counterbalance violence and drama, and even if the games do not shy away from difficult topics, the narrative usually has a strong component of wholesomeness, as is the case in the two substories analysed in this paper.

2. Methods. Myth-analysis and recurring motifs

Games can be conceived as spaces in which, through narrative and ideology, traditional myths are reproduced and new mythical structures are created (Planells de la Maza and Navarro-Remesal, 2022). This view of games, which has been termed ludomythologies, coincides with Dom Ford's (2025) idea of "mytholudics", that is, the understanding of games as/through myth.

Repetition is a constitutive element of myth, which may be understood as a story made of motifs (mythemes) that, through repetition, becomes meaningful and valuable for a community, fulfilling the function of helping to explore and understand the world. In this model, gameplay elements such as mechanics (what players can do) and goals (what they need to do to advance in the game) are understood as motifs and mythemes too. These repeating motifs are the basis of mythanalysis, which further allows for the study the

structural and cultural dimension of games. This process was proposed by figurative structuralism (Gutiérrez, 2012; Durand, 1982) and seeks to discover ‘the patent or latent myths that go through, ‘work’, or sustain a certain cultural moment’ (Gutiérrez, 2012, p. 183). Mythanalysis looks for the explicit and/or latent connections between myths and their contexts, thus focusing on sociological and cultural interpretations (Planells de la Maza, 2021). It can thus unearth shared social imaginaries and cultural obsessions, shaped and naturalised through repetition. Here, a social imaginary can be understood as an amalgam of representations of the world and imaginary meanings, shared by a certain social group, and which partly reflects society and partly affects its construction and transformation, where mental models are intertwined with affective dispositions, and which is in a state of constant tension and mutation (Pérez Latorre, 2023, p. 22).

Consequently, ‘ludonarrative imaginaries’ are understood as subsets of that social imaginary articulated by works of a ludic, narrative, and ludonarrative nature in a symbiotic relationship.

This paper analyses the two BDSM substories in RGG games placing them in wider contexts, following these steps:

1. Analysis of the main (ludo)narrative mythic motifs about BDSM of the two substories, situating them in the discursive space of RGG as a series,
2. Detection, analysis, and comparison with similar motifs in other video games (an intra-medium reading), based on our own research,
3. Detection, analysis, and comparison with similar motifs in other popular media (an inter-medium reading), based on our own research and previous literature

Thus, this paper shows how the motifs in RGG relate to others that dominate the social imaginaries of and about BDSM, which dominant narratives about the topic appear, and how RGG games reinforce or challenge them.

To study these two substories, we have replayed them in the European PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 5 versions of the games. Given their linearity, we have complemented our playthroughs with YouTube recordings, which coincided in full with our experience. We have also replayed *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* to observe the traits of the Queen of the Night job.

3. Results and discussion. A Tale of Two Dommies.

Yakuza 0 features a substory titled “How to Train Your Dominatrix” (in the original, “SM 講座”, *SM Kōza*”, literally “S&M Course”), from now on HTTYD. Here, Kiryu meets a shy and polite dominatrix who fails to humiliate a customer begging her to do so, which fuels a quiet anger and results in large disappointment. When Kiryu sees her crying he consoles her. Ayu admits she decided to become a domme (dominatrix) to change her subservient nature and become more confident. In her childhood, that subservient personality made her the target of abuse by other children she had deemed as friends. Kiryu and Ayu then go to a park and practice the verbal exchanges expected of a BSDSM session. Here, the player needs to pick the correct dialogue choices, which include “I bet you’d like that, you pervert” and “Who gave you permission to speak, pig?”. Kiryu and Ayu later return to the club and Kiryu witnesses how she dominates the previously disappointed customer. If the player has picked the right answers, Ayu will succeed in dominating him and end the substory with the customer happy and, more importantly, with Ayu gaining a new sense of confidence and self-worth.

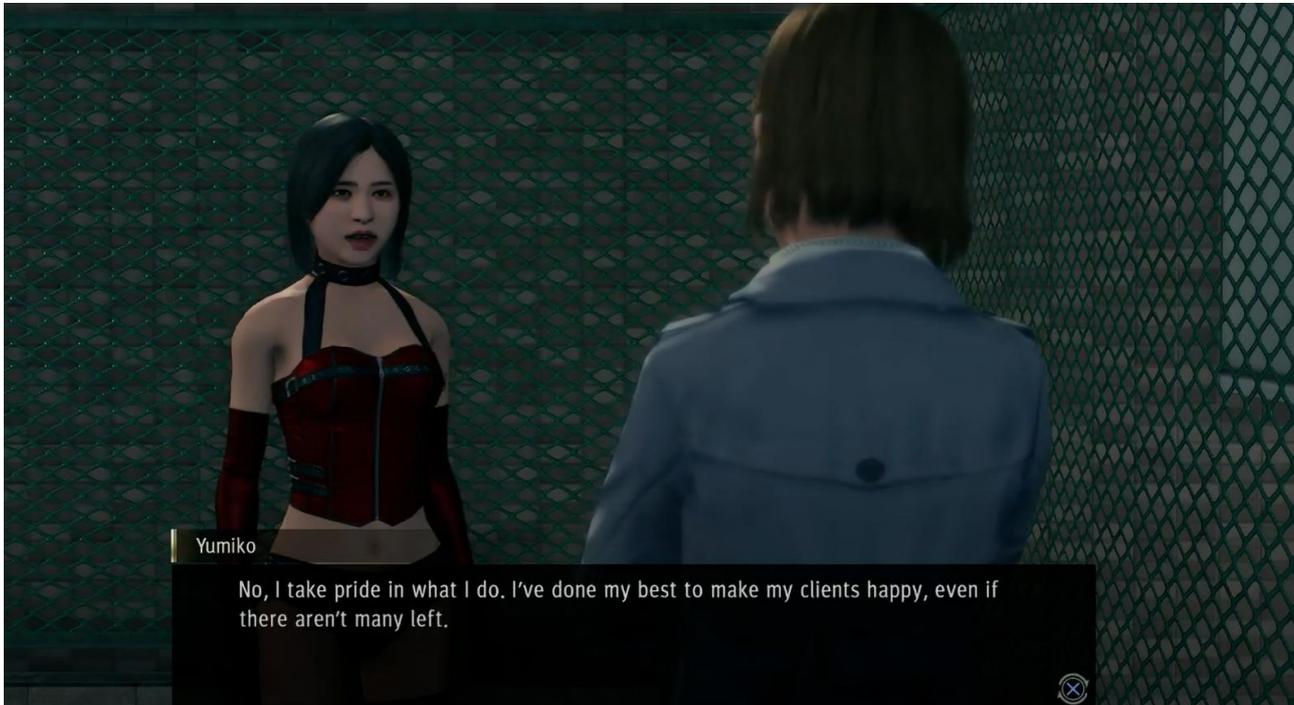
Figure 1. Ayu confessing her intentions to Kiryu in *Yakuza 0*.



Source: screenshot captured by the authors from *Yakuza 0* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015), PlayStation 4 version.

Yakuza: Like a Dragon includes the substory “Fifty Shades of Play” (in the original, “あの素晴らしい痛みをもう一度”, literally “That wonderful pain again”), from now on FSOP. This starts with Kasuga encountering a group of women bullying Yumiko-san, their colleague, because they believe she is too old for the job of dominatrix and bad for business. Kasuga avoids a violent confrontation among them and leaves concluding that “life’s a harsh mistress”. He soon runs into another dominatrix with her boss outside their club apologizing to yet another disappointed client popularly called Mr Masochist, known in their community for not being able to feel pain any longer and who becomes the target of every reputable club.

Figure 2. Yumiko confronts her colleagues in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*.



Source: screenshot captured by the authors from *Yakuza 0* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015), PlayStation 4 version.

After discovering that Yumiko works a second job at a convenience store under the supervision of Mr Masochist’s mother, Kasuga arranges a meeting between mother and son, arguing that an estranged son being reprimanded by his mother is one of the highest possible humiliations. This event, which Mr Masochist deems cruel but not painful, does not bring the type of pain he seeks: one that can make him feel alive instead of empty. When Yumiko, brought by Kasuga to meet a depressed Mr Masochist, hears him suggest that his only option now is death, she slaps him and tells him that it is not right “to feel so unimportant and worthless”. Through this slap and Yumiko’s words that Mr Masochist regains the ability to feel pain: she has “tenderised” his heart, and his flesh is next. He is ready to be judged, a desire he expresses to his now mistress.

Besides these two substories in *Yakuza 0* and *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, the latter game also features some female characters, Saeko and Eri, who can take on the jobs of ‘Night Queen’. The game mimics the traditional RPG class system (in which characters are assigned occupations that modify their traits) under a narrative framing of part-time jobs, since employment and working-class conditions are a central part of the main plot. The Night Queen job is basically that of a dominatrix, with a pleasure whip and able to inflict blunt damage during fights. This summarises how BDSM and dominatrices are framed in RGG: chiefly through a professional role, one that fits within a community (red-light districts) and that is beneficial to both the dominatrix and the submissive customer. To analyse the mythemes of these stories and how they present a particular idea of BDSM and sexuality, it is necessary to first explore their wider contexts.

3.1. The context of genre and desire: BDSM and dominatrices in Popular Culture

If kink is understood to include a wide variety of desires, behaviours, and practices, their representations may be expected to be as diverse. However, this is not always the case in media depictions. Jenny Barrett highlights how a frequent convention of mainstream Western filmmaking is “to characterise the fetishist, the sadomasochist and the dominatrix if not as psychopaths, at least as individuals with self-destructive obsessions or behaviours that are dangerous to society” (2007, p. 1). Barrett found two main dominatrix stereotypes, the “Mature Dominatrix” and the “Vamp Dominatrix”, young, attractive, and extreme in behaviour, which are often respectively paired with two stereotypes, the Young Male Sub and the Public Authority Male Sub. Barrett’s qualitative study among UK BDSM practitioners, evidences that the community wishes for “mainstream representations” to include “revised treatments now given to other social groupings, such as the gay community or ethnic populations” and to be able to watch “a BDSM film in the future that is not a

joke, a freak circus, and that doesn't attempt to explain or legitimize itself, especially in terms of 'accepted normality'" (2007, p. 18).

In US popular media, BDSM themes often appear in romantic dramas and erotic thrillers. These two genres were joined in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which exploited a common BDSM narrative motif, that of trauma. As Ummni Khan (2017, p. 60) argues, "stories with sympathetic BDSM characters, such as *Fifty Shades*, often displace stigma and abjection onto other identities and practices, using narratives of childhood trauma and pathology and reinscribing gender and sexual normativity, albeit with a tolerance towards mild heterosexual kink". This displacement to trauma results in a new narrative motif, that of the healing narrative, which according to Schotanus (2021, p. 109) "suggests that BDSM practices offer therapeutic potential". This is present in American films such as *Secretary* (Shainberg, 2002) and the Finnish movie *Dogs Don't Wear Pants* (Valkeapää, 2019), in which BDSM, taken to extremes, frees the protagonist from his trauma and suicidal tendencies.

Japanese popular culture shows some contrast in its representation of BDSM. In literature, De Matas (2019: p.101) shows that novels such as *Snakes and Earrings* by Hitomi Kanehara (2003) and *Hotel Iris* by Yōko Ogawa (1996), both written by female authors and adapted to film in 2008 and 2021 respectively, "depict women involved in BDSM relationships which shape how their characters are seen, how they view themselves, and how they develop their consciousness of the world". In film, *Tokyo Decadence* (Murakami, 1992), adapted by Ryu Murakami from his homonymous novel, portrays a gallery of perverts, normally wealthy men with negative traits, but it also features a positive role model in Saki, a BDSM sex worker, and a protagonist, AI, who works as a domme specialised in humiliation and slowly grows from being shy and insecure to confident, in a process that recalls Ayu's aim to become a better dominatrix in *Yakuza 0*. *Tokyo Decadence* is a "pinku eiga", a category of softcore pornographic films in Japan "where marginalised themes of bodily relations, sex-affectivity, BDSM and relational dynamics of aggression are dealt with" (Medina-López Rey, 2024, p. 107). Pinku eiga can be thus seen as a "kind of queer cinema" that incorporates "the confluence of a queer cinema mediated by queerness and panic of socio-cultural and sex-affective hegemony" (ibid).

With a very different tone, the surrealist comedy *R100* (Matsumoto, 2013) presents a businessman who signs a contract with a mysterious BDSM club where various dominatrices will assault and humiliate him in public, unannounced and unexpected, during a year. The title itself is a play on the Japanese Film Classification and Rating Organization (popularly known as "Eirin") categories, where R15+ and R18+ limits viewing to people above that age. *R100* features a hypodiegetical movie-within-a-movie made by an elderly filmmaker who claims that no one below 100 years of age could understand it. This is an atypical connection, in which dommes are presented as powerful and mysterious professionals and BDSM is connected to absurdist and surrealist humour. *R100* is the film that comes closest to Ryu Ga Gotoku in its humorous and often absurdist tone surrounding BDSM and the depiction of dominatrices as professionals.

In summary, we can see 12 motifs about BDSM and dominatrices in this context:

1. Kink as Psychopathy
2. Mature Dominatrix
3. Vamp Dominatrix
4. Healing and Trauma
5. Domming as Self-Confidence
6. Domming as a Business
7. Warping the Body
8. Pleasure in Passivity
9. Margins of Hegemony
10. Absurdist Humour
11. Young Male Sub
12. Public Authority Male Sub

3.2. A history of dominatrices in Japanese games

In a more specific context, RGG games should be read as part of the gaming industry and, more particularly, of the Japanese industry. While this paper analyses non-BDSM and non-erotic games, Japan has a long tradition of *ero*ge or erotic games, often published for PC, away from the more controlled space of consoles, and developed by smaller and amateur (*dōjin*) teams. Outside this *ero*ge subculture, three trends or historical phases can be identified in the portrayal of dominatrix-coded characters in Japanese games: 1) the urban hellscape beat 'em up, 2) the fighting game domme, and 3) the domme as a positive character with agency.

Beat 'em ups have their origins in the games *Kung Fu Master* (Data East, 1984), *Nekketsu Kōha Kunio-kun* (Technos, 1986), and *Double Dragon* (Technos, 1987). *Kunio-kun* dealt with fights between high-school gangs in Japan, while *Double Dragon* moved to an abstracted version of the US. *Final Fight* (Capcom 1989) has been signalled as an instance of the incorporation into video games of "transnational imaginaries of "street violence" and "vigilantism" against the background of large, modern American cities during the 1970s and 1980s" (Zanotti, 2019, p. 48). Like that game, "the classic beat 'em up games produced in Japan carried out a function of symbolic appropriation and redistribution at a local level as they remediated a cinematic textual canon [...] into the video game medium", incorporating a marked "American-ness" (Zanotti, 2019, p. 48).

Through this appropriation, the US became a kind of "universal space" for beat 'em ups, with urban areas in decay populated by violent punks and gangs. These American spaces reproduced the idea of an "urban hellscape" seen in American films such as *Death Wish* (Winner, 1974) or *The Warriors* (Hill, 1979), with a touch

of the *Mad Max* series (Miller, 1979-present), in itself filtered by its Japanese reinvention in the manga series *Fist of the North Star* (Burtonson, 1983-1988), especially in its obsession with punks, mohawks, and BDSM gear. *Mad Max* and the *Fist of the North Star* might account for the prevalence of dominatrices as regular enemies in many of these games. Dominatrices, usually armed with whips, can be seen in, other video game series such as *Double Dragon*, *Final Fight* (with Poison later reinvented as a trans icon), *Streets of Rage*, and the game *Captain Commando* (where they carry electric prods). This also shows a symbolic connection between BDSM's playful violence and actual violence.

Later on, the fighting game *Battle Arena Toshinden* (Tamssoft, 1995) featured Sofia, a woman dressed in a revealing black rubber suit, high heels, and opera gloves, armed with a whip, and described in-game as a "queen". Sexualised female characters were not new in fighting games, but BDSM-coding was not overt until games such as *Toshinden*. There were some borderline cases coming from the *ero*ge space. Such was the case of the shoot'em up *Steam-Heart's* (Giga, 1994), a space shooter with erotic cutscenes, and *Variable Geo* (Giga, 1993), a fighting game starring exclusively female characters with erotic content focused on abusing and humiliating the losers that became a precursor of incorporating domination into fighting games.

This strong dominatrix coding continued in *Soulcalibur* (Namco, 1996) with Ivy Valentine, a warrior with a similar suit, a sword that transforms into a whip, and a moveset heavily built around humiliation and dominance. Interestingly, many of the alternative outfits of Valentine are based on male pirate attire, including a more male-coded hair styling, in a clear play with gender-bending. In *The King of Fighters '99* (SNK, 1999), the female character Whip also fights with its namesake weapon, though she is fully covered in military attire. By the end of the decade, the trope had become codified, with later characters exploiting it openly, such as Mistress Spencer in *Rumble Roses* (Konami, 2004), known in-game as The Mistress or The Dominatrix. Fighting games often have some sort of storyline that connects all of the characters, and backstories for them, although these are usually saved for side content or paratexts. Many of the dominas in fighting games have a neutral or positive character: they are presented as tough and intimidating, but rarely as villains or psychopaths.

The first two waves of dommes in Japanese games were clearly connected to action genres. There might currently be a third wave of sorts that is still connected to those genres, but with two key differences: a focus on stronger narratives and a sense of agency for these characters. In addition to the RGG subseries, the Bayonetta series (Kamiya, 2009-present) could be included. This action series, indebted to 2D beat 'em ups, stars a witch that, although not professionally a dominatrix, dresses in a strongly BDSM-coded attire, uses whips, pole dances, and submits her enemies. We know nothing of Bayonetta's sexual life and preferences, though her stylings and attitudes have turned her into a sort of disruptive queer icon.

In summary, we find some repeating motifs from the wider pop culture context, with 5 extra new ones:

1. Urban Hellscares
2. Actual Violence
3. Tough Female Fighter
4. Powerful and Disruptive Femininity
5. Heroism

3.3. Ryu Ga Gotoku: on roleplay, professionalisation, and (no) shame

In RGG, desire is portrayed through the characters' life choices, their involvement in underworld power struggles, and the devotion and often homosocial bonds they maintain with friends and family. The protagonists are driven by multiple layers of desire, including violence, loyalty, familial affection, and a sense of what is right and just. The narrative presents strong bonds, conflict, betrayal, and self-sacrifice among male characters; however, beyond homosocial desire, as pointed above, the story structure also incorporates elements of gender fluidity. These elements open potential queer readings of the games. Although queer fan communities normally focus on Boys Love (BL) manga, anime, and video games such as *Slow Damage* (NITRO CHIRAL, 2021-2023), which features male homosexual S&M relationships with the player/protagonist in the role of the submissive, some members of these communities have taken on RGG as queer texts: the series has inspired various YouTube videos in which queer players provide commentary from their own perspectives, such as @Dragon-Cafe, @tcs4613, @enpasu0711, or @gaymtime, to name but a few.

It helps that the series, as several popular outlets have highlighted, stars men that defy toxic masculinity, are open about their feelings (especially Kasuga), and value friendship and social bonds. For example, Keith Stuart (2020) argues that in *Yakuza Like a Dragon* "Ichiban is vulnerable and sensitive; he remains consistently moral whether the player is in control or not. If he sees poor people being victimised or sex workers being exploited, he steps in to protect them". The target audience ensures that RGG is filtered through a (middle-aged) male perspective, but one that does not result in the exclusion of queer perspectives. To the homosocial relationships between characters, it must be added that both Kazuma and Kasuga are compassionate and open-minded characters. They are not motivated by revenge but by justice and a willingness to help even strangers, and they are good listeners, ready to learn about and accept different perspectives. Their pasts and instrumental use of violence complicate a moral build that otherwise could seem flat. Their positive masculinity does not exclude traditional markers of their gender. Mondelli and Hutchinson (2025, p. 174) argue that in *Yakuza* games "[t]he heterosexual masculinity of the player-character is underscored by risqué content such as viewing a peep show or cabaret dance, managing a hostess club and other activities". This is also the result of a strong use of the Japanese underworld as the central setting of the series. Here, both Kiryu and Kasuga enact the chivalry that characterises RGG's male protagonists, which is "upheld as a masculine virtue in *Yakuza* through the main

plots, side missions and optional content, and NPC behaviour in the game environment” (Mondelli and Hutchinson, 2025, p. 175). This chivalry results in social openness and, as the analysis of the two domme substories shows, their driving force is acceptance, even (or especially) of people in the margins.

In the two domme substories, the role of the main character (and thus of the player) is to listen and help: with Ayu, it is about guiding her to be more confident in her abilities and skills as a professional dominatrix; with Yumiko and Mr Masochist, it is about pairing a customer with a professional in a way that makes them bond emotionally and recover from their insecurities and emotional and physical shells. With Kiryu, substories often involve his worldliness: he is a veteran of the underworld and always shows great common sense (this explains how he can guide Ayu even if he is not apparently into kink); with Kasuga, substories are frequently built around his passion and eagerness to help, even when he lacks the proper skills. Chivalry and positive masculinity are combined with a sense of fellowship among underworld denizens, even including those enemies Kiryu must fight.

The game further integrates chivalry, normativity, and BDSM in Ayu’s story when Kiryu fights two street thugs that harass Ayu shortly after the mission starts. The thugs are referred to by their names Okuno and Suga when fighting but as “Chauvinist Swine” and “Misogynist Hound” in conversation. As their harassment moves from Ayu to Kiryu, they start hurling insults at him by calling him “squealling pig”, “bacon boy”, and “wub”, which depicts them as homophobic. The fight that ensues between them is framed within the chivalrous narrative mentioned above, but with Kiryu speaking the words and tone that Ayu has yet to master. In addition, the language introduced here and the tone of the fight are framed as potentially tied to pleasure: the thugs are eventually defeated and humiliated, with Kiryu stating that they should “pick a safeword before [they] ask for a flogging” and the thugs fleeing the scene crying and apologizing.

While both Kiryu and Kasuga find no problems in helping dominatrices and masochists in these side missions, they do remark that they are not customers and would not know where to begin were they to engage in kink. This does not come from a place of shame but of openness about their lack of skills and potential inexperience. The lack of shame around kink practices is presented as liberating and allows the protagonists to forge connections with both female and male characters of the underworld. In fact, shame is redrawn as an affect that can be used positively, one which turns masochists on and which will be used in public to increase their pleasure. This is particularly the case in the HTTYD substory. The game, nevertheless, differentiates between shame and humiliation both as part of kink practice and as emotionally devastating acts, be these Ayu’s harassment by street thugs, Yumiko’s harassment by her colleagues, or the cruelty of being told off by one’s mother in the case of Mr Masochist.

Figure 3. Ayu and Yumiko as professional dominatrices



Source: screenshot captured by the authors from Yakuza 0 (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015), PlayStation 4 version

Part of the shamelessness attached to these side missions comes from how the stories of both dominatrices are framed through professionalisation. In HTTYD, Ayu-chan is presented as a woman who is bad at roleplay, which does not escape some irony in a game with RPG elements. This substory is focused on facing what the game terms the unique challenges that working in the S&M industry presents: for Ayu-chan this means finding a more self-assertive voice and being able to secure customers. When this substory begins, she is restrained by her good nature, her lack of assertiveness, and even by the business etiquette often associated with Japanese hospitality. Through her interactions with Kiryu and the input offered by the choices players can make, she becomes better at her job. Ayu-chan approaches S&M as a means of self-transformation, but not healing: it has to do more with finding a voice and feeling self-confident and free enough so as to say what’s on her mind rather than with the recovery from trauma. As Sprott argues (2023: 109-110) kink activities and roles may be motivated by “self-regulation” and/or “self-actualization”, with “personal growth”, finding “purpose” and “autonomy” featuring prominently within discussions of the positive outcomes of kink. Muzacz’s (2021, p. 15) also concludes that the “exploration of kink identities and BDSM behaviors can encourage identity development and movement towards self-actualization”. This is what is at the core of Ayu-chan’s development in the game. And while less explicit, Yumiko also must overcome professional difficulties: being derided by her younger colleagues and breaking Mr Masochist. In turn, Mr Masochist himself is frustrated by having become immune to pain, and Yumiko might be seen to heal him of that, but he is not attracted to BDSM because of any previous trauma.

Both substories have a marked light and comedic tone, bordering on the absurd. Their tone fits within the traditionally “sillier ambience of side plots and activities” against the higher seriousness of the main narratives of the games in the series. (Mondelli and Hutchinson, 2025, p. 173). Kiryu helps Ayu train her acting skills in a children’s park - a location that may feel both humorous and defamiliarizing, particularly when three children ask them if they are playing and whether they can join them before briefly becoming witnesses to Kiryu’s pretend humiliation. This adds not only to the focus on roleplay, but on the whole demystifying aspect of the tale: BDSM is not something forbidden, caused by trauma, but a weird adult game that children care little about. It is not in itself ridiculous: what is presented as ridiculous is treating it with such seriousness. RGG games often use humour as a tool for naturalisation and resistance to being excluded from society: even the quirkiest characters with the quirkiest kinks are humanised and shown to have valuable social bonds. It is the case, for example, of yakuza patriarch Susumu Gondawara, who likes to roleplay as a baby while being cared for by women roleplaying as mothers - he first appeared in *Ryu Ga Gotoku 2* (2006) and later became a recurring character in the series, even collaborating with Kasuga, in a dramatic and wholesome substory, to help a man fulfil his dying wife’s dream in *Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth* (2024).

Figure 4. Night Queen



Source: screenshot captured by the authors from *Yakuza 0* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2015), PlayStation 4 version.

Lastly, the Night Queen job must also be considered as a key element in RGG’s representation of dominatrices. Even if it is not part of the narrative and not acknowledged diegetically, appearing in and impacting just the combat scenes, it is coherent with the rest of the fictional world and shows some very strong motifs. This optional job class, available in both *Like a Dragon* and *Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth*, changes the female characters’ costumes (including a corset and a domino mask), weapons (a riding crop), attacks, and skills. These include ‘heel stomp’, ‘luscious guillotine’, ‘whip service’, ‘somersault leg’, ‘spinning queen’, ‘tough love’, ‘candle rush’, ‘vital vibration’, ‘essence of titillating claws’, and ‘essence of extreme bondage’ (shibari). These attacks may leave enemies brainwashed, which means they may in turn attack other enemies themselves, or charmed, which makes them fall in love with the character and unable to do anything beyond looking at her with hearts popping out of their heads. Thus, the Night Queen repeats several key motifs seen here: the Vamp Dominatrix, Domming as Self-Confidence, Tough Female Fighter, Actual Violence and Urban Hells-capes (since it is a fighting class), Powerful and Disruptive Femininity, and, given that the characters that can use it are among the game’s heroes, Heroism.

In summary, these two substories and the job class add three motifs about BDSM: Fellowship in the Underworld, Positive Male Helper and Shame. They also feature 14 of the ones described in previous section, for a total of 16:

1. Fellowship in the Underworld
2. Positive Male Helper
3. Shame

4. Conclusions

Being set in the Japanese underworld, RGG games can include BDSM and professional dominatrices in a natural way. The combination of quirkiness, absurdism, and wholesomeness typical of the franchise (especially in its substories) helps keep these depictions of BDSM from being too dramatic, without being ironic.

This paper has thus identified a total of 20 motifs, with 12 motifs found in popular culture about BDSM, 8 in Japanese games (5 of them new), and 16 in the RGG games (2 of them new):

Table 1.

	HTTYD	FSOP	Night Queen
Vamp Dominatrix	X		O
Fellowship in the Underworld	O	O	
Positive Male Helper	O	O	
Domming as Self-Confidence	O	O	
Margins of Hegemony	O	O	O
Urban Hellscape			O
Actual Violence			O
Tough Female Fighter	X		O
Powerful and Disruptive Femininity	O	O	O
Heroism			O
Mature Dominatrix	X	O	
Healing and Trauma		X	
Domming as a Business	O	O	O
Warping the Body		O	
Pleasure in Passivity	O	O	
Absurdist Humour	O	O	O
Shame		O	
Kink as Psychopathy	X	X	X
Young Male Sub	X	X	X
Public Authority Male Sub	X	X	X

Source: by author.

This table marks those motifs present in the games (O) and also those the games more or less actively rejects or subverts (X). As shown in the discussion and results, the games make an effort to portray everyone involved in BDSM as normal (though not normative) and not psychopaths. The negative pairings of the Mature Dominatrix and the Young Male Sub and the Vamp Dominatrix and the Public Authority Male Sub are avoided. In fact, these two male archetypes are not present in the games. The motif of the Positive Male Helper is a mainstay of the RGG franchise, not only of the substories analysed here. Kiryu and Kasuga treat everyone with dignity, even their enemies (such as the angry costumer in HTTYD), since, in the end, they all belong to the same underworld of red-light districts in the Margins of Hegemony. Consequently, the protagonists foster a sense of fellowship in the underworld which neutralizes shame and makes them connect with dominatrices and submissives alike.

This underworld is not exempt of violence, narrative- and gameplay-wise. The tropes of Urban Hellscape are included, following the genealogy that connects RGG to beat 'em ups, but Actual Violence in RGG is limited to fighting scenes: when the game is dealing with exploration and character interaction, relationships are more nuanced. These two tropes, together with Heroism, Tough Female Fighter, Vamp Dominatrix, and

Powerful and Disruptive Femininity are visible when female characters in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* take on the Night Queen job class.

Ayu's story in *HTTYD* is about gaining self-confidence through domming, something Yumiko in *FSOP*, as a Mature Dominatrix, already has. In the end, both Ayu and Yumiko, as well as the Night Queens, show a Powerful and Disruptive Femininity that grants them a special place in a male-dominated, violent criminal world. But more importantly, this is a result of their being proficient in Domming as a Business: in these red-light districts, excelling at what one does contributes to the whole social structure. Their business is one of providing (male) customers with the right kind of Shame and Pleasure in Passivity. In the case of Mr Masochist, these are needs that have taken him on a quest that results in him Warping his Body to the point of becoming invincible, a metatextual play with the form of action and RPG games. This subversion fits with the general Absurdist Humour of RGG's substories and job classes. The usual dramatic weight of Healing and Trauma stories is actively avoided in favour of smaller "quests": overcoming being too shy and polite and recovering the capacity to feel a particular kind of pleasure.

With this articulation of motifs, RGG games presents BDSM as something not outside of the norm; instead, it is a codified professional service in an underworld where everyone is, at most, comically eccentric. The focus is not on exploring BDSM from without, but on particular stories from within about how professional dominatrices contribute to their submissives and their communities. In RGG, BDSM, as a queer space and an alternative sexuality, is not treated as a problem in itself, but as a space where to tell personal stories.

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