Game Narrative Review

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Overview

In NieR: Automata, centuries have passed after the end of human life on Earth. Greenery entombs skeletal skyscrapers, barren sands stretch out for miles, and sunlight shines on silent, ancient streets. Nonetheless, humanity's influence haunts the planet like a ghost, not least of all in the proxy war fought by two separate mechanical species: the machine lifeforms created by the alien invaders who drove the final humans away, and the androids sent to fight by the human survivors who fled to the moon. As time presses on, so does the war, until its soldiers find themselves confronted by many of the same questions the Earth's former occupants faced so many years ago.

An action RPG utilizing many different gameplay genres and storytelling techniques, NieR: Automata is an unusual game. Players will explore an apocalyptic open world, fight enemies with graceful real-time combat, engage in bullet hell minigames, and customize their characters with new abilities, but in the end, NieR: Automata is designed to capture a vision. If players seek to uncover everything the game has to offer, they will need to complete at least three playthroughs, experiencing changes in point of view and

unlockable chapters which offer many different outcomes to the twisting, tragic war. The game conceals a total of 26 different endings, with 5 main conclusions.

Characters

Project YoRHa:

The YoRHa project is a militant organization of androids created solely to serve the human colony on the moon as soldiers in the proxy war to take back Earth. At least, that is what YoRHa itself claims. They operate from a satellite Bunker in orbit around the planet, and utilize several advanced technologies - such as flying battle suits and weaponized assistant Pods - while its androids are classified by model numbers instead of names. Another unique trait of YoRHa androids are their black boxes - in an emergency, they can use these to explosively self-destruct their bodies while saving backups of their "mind" to the Bunker's servers. This also means that YoRHa androids can almost always be recreated in the event that they are killed, so long as they maintain connection to the Bunker's servers. They are discouraged from showing emotion or individuality, as they exist only to serve the humans who supposedly created them.

However, YoRHa's true purpose is to maintain the myth that humankind escaped to the moon, when in reality, humanity is already extinct. Androids as a whole were created to ensure human survival long ago, and they failed this mission when Project Gestalt collapsed. Because of this, YoRHa provides their own species with a false sense of purpose. YoRHa's soldiers are unaware of the futile nature of the war they were born for, live for, and die for. In fact, their so-called black boxes are actually the same machine cores utilized by machine lifeforms, as it was deemed "inhumane" to create traditional androids for the disposable YoRHa project. This means that the YoRHa soldiers effectively share the same "minds" as they machine lifeforms they slaughter.

- **2B:** A dutiful and competent Battle android who was marketed as the game's protagonist. She carries herself with a stoic countenance and obediently tries to repress any emotions she feels. However, her designation as a Battle android is only as cover for her true designation - as 2E, an Executioner model. Her role is to

watch over her partnered Scanner model, 9S, and if his skills for intelligence gathering lead him too close to YoRHa's secrets, kill him in his current form and wipe his memory. In this way, she acts as an insurance tool for YoRHa. It is implied that she and 9S have worked together for years before the events of the game, with many missions ending in 9S' execution. While 9S remains oblivious to the nature of their relationship due to his frequently reset memories, 2B hides a deep sadness after executing and losing her only friend over and over again.

- **9S:** A curious and energetic Scanner android with advanced capabilities for information gathering, and the game's protagonist. While he takes pride in his role as a YoRHa soldier, he is more openly emotional than 2B. He is unaware of 2Bs true purpose, and because of this, she has managed to keep him equally unaware of YoRHa's secrets by forcing him through many memory resets. However, as he and 2B continue to work together throughout the game, their bond deepens, and he develops feelings for her. While he essentially begins the story as 2B's sidekick, he is thrust into the leading role after her sudden and permanent death. His grief - and his eventual discovery of YoRHa's secrets - slowly drives him into madness, and he swears revenge on the machine lifeforms and A2, who he believes are responsible for her death.

- **A2:** A rogue YoRHa soldier who deserted the organization after learning of its true nature. Her only remaining motive is revenge on the machine lifeforms for the death of her previous squadron. She is older than 2B and 9S, and was originally a prototype combat model. Because of this, A2's stoic personality shares some similarities to 2B's, but she is much more sardonic and aggressive. Still, she is not without empathy. After 2B is infected by a virus that would otherwise destroy her mind and sanity, A2 executes her to spare her from the effects and agrees to honor her wishes by inheriting her memories and trying to protect 9S in her stead. However, 9S blames her for 2B's fate.

- **The Pods:** Each YoRHa soldier is assisted by floating robots referred to as Pods. Pod 042 and Pod 153 belong to 2B and 9S, respectively. They are intended as

simple weapons, lacking any actual consciousness, but throughout the story, they develop minds of their own. For instance, after 2B's death, Pod 042 stubbornly assists A2 despite her objects, and both Pod 042 and Pod 153 begin to work together on their own initiatives to keep the vengeful 9S away from A2. Eventually, the pods begin to acknowledge their own senses of self and realize that they genuinely care for the androids they are tasked with protecting. Near the end of the story, they interact with the rest of the game in strange ways, such as manipulating loading screens and directly addressing the player. The pods play an unexpectedly significant role in the story's outcome in several ways - by mirroring the issues and growth faced by many other characters, mirroring the player's feelings, and by directly interfering in events.

- **The Operators:** The operators assist YoRHa's Earthbound soldiers from the satellite Bunker. While they serve as minor characters, both 2B and 9S interact with operators with personalities that act as foils to their own.

- **The Commander:** The Bunker's highest authority and a sentinel of many of its secrets, the Commander issues the orders 2B and 9S must follow throughout most of the game's campaign. Distant, but not unkind, she sacrifices herself to help 2B and 9S escape the Bunker after the virus spreads to most of its soldiers.

- **Council of Humanity:** The supposed human government on the moon. YoRHa's soldiers occasionally receive transmissions of praise and encouragement from the Council, but in reality, these messages are staged to further enhance the fiction of humanity's survival and make the soldiers feel as though their efforts matter.

Machine Lifeforms:

A race of sentient robots created by the aliens who long ago invaded Earth. YoRHa claims that the aliens still exist and command the machines, but in truth, the machines overpowered and destroyed their own creators long ago. Androids also claim that the machines lack the ability to feel emotion - that any humanlike behavior is merely mimicry - but as the machines continue to evolve, evidence suggests this isn't the case.

The machines communicate and connect with each other over a shared network, which leaves them gravely vulnerable to viruses.

- **Pascal:** A kindly, pasifistic machine who founded a peaceful village inhabited by machines lifeforms who disconnected themselves from the network. Pascal is highly intelligent, with fully developed human emotions and interests in history, literature, and philosophy. He especially loves the young, weak machines he refers to as children. Pascal at once embodies a childlike wonder at the world he is awakening to and a mature, nurturing wisdom. He is the first machine 2B and 9S meet who exhibits a truly human-like personality, casting doubt on their beliefs about machine lifeforms. Pascal plays an even larger role as the story develops, even serving as a temporarily playable character. In a world stained by human cruelty, Pascal represents many of humanity's positive traits - compassion, hope, morality - and is instrumental to the story's themes, even if he ultimately pays a steep price for his ideals.

- **Adam:** A highly evolved machine lifeform, and the first with a humanlike - and therefore android-like - appearance. He represents the desire, held by many machines over the network, to become more human. To this end, Adam goes so far as to wear clothes and imitate human customs. Unlike Pascal, however, he embodies many of humanity's negative traits. Eventually, his desperation to understand feelings such as rage, hatred, and fear led him to recklessly fight to the death against 2B.

- **Eve:** A second humanlike machine lifeform created from Adam, with even more highly evolved combat abilities. He is more straightforward, but cares deeply about Adam, whom he considers his older brother. He is also much more childlike - expressing curiosity about the world, questioning Adam's constant need to become more human, and simply wanting to play with his brother. However, he changes after Adam's death, becoming mad with grief and seeking revenge against 2B and 9S. He is the one who originally spread the virus throughout the machine's network, as it allowed him to take control of the other machines and

use them as his own personal army. He is the major antagonist of first playthroughs, and his transformation from a kindly supporter to an agentic, cruel avenger directly mirrors 9S' transformation in later chapters.

- **The Red Girls:** The red girls represent a hive mind consciousness that evolved from the machine's network after it became increasingly influenced by human data. The red girls realized a fatal flaw in the directive the network's alien creators left behind: the machines were created for one sole purpose - to fight against the androids - so what would the machines do when the androids were finally defeated? In an attempt to avoid this paradox, the red girls purposely sabotaged the network, allowing machines to develop new personalities and flaws. In the same way that the androids created Project YoRHa to escape the existential horror of apparent meaninglessness, the red girls served the same purpose for the machines, and in doing so, allowed them to become more humanlike, even if doing so effectively meant the war would never end.

Project Gestalt: Centuries before the beginning of Nier: Automata, a supernatural plague nearly wiped out the human species. In a desperate attempt to avoid extinction, the experimental Project Gestalt separated human souls from their bodies, while at the same time creating artificial bodies for them to return to once the danger of disease had eventually passed. These disembodied souls were referred to as Gestalts, and the original Gestalt - created from a man named Nier - was required to help stabilize the sanity of his fellow phantoms. The newly created bodies were referred to as Replicants. The first androids were created with the mission of watching over these empty shells. However, the Replicants unexpectedly developed sentience of their own, and in fact believed themselves to be the original humans, while seeing the Gestalts who wanted to steal their bodies as monsters. Project Gestalt failed when the original Gestalt was killed by his own Replicant, damning humanity to extinction.

- **Nier:** The well-meaning Replicant Nier was the main protagonist in the series' first game. While he is long dead and his actions occurred centuries ago, it could

be said that he is responsible for Project Gestalt's collapse. As such, the events of NieR: Automata are a product of his grim legacy.

Other Characters: Several other characters populate the Earth's surface. Most of them are members of The Resistance - a group of androids fighting against the machine lifeforms independently from YoRHa. Some Resistance members are aware of the YoRHa project's true intentions.

- **Anemone:** The leader of the Resistance Camp, which serves as the player's' primary home base for most of the game. She provides background information about the world, and also has past ties to A2.

- **Devola & Popola:** Devola and Popola are older android models originally designed to watch over the Replicants over the course of Project Gestalt. It is speculated by other characters that these guardians were designed as twin sisters and delegated in pairs so that they would not succumb to the human emotion of loneliness during the many years that would theoretically pass before the Gestalts could safely reunite with their Replicants, and this idea itself calls into question how the humans themselves thought about their android creations. However, one pair of Devola and Popola androids from the first game were partially responsible for Nier's actions and the failure of Project Gestalt. Because of this, all remaining Devola and Popola models are ostracized in NieR: Automata's world. This includes the Devola and Popola who reside in the Resistance Camp. However, even though these sisters are ultimately innocent, they still seek atonement for the actions of their kin.

- **Emil:** A disembodied, skull-like head who was once a young boy, Emil's services as a simple shopkeeper bely his strange role in the world and his dramatic history. A recurring character from the first game in the series, Emil was subjected to human experimentation thousands of years prior to the events of NeiR: Automata, and transformed into a magical, biological weapon. He chose to sacrifice himself to save Nier and his friends, but while most of his body was destroyed, he

managed to live on and his abilities continued to grow throughout the long stretch of time between the two games. Players can choose how deeply to explore Emil's past, and the curious player will eventually discover that Emil had evolved the ability to create clones of himself. He waged a solitary, losing war against the aliens and their machines for centuries, until his clones finally began to lose their sanity and their own sense of purpose. Interestingly, despite his somewhat monstrous appearance, Emil is the only character in the game who was once human...and could be considered the last living human being. His futile war - his ceaseless struggle for survival and meaning - mirrors the fates of many others characters as well as the human species, itself.

Breakdown

As the sequel to a little known 2010 cult hit, NieR: Automata's existence is a plot twist in its own right, and it hides plenty of other surprises within both its gameplay and its narrative. Marketed as an action RPG with standard sci-fi trappings, attractive robots, and familiar combat styles, little about NieR: Automata is quite what it appears to be on the surface. It's a story that remembers its a game, but it's also a game that - like so many of its characters - yearns for meaning. Rather than focusing on mechanical conceits, it wants to craft an experience players will remember long after the final credits roll. It accomplishes this by placing emphasis on each of its pillars - the narrative, the gameplay, the art style, and the audio - and blurring the lines between them, as well as by refusing to limit itself to standard gameplay or narrative genres, paying attention to small details, and utilizing unconventional story structures and subtext in service of the tale it wants to tell.

"Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped...in a never-ending spiral of life and death."
- 2B

The game opens on these words as 2B, the initial protagonist, embarks on the first mission. During this prologue, the gameplay instantly sheds its veneer of standard action RPG gameplay by launching the player into bullet hell combat, and afterwards, mixing in side-scrolling elements. This adjust player's expectations early on, and the narrative style is sampled in a similar fashion. After the first battle, 2B meets her companion, 9S, for what appears to be the first time. What starts as a standard science fiction setup, with an upbeat, empowering mood, ends in tragedy. The two main characters choose to sacrifice their current bodies - their current selves - to defeat an unbeatable enemy in a self-destructive explosion. Only one of them has time to backup their most recent data to the Bunker for later restoration. From the start, this poses important questions within the game's world - are the androids more than just their data? If that data is moved to a different body, then are they really the same being? 9S' choice to sacrifice his data for 2B's also sets up the dependant relationship the two androids have with one another. However, this prologue serves as a cycle of life and death all its own, embodying the game's cryptic first words and foreshadowing the entirety of the rest of the story.

After the initial tragedy, the next place the player encounters is the YoRHa project's Bunker - a satellite base in orbit around Earth. YoRHa androids are taught that they exist for only one purpose - to kill the machines. These machines supposedly have no emotion or identity of their own, and not dissimilarly, the androids are discouraged from showing their own emotions, living and dying as nameless soldiers. These black and white ways of thinking are expressed in the Bunker's design through literal black and white graphics and its ambient, stoic music. This is one clear example of the way the gameplay, story, art, and audio emphasize and complete each other throughout the rest game, rather than competing for attention.

As 2B and 9S prepare to depart for Earth on their next mission, they recite YoRHa's mantra - "glory to mankind". Even as she does so, 2B clenches her fist, suppressing

emotions she isn't supposed to have. This is another moment of foreshadowing, hinting at the hidden truths buried by YoRHa's seemingly straightforward purpose.

As the first playthrough continues on, it develops into a fully-fledged open world game, with all the trappings a player would expect from an action RPG, with enemies to battle, secrets to find, and sidequests to complete. Perhaps the most important facet when it comes to the game presenting itself as an immersive experience, however, is the way all of its elements continue to react to each other. Rather than aiming for mechanical consistency, the gameplay instead serves the narrative, adapting with new entirely new styles as befitting each story beat.

For instance, in the second playthrough, an entirely new mechanic is introduced without warning - hacking, which takes the form of an arcade-style shooting minigame, but which actually allows for many narrative revelations by allowing 9S to literally read the minds of his enemies. These mechanical shifts and metaphors incorporate smaller details, as well, such as players upgrading the playable androids by installing computer chips. These chips tie into both the UI and the narrative conceit of the characters' robotic bodies - when players begin the game, they already have their most essential chips installed, including an OS system. Strange results can occur if players remove these chips, and if they remove the OS system chip itself, the android experiences a "fatal error" and dies, leading to the one of the many minor endings hidden throughout the story. Many of these twenty-one small endings also result from unusual player actions, such as running away from bosses, blowing up the Bunker by self-destructing, or massacring friendly NPCs. While most of these endings are humorous in nature, they offer an illusion of agency in an otherwise mostly linear narrative, and further blur the lines between story and gameplay due to triggers caused from real-time player choices.

The art and audio are just as adaptable. The soundtrack - which has received heavy critical praise for its atmospheric, emotive style in both NieR games - dynamically shifts

according to the current situation, with nearly every song featuring multiple mixes for different moods. The art style places heavy emphasis on showcasing dramatic set pieces, and particularly takes advantage of the camera. Sometimes a shift in the camera represents a metaphorical change in point of view as much as a literal one, zooming out to emphasize loneliness or confining players in a 2D plain during moments when the character's viewpoints are just as limited, such as the inside of the Bunker. One example takes place after encountering a friendly machine named Pascal and his village of peaceful machines, which call the protagonists' beliefs about machines into question. Visually and aurally, this area is the antithesis of the Bunker, with colorful environments, cheerful, vocal music, and camera angles that twist in unexpected ways around every corner, as unsettled as the character's thoughts.

Subtext is steeped into the narrative itself, as well. The main antagonists for the game's first two playthroughs are Adam and Eve, a pair of machine brothers who exhibit especially humanlike qualities. Adam, born into a world empty of the humans he is modeled after, seeks to understand them, but as he searches for what it means to be human, what he finds is despair and violence. He even goes so far as to build his own false city and set up a fight to the death between himself and 2B all in service of what he considers his purpose.

Only then did I realize the truth...the core of humanity...is conflict. They fight. Steal. Kill. This *is humanity in its purest form!*
- Adam

Ultimately, Adam serves a symbol of humanity's worst traits. Eve is initially a much more positive figure, full of curiosity and affection for his brother. After Adam's death, however, the very human emotions of grief and anger transform him into a vengeful antagonist, and in this way, humanity also serves as Eve's undoing.

Other characters also explore this theme. Pascal - kind, intelligent, ethical, pacifistic, and full of wonder at his own existence - symbolizes all that is good about the human race. However, in a world largely bereft of compassion, his story is a sad one. During the game's final playthrough, a tragedy turns the humanlike emotions Pascal treasures into a burden that's too heavy to bear, and he asks the player's character to delete his memories...and the humanity he has developed along with them. This segment is also notable in terms of gameplay. For only a single boss fight, Pascal becomes a playable character, complete with his own simplistic mechanics - all in service of letting the player experience his desperation first hand. Afterwards, the player can also choose how to react to Pascal's request. They can erase his memories as he asks, they can choose to kill him, or they can simply walk away from him, leaving him with the sorrow he doesn't know how to handle.

Another interesting character with a slightly different take on these concepts is Emil, one of the only returning characters from the first game in the series. In NieR: Automata, he primarily serves as an inconspicuous shopkeeper, despite his somewhat monstrous appearance. However, players of the first NieR will know that he was once a normal human boy before being turned into biological weapon - and in a way, might be the last living human in NieR: Automata's world. Players who choose to delve into his side quests discover Emil's history as the lone soldier in a tragic, cyclical war against the aliens who originally built the machines prior to the interference of the androids - a war he could never win, and one that he fought - metaphorically, at least - as the proxy of his entire species. This scenario plays with the subtext in a variety of ways. Emil's own desperation for purpose, along with the emphasis on memories and identity in his side quests, mirrors these struggles in his android counterparts. The unending war he fights serves as another symbol for the game's overall cyclical structure, while he himself is a symbol of humanity - and of humanity's stubborn will to survive.

In one of the highlights of the game, Emil actually serves as an optional sidequest boss, and during the battle, he breaks down under the weight of his seemingly eternal burden.

"But the eternal war… Our eternal pain… The eternal pain! It screamed at us! It told us there is nothing of value to protect in this world… The world had no meaning! It screamed at us! You… All of you… This pain! This sadness! This desperation! You know nothing about it!
- Emil

It is only in his defeat that he comes to terms with his memories. In his last moments, he holds onto hope - believing that his life did have meaning, and that he might now finally see his loved ones again. When he slips away, he does so peacefully, as does the last trace of the human species with him.

Throughout the story, the protagonists must also come to terms with the ghosts of humanity that live on inside them. An example of this are the blindfold-like visors that they wear. While their usage is never fully explained in game, it can be inferred that they metaphorically represent the androids' closed mindsets - their refusal to "see" even their own feelings. The few instances when the protagonists remove their visors occur only when they are forced to acknowledge their own emotions, and the emotions of others.

The idea of a cyclical history - a past that repeats itself - is also exemplified in the relationship between 2B and 9S. Near the end of the game, it is revealed that 2B is in fact an Executioner unit, tasked with assassinating fellow YoRHa units who have come to the close to learning the organization's true intentions. On many occasions, this has included 9S, who is unaware of these incidents due to losing his memory each time he is rebooted in a new body. Meanwhile, 2B carries these horrors with her, and finds herself faced with the question of whether the 9S she values as a friend is truly revived each time he dies, or

whether each 9S - always awakening in a new body and without any familiar memories - is really a different being.

These concepts are explored in more interactive ways, as well. Although they are able to back up their memories to the Bunker throughout most of the game - which takes the literal form of "saving progress" through the game's UI - the androids reawaken in new bodies each time the player dies. It is only after Bunker's destruction - and therefore after the androids can no longer simply backup their data - that players are faced with a "game over" screen upon defeat, signaling a true death for the androids.

However, the most powerful example of interactive metaphor is the structure of the game, itself. The usage of multiple playthroughs - all leading to tragic outcomes - embodies the "cycle of life and death" referred to so often within the game, and by structuring itself around this theme, it requires players to actually experience it for themselves.

This concept of cycles - along with explorations of meaning and identity - relate to classical existential philosophy, and in particular, Nietzsche's theory of Eternal Recurrence - the belief that events will always repeat in similar ways. Indeed, even in a purely mechanical world, its inhabitants continue to make many of the same mistakes as the humans who lived before them.

The first playthrough finishes in much the same way as the prologue, with 9S risking the sacrifice of his memories to defeat Eve and spare the distraught 2B.

"It always...ends like this…"
- 2B

There is a flicker of hope when 9S manages to salvage his memories, but then the second playthrough begins. Players must live through the same experience through 9S' eyes instead of 2B's, and any illusion of hope is shattered when YoRHa's true nature is discovered. 2B, 9S, and the rest of YoRHa's androids were designed to be disposable - only actors in a stage play meant to disguise the fact that humankind is already extinct. There are no happy endings to fight for.

It is the third playthrough, however, when the narrative shifts. In a powerful sequence, 2B is fatally infected with a logic virus and is unable to revive herself due to the Bunker's destruction. A countdown appears. While it masquerades as a timer, ticking away towards 2B's demise, it actually marks the player's progress towards a goal on the map. This is an especially effective example of the game making usage of its mechanics, and even its UI, in order to better tell the story. The reactive countdown, and the dynamic music accompanying it, build tension, and as enemies surround the feeble 2B, the moment is much more impactful than it would be if it were relegated to a cutscene.

After another android, A2, finishes off the ailing 2B at her own requests, 9S fully takes on the role of the main protagonist. However, he is deeply twisted by 2B's death, swearing revenge against both A2 and the machines. From this point on, players switch between 9S and A2s perspectives, and their characters grow in opposition to each other. A2, influenced by the memories 2B left behind for her, begins to empathize with the machines, while 9S' slow descent into madness mirrors Eve's after Adam's death from the earlier playthroughs. This is reflected in the pacing of the gameplay, as well. Rather than the more open, investigative structure of the first playthroughs, the third is a headlong rush from one frenetic battle to another, without any time to breathe or ask questions. The onslaught of bosses and dungeons tests the players as much as it does the protagonists, and by the time 9S and A2 defeat the machine's networked consciousness and meet face to face, the player is likely just as exhausted and desperate as they are.

During the final conflict between 9S and A2, players can choose which one of them to play as. This decision leads to one of two different endings for the game and its war, and both lead to tragedy.

However, the opportunity to attain the final ending only appears after players have seen both 9S' and A2's endings. During the credits, the androids' weaponized assistant Pods seem to have developed their own emotions and self awareness after interacting with each other and their androids throughout the rest of the game. One of them defies their orders to delete what remains of YoRHa's project data, and seems to speak to the player when it asks, "you hoped [the protagonists] would survive as well, didn't you?" If the player agrees, the Pods attempt to salvage the androids' data, in opposition to the destructive purpose for which they were created. In this way, they are perhaps the first characters in the game to break free from the endless cycle of war.

An unconventional final boss begins against the credits, themselves, which spew swarms of projectiles in a bullet hell influenced hacking minigame. The difficulty during this segment is purposely extreme. Virtually any player will fail many times over. Each time they do, the player is presented with one of several simple questions. "Is it all pointless?" the game asks. "Do you think games are silly little things?" "Do you admit there is no meaning to this world?" The seeming hopelessness of this long, grueling boss mirrors the despair faced by nearly every character throughout the story, and most players will likely consider giving up, but in order to make it to the final ending, the player must declare their own defiance against the cycle - their own desire to keep on fighting.

If players choose to answer 'no' to these suggestions of surrender, words of encouragement, left behind by previous players, appear after each defeat. "I made it in the end. That is to say, fight for what's important to you!" one might say. "You're surrounded by enemies. But even so, you've got us with you." Eventually, the player receives an offer of assistance, and if they accept, they are aided by representations of

other players who finished the game before them, acting as shields to help them through the final challenge. The credits song itself changes from incorporating a solo singer to a chorus of voices. The message is clear - even when the life seems meaningless or impossible, we can choose to keep fighting, and we're all in the battle together.

It is only after the sequence is won that a final truth comes to light - the players who aided you during the credits sacrificed their saved data to do so, and if you wish to help just one other player, you must sacrifice your saved data, too. The Pods, now speaking directly to the player, warn you that the person you help may not be grateful - may not even be someone you like - and that your sacrifice will ultimately be insignificant, just one fleeting moment amongst many. This choice hammers in the game's themes in several ways at once.

Firstly, it is a representation of altruism. The sacrifice you may make is small, but it is tangible in a way that most choices within games are not - it affects reality by deleting your hard-earned progress, all in exchange to help a single stranger. It's a stark image of how insignificant each person ultimately is in the wide universe. Still, it poses a powerful question - are you the type of human the machines wanted to be?

It also offers an interesting opposition between narrative and gameplay. Mechanically, there is nothing to gain by offering up your saved data. In doing so, you lose all of your accomplishments - all of your weapons and skills and unlockables, everything that typically makes a game a game. Narratively, however, choosing the sacrifice offers a satisfying conclusion to the game's themes - your own decision to believe in hope, compassion, and purpose. Many players find themselves swept up in this catharsis and choose the sacrifice, and as all evidence that they even played the game is erased, what remains is the experience. This bold design demonstrates just how much NieR: Automata was modeled with the mission of leaving an impression on the player, rather than on mechanical accomplishments.

In the ending itself, the protagonists are offered similar hope. 9S', A2's, and even 2B's data is successfully salvaged into new bodies, and while the Pods realize the cycle may simply repeat once again, there is also a chance that the protagonists might finally break free from it, and that chance alone makes living worth the pain.

Much like the search for purpose undertaken by many of its characters, NieR: Automata challenges players to craft their own meaning from the experience.

"Everything that lives is designed to end. They are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death. However...life is all about the struggle within this cycle. That is what we believe. A future is not given to you. It is something you must take for yourself."
- Pod 153 and Pod 042

Strongest Element

NieR: Automata's most effective feature is that all of its elements - the gameplay, the narrative, the art, and the audio - mix together to create a cohesive whole, rather than competing for attention. Additionally, its flexibility with gameplay genres allows it to incorporate complex thematics into this blend. The way in which it aims for impact rather than following convention makes it stand out amongst other titles

Unsuccessful Element

Despite serving the themes in structure and offering new insights through the introduction of hacking, the pacing drags during the second playthrough, as it incorporates much of the same content as the first. It may have benefitted from allowing players to skip segments that don't feature new content.

Highlight

During the third playthrough, the conclusion of Pascal's character arc is especially powerful. After watching his village of fellow pacifist machines burn under the influence of a virus, Pascal breaks his own moral code, taking over the body of larger machine and fighting to protect the village's children machines - the only survivors. Instead of relegating this to a cutscene, the player takes on the role of Pascal just this once - with playable mechanics created only for this sequence. While the actual gameplay is simple - stomping over smaller enemies and performing powerful punches with each press of a button - they are designed to maximize emotional impact. Thanks to effective acting, audio, and art direction, the player feels Pascal's pain and desperation with each attack - and this emphasis on emotion is exactly what allows him to overcome his fellow machine foes. However, the fight is in vain. When he returns to his children, he finds every one of them dead - they killed themselves to escape the fear and sorrow they weren't equipped to handle after the loss of their village. Overcome with guilt as the one who taught them about human emotions, Pascal asks A2 to either erase his memories or kill him. His fate rests with the player's decision.

Critical Reception

NieR: Automata received critical acclaim, with a Metacritic rating of 88.[1]

Reviewers praised both the gameplay and the narrative, as well as the game's uniqueness. "We don't get games like NieR: Automata too often," said USGamer's Caty McCarthy, who awarded the game a score of 5/5. "And by that I mean games that simultaneously weave a deeply harrowing existentialist narrative, in addition to playing with our expectations on how we play games. There's nothing else around like NieR: Automata. And in an industry that sometimes leans too heavily on sameness, it's wholly refreshing."[2] GamingTrend's Zach Faber was more critical of the graphical textures and occasionally repetitive structure, offering the game an 85/100, but noted that "the combat

is smooth, the story is captivating, the world is alive and evolving, and it's all backed up by an incredible soundtrack."[3] Tyler Treese, from We've Got This Covered, awarded the game another 5/5, stating that "NieR: Automata is the rare title that showcases what's absolutely so special about video games as a medium. From storytelling to gameplay, this is a truly unique experience that needs to be played."[4] DigitallyDownloaded's Matthew Sainsbury agreed with a 5/5 and claimed that "put simply, NieR: Automata is the greatest game ever made. It's not just that it is the deepest and most narratively potent game ever developed - and it is a truly deep narrative experience - but more than that, Yoko Taro has finally found perhaps the only developer on the planet capable of doing his visionary work justice. This game is a true, genuine work of art, and anyone who wants to prove that gaming does possess an equivalent to the greatest novels, operas, theatre plays, or paintings, now has that very game to point to."[5] Elias Blondeau from CGM also called it his new "golden standard" for gaming as an art form, offering the game a 10/10 and concluding that "NieR: Automata is the rare gaming experience in which narrative, aesthetics, and gameplay all complement each other to form a perfect storm of master class game design. A truly exemplary example of what video games are capable of as an art form."[6] NieR: Automata was chosen as the 2017 Game of the Year by Game Debate's Global Game Awards.[7]

Additionally, the game surpassed the modest expectations set by its publisher, achieving over two-million in sales.[8]

Lessons

- **Gameplay and narrative can make each other stronger:** In game design, there is a tendency to believe that gameplay and narrative are inherently at odds. While there are successful titles focusing only on one or the other, NieR: Automata proves that a game can tell an engaging, meaningful story and still feature fun, fully developed gameplay. NieR: Automata's narrative and gameplay adapt to each other in a seamless, symbiotic relationship. The narrative adds impact to

every action and the gameplay lets players experience every revelation firsthand. When the story and the gameplay come together - when the player's heart pounds along with each button press not only due to a fear of failure in battle, but a fear of what might happen afterwards - the result is a truly breathtaking experience that is unique to the video game medium.

- **Genres are tools, not limits:** NieR: Automata doesn't limit itself to standard genres in either the gameplay or narrative senses, and this is one reason those two elements are able to adapt so well to each other. A plot featuring both science fiction and supernatural fantasy elements, and which varies from comedic to tragic, offers abundant creative freedom to its mechanics and level designs. The gameplay itself is even more flexible. While NieR: Automata is primarily an action RPG, players will encounter bullet hell battles in flying ships, platforming challenges, side-scrolling combat, arcade-style hacking minigames, and even visual novel segments. It also adapts its camera angles, visuals, and audio to better reflect the changings conditions its characters face, and during one memorable boss fight, even features an entirely new playable character with entirely new gameplay elements solely to capture the experience of that one particular story beat. Rather than treating genres as the canvases it must fit into, NieR: Automata instead treats them as different pigments of paint, carefully choosing and mixing the colors necessary to craft its final picture.

- **Small details make a big difference when crafting a cohesive world**: Additionally, the narrative and gameplay blend together in many small, unusual ways throughout the game, and even incorporate the UI. Maps represent each android's radar systems, saving and loading progress equates to uploading and downloading the characters' memory data within the world, and instead of traditional skill trees, the game utilizes a system that lets players install "chips"

into their androids. These details break out of standard conventions and play a role in reducing dissonance between the game's different elements.

- **Audio maximizes impact:** Like its predecessor's, NieR: Automata's soundtrack is a part of the game's identity. Atmospheric songs enhance the drama of each story beat, the tension of each boss fight, and the loneliness of each empty, apocalyptic expanse. However, the sound design itself also stands out. Mirroring the way the gameplay and narrative adapt to each other, NieR: Automata's dynamic audio features multiple versions of each song that shape themselves to fit every scenario. The audio intertwines with the game's other elements and plays a key role in bringing it all together into one cohesive experience.

- **Games can incorporate literary subtext:** While many titles either shy away from incorporating complex themes or simplify them into black and white decisions, NieR: Automata takes advantage of the unique tools the video game medium offers - including choices, player interaction, and metaphorical mechanics - to delve deeply into subtext, and isn't afraid to pose more questions than it answers.

- **Games can effectively utilize unique story structures**: While NieR: Automata utilizes a mostly linear story structure with occasional branching elements, it also twists the form by requiring at least three playthroughs to see the whole narrative. The second shatters the expectations deliberately constructed by the first simply by letting players see the world through an alternate character's eyes, and the third playthrough presents entirely new chapters that build off the previous routes' revelations in subversive and dramatic ways. Even the final ending appears unexpectedly, letting players defiantly break free after they have witnessed every tragedy the hopeless, endless war has to offer. In this way, the narrative structure itself is a metaphor for the cycle of life and death its characters so desperately

want to escape - the cycle of human mistakes repeated in an entirely inhuman world - and is something that can only be achieved in an interactive medium.

Summation

From its tragic opening mission to the final choice of whether or not to sacrifice data, NieR: Automata aims to be more than another RPG that plays it safe in order to reach the mainstream audience, and in doing so, offers a much more impactful and unique experience. By crafting a cohesive world with all of its elements, using genre expectations as tools instead of limits, and exploring subtext and structure, it demonstrates the potential that games have as a storytelling medium without forgetting to be fun in the process.

Citations

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[5] Sainsbury, Matthew. "Review: NieR: Automata; the greatest game ever made (Sony PlayStation 4)" *DigitallyDownloaded*. N.p., 07 Mar. 2017. Web. 25 Nov. 2017.

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