Game Narrative Review

====================
Your name (one name, please): Erica Kleinman
Your school: Northeastern University
Your email: kleinman.e@husky.neu.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: 12/17
====================

Game Title: Nier: Automata
Platform: Playstation 4/PC
Genre: Action Role Playing
Release Date: March 7, 2017
Developer: Platinum Games
Publisher: Square Enix
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Yoko Taro

Overview

Nier: Automata, a sequel to the 2010 game Nier and a spinoff of the Drakengard series, details the events of the 14th machine war in the year 11945 AD. Some time prior to the beginning of the story, aliens arrived at, and attempted to conquer, the Earth with an army of machine life forms. The last of humanity fled to the moon and counterattacked with an army of androids. The two sides have been fighting this proxy war ever since. The story focuses on three specific members of the android organization, YoRHa, 2B, 9S and A2, as they seek answers and meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.

Automata features 26 endings (5 main endings and 21 "joke" endings) and requires the player to replay the game multiple times in order to progress through the entire story. Between these play-throughs, a reframing will occur that grants the player access to insights and information they previously did not have, bringing new light to the true impact of the characters' (and their own) actions. This format, along with a tendency to lean on the fourth wall, allows the game to deconstruct and reflect on the roles of the hero and the player. The story places a strong emphasis on exploring thematic elements, such as life, death, resolve, human nature, the meaninglessness of conflict, and one's reason to fight. Although it features a largely linear structure, Nier: Automata successfully takes advantage of emotional moments, heavy consequences, and well-timed interaction points to generate a sense of meaningful interaction and responsibility within the player.

Characters

Most of the characters in Nier: Automata belong to one of two factions: the machine army created by the invading aliens to overrun the earth, or the androids fighting the invaders on humanity's behalf. Most notable among the androids are the members of the elite combat group YoRHa. One noteworthy detail about the cast of Nier: Automata is that none of the major characters are human. Technically, the only human character in the

game is Emil, a returning character from the previous game who plays a minor role. The irony is that Emil looks far less human than any of the nonhuman characters that appear in the game. The characters most significant to the story are as follows:

- **2B** – The first of three player characters, YoRHa No. 2 Model B or "2B" is a calm and collected combat android that fights alongside 9S. She keeps her emotions in check and resists 9S's attempts to get closer to her but is actually a very loyal and caring individual.
- **9S** – The second playable character, YoRHa No. 9 Model S or "9S" (or Nines as he requests to be called) is a reconnaissance android and 2B's mission partner. He possesses an insatiable curiosity that leads to him asking questions better left unanswered.
- **A2** – The third playable character, YoRHa Model A No. 2, or "A2" is an older model android who has defected from YoRHa and been branded as a traitor. A2 is a cold and aloof, berserker style fighter, carrying out a personal mission to destroy all machine life forms and anyone who gets in her way.
- **Adam and Eve** – A mysterious pair of machine life-forms who refer to each other as brothers and possess unique, human-like appearances, resembling androids. Adam possesses an analytic personality, scientific interest in humans, and sociopathic mindset. Conversely, Eve possesses a childlike personality, wanting only to "play" with his brother, but displays violent tendencies and lacks any moral compass.
- **Pascal** – A machine life-form and leader of a village inhabited by machines that have broken free from the network, and desire only a peaceful existence. He is a scholarly and philosophical individual who enjoys reading human books from the old world and teaching what he learns to the machine children.

Breakdown

Nier: Automata's story is split into three "routes" with five main endings and 21 "joke" endings. Although they are often referred to as routes, they do not branch off from each other in a traditional sense but instead come one after the other in a designated order and the player progresses through them by "completing" and then replaying the game. The first two routes cover the same series of events but tell them from the points of view of 2B and 9S, respectively. The third route has the player switch between 9S and A2 throughout and covers a series of events that occur chronologically after the conclusion of the previous routes. A series of primary quests will guide the player through the main story; these can be identified either from the way they are marked on the map and quest trackers, or from the way they are presented to the player within the context of the narrative. The game world will change and restrict or expand as the primary story is progressed, but the story will not progress if the player does not complete these main-story quests. As such, the player is able to control the pace at which they proceed through the game and how much or how little of the open world and side content they explore.

The first two routes each have a single ending while the third features three possible endings dependent on the end game decisions made by the player. As the game does not feature a large, branching narrative, many of the interactions the player is presented with

do not actually have any effect on the outcome of the story. However the game effectively takes advantage of emotional impact and consequences to make the player feel as though their actions matter. In order to maximize emotional impact and self-reflection, the game leans on the fourth wall and seeks ways to place the player within the context of the narrative. An example of this is the process of setting up system settings, which is framed as 9S helping 2B setup her new android body after the pair is forced to self destruct in order to complete the first mission. While the player is the one setting things like volume and brightness, it is all framed as a piece of the story rather than an external action. Placing the player within the narrative context in this way creates a heightened emotional link that will increase the sense of responsibility towards events that come later.

Scattered about the game's open world are numerous sidequests, some of which can expand upon details of the main story, and many of which deal with the game's overall themes of life and death. Most involve helping androids or machines find their reasons to live, or discover that they no longer have one. While the player is always rewarded for completing the quests, the narrative outcomes are not always happy. The very action of completing a sidequest may result in the death of the one who gave you the quest. Within the main story, interaction points are synced up with emotional moments to create a sense of meaning and consequence behind the player's actions. This forces the player to reflect on the impact of everything they have and will do throughout this game and reconsider what it really means to be holding the controller in their hands.

flowers for m[A]chines

On their first play-through, the player follows 2B and 9S as they engage in numerous missions together. They repeatedly encounter machines that behave in inexplicably human ways, including desert dwellers who nonsensically mimic human behavior and express fear towards the androids who pursue them, machines that live and play in an amusement park, forest dwellers who protect their kingdom and infant king with unwavering conviction, and machines who have formed a religious cult and seek to convert others. They also interact repeatedly with Pascal's village, filled with machines that have disconnected from the network and wish to live peaceful, and almost eerily human, lives. All of these encounters cause the characters, and the player, to reflect on human nature and question the justification behind killing the machine life forms that have begun to replicate it.

This first part of the story deals primarily with the conflict between 2B and 9S and Adam and Eve. They first meet the machine brothers when they witness their birth in the desert. They encounter them again later within the recently excavated alien mother ship, where it is revealed that the aliens have been dead for a long time and that the machines are fighting for no reason. Some time after this, Adam abducts 9S and uses him to taunt 2B into fighting him, a battle in which he allows himself to be killed so that he may experience death. Unable to accept a world without his brother, Eve goes berserk and drives the machine network into a violent frenzy. 2B and 9S are forced to kill the mourning machine but the network corrupts 9S during the battle. 2B is forced to kill 9S,

however the final scene shows that he survives by transferring his consciousness to a nearby machine body. He gently lifts 2B into his arms and the pair shares a quiet moment together as 2B questions what separates the androids from the machines.

or not to [B]e

After "completing" the game once, the player can reopen their save file to continue the story. This second play-through follows the same series of events as the first but shows them from the point of view of 9S. While the overall progression of events is the same, there is new content; primarily, a series of cryptic videos play after certain main story events. Although they are vague in nature, each video appears to depict some amount of background information about the enemies and characters encountered throughout the main story. These videos, as well as information about enemies that 9S accesses by hacking, serve as a reframing within the narrative. They provide the player with previously unavailable context that changes the meaning behind their enemies' actions and their understanding of the impact of their own actions. These videos are never acknowledged by the characters in game and appear to exist to be viewed by the player specifically. To some extent, they exist outside of the diegetic world of the game, but since the game tends to place the player within the context of the narrative, the line where that diegetic world ends is never quite clear. Additionally, scenes of Adam and Eve interacting with each other are seen in this route, providing additional context regarding the two characters and their relationship with each other. Through this reframing, this second play-through provides the player the opportunity to reflect on the actions they have taken and their impact within the story world.

This is also the play-through in which the primary plot twist is revealed. Through his curious nature, 9S discovers that there are, in fact, no humans living on the moon. Humanity is extinct. YoRHa was created to continue the illusion that humans still existed so that the androids left behind would continue to have a reason to live. This revelation means that, like the machines, the androids have also been fighting a meaningless war.

meaningless [C]ode

After the player completes the first two play-throughs they can begin the third, in which a new series of events begins, taking place after the conclusion of the battle with Eve. 2B is infected with a machine virus that wipes out all of YoRHa as a mysterious machine tower rises up from the ground. 9S, returned to his android body, is spared but devastated when he witnesses A2 killing 2B, unaware that it was 2B who wished for this.

Without 2B, 9S loses his way. Unsure of what he is living for and unable accept the true meaninglessness of everything, he fixates on vengeance against A2 and the machines as his mental state begins to deteriorate. A2, accompanied by 2B's pod and haunted by her memories, is forced to rethink how she feels about the machine life-forms, as well as her mission, her reason to live. This route focuses, thematically, on how the different characters deal with the truth, the mistakes they've made, and the losses they've

experienced. A2 is able to reevaluate and adapt, but 9S, overcome with grief, breaks under the burden.

The player switches between A2 and 9S throughout the route, sometimes automatically and sometimes by choice. If they choose to fight as A2 in the final battle, they receive ending C. With the aid of the pod, A2 is able to hack into 9S and purge the corruption that ails him. Although his ultimate fate is unclear, we see the pod carrying him away from the machine tower as it collapses. A2 accepts her fate, remaining behind to sever the functionality of the tower, and telling "everyone" that she is coming. In this ending, A2, who was driven to survive by a need to destroy, is able to accept her death as the cost to save another. Her purpose shifts from destruction to salvation and she is rewarded with the ability to see her lost comrades again.

chil[D]hood's end

If the player chooses to control 9S for the final battle, they will receive ending D. Here, A2 hesitates to attack 9S, giving him the opening to kill her. However, he impales himself on 2B's sword (wielded by A2) in the process. At this moment, the game switches to a text based format, as 9S's fading consciousness is drawn into the machine network. It is revealed that the tower is an arc that will carry the "souls" of the machine life forms to a new world. Adam asks 9S if he would like to join them and the player is given the ability to choose. If they say yes, the final cut scene will show the arc lifting off into space as 9S and A2's bodies collapse into the rubble of the tower. If they say no, then an additional shot will play at the beginning of the final cut scene in which 9S will look to the sky and state "So that's where you were...2B".

Thematically, this ending explores how 9S's loss of purpose destroyed him, while from a narrative standpoint, this final choice is a great example of a well written, well timed narrative interaction point. The final cut scene is almost exactly the same regardless of what the player chooses; the extra shot is a trivial difference. But because of the nature of the choice, the player's understanding of what is happening in this scene is completely different. If they chose to go on the arc, then the ending has a hopeful feeling; 9S is able to let go of his grief, will survive with the machines, and has a second chance to live. However, if they choose to stay, then the ending feels much more tragic; 9S dies, unable to find the will to live in a world without 2B. Despite the fact that the choice changes little in the outcome of the game on a structural, computational level, on a cognitive level, the choice *feels* like it affects the outcome of the story.

[E]nd of yorha

This final ending can be obtained after the player has witnessed all endings at least once each. The credits will begin to roll as normal but will be interrupted by dialogue from pods 042 and 153. If the player agrees to investigate the data abnormality, the pods will ask them to choose if they wish to save 2B, 9S and A2, even if it will be a dangerous task. Choosing to do so will direct them to the game's true final boss: the end credits.

The player will have to engage the credits in a bullet-hell style mini-game, a task that is technically not impossible without aid, but extremely difficult. Each time they fail, the player will be asked about their resolve to continue while seeing messages of encouragement from other players. Continuously choosing to continue will eventually lead to a rescue offer from another "player". If accepted, additional firing pods will appear to shield the player's pod and increase their firepower. However, every time one of the pods shielding the player is destroyed, the game will inform them that that player's data has been erased. Each pod corresponds to (and bears the name of) an actual player who previously completed the game and agreed to offer their aid to others in need.

After clearing the end credits boss fight, a scene will play in which the pods reveal that they have begun to develop human emotions and care for the androids. During this scene, the pods are shown to be rebuilding the bodies of 2B, 9S and A2, and state that the data salvage was a success meaning the androids can be restored to their former selves. The final line "a future is not something that is given, but something you make for yourself" drives home the key theme of the game: that you do not need to be given a reason to live; you can always find one for yourself.

After the cut scene, the player will be directly addressed by the pods, who will ask if the player wishes to assist others in need, at the price of the deletion of all of their save data. Accepting this offer will allow the player to become one of the random assist pods that can help a player clear the credits. In these final moments, the game narrative that tested the resolve of its characters in the face of incredible consequence and adversity directly tests the resolve of the player. It goes from leaning on the fourth wall to breaking it completely, to remind the player that they did this, that they were and are a part of this story, not just a witness to it.

Strongest Element

There is a lot to talk about in Nier: Automata and there is a lot that makes it stand out from other games. However what I found to be the strongest element was the way in which the game was able to generate a sense of meaningful interaction, the impression that every act the player took had an impact on the story world, without using a branching narrative structure. Instead of lots of choices and branching outcomes, Nier: Automata seeks ways to place the player within the context of the story world. By doing so, they create the sensation that the player is more than just a witness to the story, but rather that they, and every action they take, is a part of it. This heightens the emotional attachment and sense of responsibility to events that occur. When you turn in a side quest, and the quest giver decides that they no longer want to live because of what you discovered, or you are forced to make an impossibly difficult choice that will determined the fate of a loved character, you can't help but think "I did this…why did I do this?" The game successfully syncs up interaction with emotional high points in the narrative and cleverly utilizes heavy consequences on both a story and gameplay level to heighten the sensation that the choices matter even if they don't have any effect on the game's story structure at a computational level.

Unsuccessful Element

While Nier: Automata's story is incredibly well crafted, and its cast of characters are engaging and thought provoking, Adam and Eve tend to feel a little underdeveloped by comparison. When the two characters are introduced, they are treated as major antagonists and the game gives you the impression that they will be important to the story. However, in the overall timespan of the game, it feels like they are barely in it. They only appear in the first two play-throughs and only roughly three times each (plus the additional scenes in the second play through) with the third time being the boss battle in which the respective character is killed. Because of this lack of screen time, it feels like we never really see any development or characterization beyond basic traits. Although the second play through does provide us with some new information that reframes them as more sympathetic villains than previously expected, most of their development as characters seems to happen off screen. Additionally, we never get a full explanation regarding who, or what, Adam and Eve really were and they are replaced by a new enemy in the third play-through. They only appear one more time during ending D, which makes it feel like they were tossed aside by the story. It would have been nice to see more of these villains as they developed and see them do more as the story unfolded, since they tied in so well with the thematic elements of the game.

Highlight

What I found to be the absolute best moment in the entire game narrative was the scene in the third play-through where the player is forced to decide Pascal's fate. After the machine village is attacked, Pascal and A2 attempt to protect the surviving machine children from an onslaught of enemies. Although they succeed in fighting off the enemies, they are horrified to find that the children, in their fear, killed themselves. Pascal, who taught the children fear, blames himself and begs A2 to either kill him or erase his memories, as he cannot live with what he's done.

At this moment, the game strips away most of the HUD and the players ability to interact with most of the environment or move quickly. All the player can do is address this choice they have been given. In order to kill Pascal, they simply need to strike him down the way they would any other enemy. To erase his memories, they talk to him. That being said, there is a third option; the player can leave. However, this involves *walking* towards the exit (as the game takes away the ability to run), which means it is a relatively lengthy period of time where the player must face the reality of what they are trying to do. When the player is close enough to the door, the camera will whip around to force them to face Pascal who will ask if they are really just going to leave him there.

This scene is the perfect example of what this game does best. What you choose to do has little impact on the outcome of the story; killing Pascal grants you his core, erasing his memories unlocks his shop where you can purchase machine parts. Neither of these outcomes really means much on a structural level and the only thing that changes in the ending is whether or not Pascal is present in a single shot. However, the choice *feels* like it matters. At this point in the story, Pascal has become a valuable ally who has saved you several times. You are emotionally invested in his wellbeing, and you are now witnessing

him at his lowest. With the player emotionally compromised by the narrative, the game now offers them an incredibly difficult choice: which terrible fate would you rather bestow upon your friend? It then strips them of the ability to do anything else but face this choice. Even if they try to leave, the game forces them to *literally* face that choice. And in order to make the choice, you have to actually perform the act. In the moment of truth, the game does not even let the player hide behind a text based decision; they must take this action with their own hands.

Pascal's despair also supports a number of the game's thematic elements. Stripped of his purpose (protecting the peaceful machines) and drowning in guilt due to the consequences of what he believes are his own actions, he loses the will to live.

Critical Reception

Polygon – Janine Hawkins – 8.0: Hawkins describes Automata as an "experience so much bigger than it initially seemed". She discusses the combat and soundtrack but goes on to praise the handling of the multiple endings, stating that the word "ending" is meaningless and that "it's only after you've 'finished' that things get really damn interesting". She states how pleased she was with the way the game handled the repetition, maintaining the player's existing progress in terms of items and sidequests and adding enough new content that the repetition felt "negligible". She describes the game as "highly invested in maintaining player momentum, in giving them every reason to keep moving forward, and that made the pursuit of those "true" endings all the more satisfying for me."

IGN – Meghan Sullivan – 8.9: Sullivan gave Automata an overall great review. She cites trouble connecting to the characters due to how long it took their personal narratives to unfold but describes the overall plot as a "quirky, full-tilt drama that unfolds as you bounce between Earth and the moon is an intriguing one, touching on existential themes like the meaning of life and humanizing those on the other side of war." She goes on to praise the mix of gameplay elements and the way she was able to pace her progression through the narrative in the game's open world environment by taking breaks to climb trees or view the sunset. She states: "These quiet, Zen-like moments were a welcome reprieve between bouts of over caffeinated combat. I loved it, and I loved the game for allowing me to do it."

Gamespot – Miguel Concepcion – 9.0: Concepcion describes Automata as "The type of production that seamlessly blends story, hack and slash combat and—believe it or not— an engaging bullet-hell shooter component." He praises the game's wild narrative as "you just go along with it because of Automata's captivating world" and states that "Your forward progress isn't propelled by the mere compulsion to achieve 100% completion; you're simply pulled by the curiosity to learn more about what happened to Earth and humanity." He also recognizes the execution of the repetition and the added content stating "as you travel down these various paths, you're not only introduced to new events, but also given new perspectives to moments you've already experienced."

Lessons

- **Good writing and implementation of choices can increase the sensation of narrative impact:** The choice at the end of ending D is an excellent example of this. As discussed above, the choice creates a sensation of a branching outcome not because of notable differences in the cut scene, but because of the very nature of the choice. Approaching decision-making in this way can increase the sensation of agency within the player without having to rely on excessive content creation.

- **Don't be afraid to touch the fourth wall:** Most narratives are afraid of breaking the fourth wall, but Nier: Automata shows that blurring the line between the player and the game world can result in a positive experience. Contextualizing the player within the world of the narrative can help the player connect to the characters and the events that occur and increase their sense of responsibility.

- **Don't take yourselves *too* seriously:** This a strange lesson to take away from a game with such a dark narrative, but many of the joke endings are humorous in nature. Having a lighthearted side to a game like this can help keep things balanced and enjoyable.

- **Emphasis on thematic exploration:** The game definitely puts a strong emphasis on exploring its thematic elements in a show-don't-tell manner. Knowing your themes and exploring them in this way can create a thought provoking gameplay experience that keeps the player contemplating the meaning behind the story.

- **Let your gameplay elements reflect your narrative:** There are several moments in the narrative when a character's senses are impaired, such as when 2B is infected by the machine virus. During these moments, the player's view will become corrupted and their access to certain mechanical elements (such as running or fighting) will disappear. Having the mechanical elements of a game change to reflect the story elements can help create a stronger link between these two sides of the narrative game experience.

- **Show, don't tell:** Nier: Automata focuses on show-don't-tell when it comes to both its thematic and narrative elements. As the story progresses, many events are never clearly explained, but the consequences can be discerned from what can be seen on the screen. Where this shines best is in the game's tendency to bring about self-reflection within the player. The game never explicitly asks the player "why did you do that", nor does it punish the player for their actions. Instead, the player will often spend a moment to ask, "Why did I do that?" Structuring the story with a focus on showing can create a deeper gameplay experience that engages the player in critical thought and understanding of the story and its themes.

- **Embrace what you are:** Nier: Automata is weird and there is no denying that. But it never tries to claim it isn't. The ability to embrace what you are and run with it rather than try to change or hide it will create a memorable and unique experience that captures the hearts of the audience. While it may not achieve the same mass appeal as more mainstream game narratives, those who appreciate it will be that much more passionate about it.

Summation

Many games achieve a sensation of meaningful interaction through branching structures and multiple choices, but Nier: Automata achieves similar sensations without these design conventions. Instead, Automata leans on the fourth wall to place the player within the context of the narrative and heighten their sense of responsibility for the events that occur. Well written interaction points, synced up with emotional highs in the plot and thematic exploration result in a gameplay experience where every action feels meaningful and every event is thought provoking. While the narrative as a whole is undeniably weird, especially if you get into the deeper lore that connects it to Nier and Drakengard, it knows what it is trying to achieve and successfully pulls it off. The result is a game that will leave the player questioning what it really means to be holding that controller in their hands.