

**A struggle in the search for meaning -  
approaches to violence in NieR: Automata.**

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## ABSTRACT

Video games, for a very long time, have been an easy target of media panics, scrutinized and accused of being a negative influence on the youth, in huge part due to their frequent depictions of violence and inclusion of it as gameplay mechanics for the players to engage with. As the years passed, some progress was made, and some of the research on video games tries to abandon the old approach to this subject from the angle of media effects. The need to talk about in-game violence while acknowledging the contexts surrounding it, its meanings and interpretations, was also signalled. Problematization of violence is a topic widely discussed by Taro Yoko, a Japanese video game director, in his works that try to question the industry's normalized practice of games having to include violence. This study aims to answer questions related to Yoko's most recent work, with the main one being: how is the topic of violence discussed in *NieR: Automata*? It is accompanied by sub-questions: in what ways are the elements of dark play utilized to influence the player's experience? How does the game discuss the humanity of in-game adversaries? To answer them, an in-depth playthrough of the game and a close reading of it was conducted, followed by textual analysis of the material gathered in the process in form of written notes and recorded gameplay. The analysis was divided according to the most prominent themes that emerged during gameplay. The results showed that across all the themes, the game heavily uses dark play related concepts, that is elements of subversion and a technique of defamiliarization, both in its narrative and gameplay, to prompt player's reflection on their perception of in-game world. Players are revealed to be exploited by the game, being either lied to or having limited information that further encourages reflection. Constant cycling between acts that are humanizing and dehumanizing in-game adversaries is found to encourage the player to question acts of violence committed by the main characters, and is taken further by the choice to dehumanize the protagonists as well, taking away their sense of superiority and legitimacy of their actions. Symbolic violence has also been revealed as a prominent concept utilized throughout the game, signalling power relations between the characters and the game's main organization, contributing to both legitimization of violence and dehumanization of the game's protagonists.

KEYWORDS: *NieR, violence, dark play, dehumanization, subversion*

## PREFACE

Video games accompanied me since early childhood, being both entertainment and objects of fascination, with some titles having a lasting impact and staying in my mind for years. Still, if I could go back in time and tell the primary school me that one day I would not only not grow out of playing them, which dad always swore would happen, but I would also end up studying them, that would sound almost as plausible as me becoming an astronaut. Even back in September of last year, when my journey with Media Studies began, after having spent three years in Political Sciences, I barely even considered that to be a possibility, treating it more like wishful thinking. I am, however, very happy that this time, wishful thinking turned real and I was given such an opportunity. I would like to thank a few people who offered their help and support during the work on this thesis:

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# 1. Introduction

By now, digital games have a long tradition of being the target of scrutiny and moral panics due to being seen as a negative influence on the youth. The prevalence of violence in a significant portion of games is oftentimes assumed to contribute to rise in aggressive tendencies as well as desensitize the player to violent acts both in-game and in real life (Smith, Lachlan, Tamborini, 2003). Research that reinforces such beliefs easily gets traction and widespread coverage, while sources rebutting these generally get much less attention, if they are not completely dismissed (Ferguson, 2010). This in turn drastically narrows down the range of discussions that can be had about the games in general – in regards to violence, for example, media researchers frequently speak of the amount of violence, but only deal with the topic on the surface level, ignoring the violence’s possible meanings and interpretations by the audience (Goldstein, 2005). Violent stories in games, just like in any other medium, may vary greatly depending on the contexts that accompany them, resulting in portrayals widely different from each other, ranging from completely serious or grotesque to erotic or even humorous, prompting different responses from the audience in turn. These variations oftentimes go unnoticed, and the games’ potential as a powerful medium remains overlooked. The arguments regarding whether video games should be regarded as an art form rather than pure entertainment have been going on for years and tend to resurface whenever a particularly compelling title, be it triple-A or indie, emerges. While the arguments themselves can get trite, it is nevertheless important to offer some considerations to these titles that strive to break conventions and the barriers set in the industry and the audience’s minds, encouraging the players’ reflection on the state of the world, social issues, and their very own values. One of the prime examples of such title from the recent years is *NieR: Automata* (Platinum Games, Square Enix, 2017), a third person action role-playing game developed under direction of Japanese scenario writer Taro Yoko, which is the focus of this thesis.

My first encounter with Yoko’s work was brief and seemingly meaningless yet remained in my mind for years. Browsing the gaming news sites back in the middle school, I stumbled upon a GIF of grotesque, overgrown babies descending from a crimson sky. One thing led to another as I sought out the image’s source – a cutscene from the game *Drakengard* (Cavia, Square Enix, 2003), depicting one of the game’s disastrous endings. Still, at that time it was more of a curiosity than a profound interest – I didn’t care for the game or the author and promptly forgot about it for the time being. The release of *NieR* (Cavia, Square Enix, 2010) was also uneventful as a 14-year-old me noted it as one of many games that look interesting and which I will never commit to playing, despite reading up on its lore still. The breakthrough for me, like for many others, came with the announcement of

*NieR:Automata* – its interesting aesthetics and a promise of satisfying gameplay prompted me to finally fall into the rabbit hole that the ‘Yokoverse’ – the combined lore of *NieR* and *Drakengard* series, is. As I learned more about it, I became utterly fascinated with Taro Yoko’s vision and the twisted stories he tells in his games. Passing curiosity has finally turned into a profound interest as I consciously revisited his works that I previously only stumbled upon by chance. Even now though, it is the descent of cannibal babies that I chanced to see years ago that I look back most fondly to, as a seed of curiosity planted in my head to resurface years later with a magnified force. *NieR:Automata*, however, was my first chance to play through Yoko’s game and the experience of it further cemented my admiration for what he strives to achieve through his work.



Image 1. *Drakengard's Watchers* (BuffMaister, 2016).

Set thousands of years into the future, *N:A* tells the story of three android units – 2B, 9S and A2 - fighting in the name of humanity to reclaim Earth from the hands of alien machines, the invasion of which forced mankind to seek shelter on the Moon. The game’s narrative is linear, presented through dialogues and cutscenes during the series of quests, focusing mainly on the three characters the player gets to control at different points of the plot. Throughout the course of the game the players are given the chance to gain a better understanding of the nature of android-alien conflict depicted in it, gathering information through the world exploration and encounters with in-game characters such as android troops stationed on Earth, and machines that gained the semblance of sentience, embracing pacifism and attempting to recreate human societies.

*N:A*, belonging to the hack’n’slash genre, is also yet another release that continues Yoko’s tradition of creating ultraviolent games that move beyond being just a brutish source of entertainment to serve as exploration and discussion on problematic topics (Turcev, 2019), some of

which tend to be not even ignored, but somewhat normalized by video game creators, glorification of violence included. Yoko himself is best known for his work on video game franchise *Drakengard* (in Japan known as *Drag-On Dragoon*), with the *NieR* franchise being its spin-off series. Prior to the release of *N:A*, his games saw limited success in the West while in Japan they fared somewhat better, with time achieving the status of cult classics. Following the commercial success of *N:A*, Yoko started to receive wider recognition from the general audience.

As it was mentioned previously, Yoko does not stray from unconventional game design choices and dark themes in his work, creating characters, worlds and stories that oftentimes are as fascinating as they are gruesome and utterly disturbing. However, he does not do that for the cheap effect of shock value; instead, he uses his games to explore humanity's faults, the reasons behind their dark drives and how they may deal when standing at the brink of despair (Turcev, 2019). His approach to the in-game violence is also a distinct one, in comparison to the huge part of triple-A industry. He himself sees the societal expectations and demand to create games in which the player has to kill enemies or dominate over them as an "invisible wall", limiting the medium's potential. The players enjoyed, and still do, games which reward and praise them for defeating the amounts of foes that in real life would make them serial killers. Working within these confines of invisible walls, Yoko uses his games to ask questions and make diagnoses on this matter. In *Drakengard*, he presented the players with protagonists as twisted as the villains, set to fight in a world filled with injustice, seeing violence as acts that one has to be insane to commit. With *NieR*, Yoko took inspiration from real-life events, including the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and changed his previous diagnosis – "you don't have to be insane to kill someone. You just have to think you're right" (Yoko, 2014). The result was a game that told a peculiar tale where all of the characters believe that their actions are right – their seemingly noble intentions however, once realized, doomed all of humanity to extinction. Seeing how violence and competition still permeate both real life and the game industry, Yoko sees that lack of change in the industry's trends as a personal failure and yet, he keeps trying, convinced of the games' incredible potential, asking questions on the nature of violence and leaving the players with freedom to find the answers regardless of his perspective (PlayStation, May 20<sup>th</sup> 2014). *NieR: Automata*, following Yoko's previous releases, is yet another tale created in his search for answers – the search to which once again the players are invited. In a way, this thesis is a response to that invitation – partially a quest for answers, partially an exploration of what exactly is it that makes this game's contents so compelling and having impact on its players, encouraging them to engage with and think about, the issues posed by Yoko. While not all games have to be focused on asking profound questions, pushing the boundaries of games as a genre of text and essentially re-evaluating it, understanding how *N:A* attempted to do that may potentially lead to finding suggestions or inspirations for many developers' future endeavours.

This attempt to explore how *N:A* achieves that is done through seeking the answer to the question of “how is the topic of violence discussed in *NieR: Automata*?”. Although somewhat simple, this question prompts one to take an in-depth look into the diverse ways in which the in-game acts of violence are portrayed, encouraged or problematized. In order to better understand how the parts of the gameplay and the narrative contribute to this discussion, two more questions are posed, based on the concepts introduced in the theoretical framework that follows, namely: “In what ways are the elements of dark play utilized to influence the player’s experience?” and “How does the game discuss the humanity of in-game adversaries?”

In the following chapter, the theoretical framework that supported this analysis is presented. The issue of the media and the scholars’ frequently hostile approaches to in-game violence is brought up and discussed in-depth, following by an alternative way of thinking about the matter, focusing on the contexts, motives and messages violence can convey. The concept of “dark play” is introduced with literature discussing the array of tools video games can utilize to engage with the topics oftentimes deemed problematic or subversive. A set of guidelines for exploring how values are integrated into and signalled in games is also included. Following that, the methodology for data collection and the analysis is introduced, while also exploring the frequently encountered problems with video game analysis. The section after is concerned with the main findings of the analysis, striving to explore the main themes that emerged in *N:A*’s portrayal of violence and divided accordingly. In the final, concluding section, the main findings are brought up as the research questions are answered, with potential directions for the future analyses being suggested.



## 2. Theory and previous research

The first section of the chapter discusses the previous research on video game violence that has been mostly focused on examining and emphasising the games' potential negative effects, contributing to moral panics over the years, influencing the society's perception of them as childish, yet dangerous, piece of entertainment. What follows is the segment that strives to introduce another perspective on violence in games, arguing that it should be given more attention and, with nuances and contexts in which it's depicted in-game taken into account, it is worth discussing beyond the media effects approach. Multiple ways of defining violence are discussed, and additional perspectives are provided on how violence can be discussed in relationship with warfare and myths, as well as values that can be conveyed through them. The second section is primarily concerned with defining "dark play" as a useful, diverse tool that, when applied well, can contribute to the game having a profound consequence on the player. A range of actions that can be understood as "dark play" is then described.

### 2.1. Violence and Videogames

#### 2.1.1 – The conundrum of violence and media effects

Digital games have by now a long tradition of being the target of scrutiny and moral panics fuelled in a significant part by the media, which tend to present them as an extraordinarily violent form of entertainment with a negative influence on the players, especially the youth. It is quite telling that aggression, after all, has grown to be the most studied potential effect of one's exposure to video games (Copenhaver, Mitrofan & Ferguson, 2017). The prevalence of varied forms of violence in a great number of games is oftentimes assumed to contribute to rise in hostility, aggressive tendencies and desensitization of the player to violent acts both in-game and in real life (Bartholow, Sestir & Davis, 2005; Smith, Lachlan & Tamborini, 2003). Some point out that apparently even a brief exposure to such violent materials is enough for such desensitization to occur and predict later increases in aggression (Engelhardt, Bartholow, Kerr & Bushman, 2011). Others focus on violent multiplayer games resulting in moral disengagement and player's reduced perceptions of their real-life opponents' humanness, but also of one's own humanity which, as it was found, could be lost also while killing the non-playable characters (Bastian, Jetten & Radke 2012). Yet other studies found the source of one's aggression to be not the act of violence itself, but rather the stress that comes from playing such games evidenced by reduced cardiac coherence (Hasan, Bègue & Bushman, 2013). In regards to the effects on children, it has been noted that even if the visible effects are generally negligible, children that are more vulnerable, such as victims of bullies or the ones having problems

with emotion regulation, might have their issues exacerbated by the medium (Funk, J. B., Buchman, Jenks & Bechtoldt, 2003). Based on the vast amount of existing literature on this topic, some propose to move on already from pondering whether video games have any harmful effects on their users to recognizing it as an indisputable fact, and working instead on public policies to reduce the youth's exposure to the medium and educate parents on its potential dangers (Anderson et al 2010). However, despite such wide array of studies and publications on the subject, with the majority of them sharing similar sentiments in regards to video game violence, this widespread approach carries a number of issues that need to be addressed, with the first one of them being how the research that fits into the narrative of the moral panic has always been able to find its way into the mainstream media with ease, while those that seem to disprove these claims or point out positives of consuming video games rather than focusing on their detrimental effects, tend to be swiftly dismissed and forgotten.

Research that reinforces such beliefs easily gets traction and widespread coverage in the general media, influencing the general public's perceptions, while works focusing on the positive sides of video game consumption and/or rebutting the claims about harmful effects generally receive much less attention, if they are not completely dismissed in the first place (Ferguson, 2010). For some, this serves as a source of political capital, creating an enemy to oppose and thus gain the voters' support for their decisive actions against the medium that's harming the children (Copenhaver et al., 2017).

Such coverage where video games are framed mostly as a threat, with special emphasis on the supposedly detrimental impact they're having on children, has been quite widespread for decades by now. Providing context and setting video games within the larger history of new media technologies sparking anxiety and being vilified, Williams (2003) went over the stages of video game coverage in USA's biggest news magazines in years 1970-2000, noting how late 1980s and 1990s were the time when the magazines framed video games *mainly* as a risk to children's values and behaviours, stripping them of empathy and encouraging violence. These fears were further fuelled by controversies surrounding the new emerging violent videogame titles, and events such as Columbine High School shooting and the shootings that followed. Williams emphasises that the widespread anxieties among the society could have influenced the attitudes of researchers that took it upon themselves to echo these anxieties by researching the negative effects of video games. Similar findings were noted by McKernan (2013) in his analysis of New York Time's coverage of video games in a timeframe moved forward by a decade compared to Williams, 1980-2010, to reflect potential changes in the narrative. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, video games being a threat to the youth remained the newspaper's predominant narrative, although, in contrast to the 1980s, the games

were oftentimes positioned next to other forms of media such as the TV as one among many harmful influences, rather than being a singular one. What's also pointed out by McKernan is the newspaper's tendency to portray video games as intended for and mostly used by children, which has consequences to the expectations and fears one may have towards the medium that, in this narrative, should abide by the standards that are helpful in child's development instead of potentially hindering it (McKernan, 2013). This also predisposed the approaches that video game's defenders had to take, when the onus was on them to prove that video games may actually spread values that are accepted by the society and thus should not be vilified. (McKernan, 2013)

The framing that media outlets choose to use when talking about video games are crucial for shaping the audience's opinions on the matter – a discourse that can be highly polarized. Depending on whether the games are depicted as a medium with great potential, threat to one's values, or both, the readers' perceptions will often change in accordance with the article's contents. That seems to be enhanced if the reader is someone with little to no personal experience with video games and as such will not have developed any positive associations with gaming before (Kümpel & Haas, 2015).

Sensationalism, simple as it is, also plays its part. Even now, after so many years of these disputes, the media, be it press or the TV, dependent on capturing their audience's attention, will have much better chance at achieving that with dramatic headlines about terrible influence of games than if their news ticker said "violent video games consumers are doing fine". As it was also noted by Copenhaver et al. (2017), another significant issue is the bias in research that has been published in high-impact journals and gained further attention over the years, with poorly designed research being more likely to both show negative effects of consuming violent video games and be cited by the academics and the press.

Partially, this enthusiasm towards the research focusing on negative effects of gaming has been attributed by Markey and Ferguson to simple human nature that makes us latch desperately onto our chosen beliefs and cherry pick the authorities and publications that support them, leaving no space for them to be challenged and, possibly, changed (Markey and Ferguson, 2017). This willingness to attribute responsibility for violent tendencies, especially in youths, to their exposure to video games can oftentimes reflect one's desire for easy answers in difficult situations, for finding something to bear the blame when it's uncomfortable, or impossible, to place this blame on anything else, and regain at least the shred of power that could have been lost due to a number of unfortunate events. These sorts of witch hunts for the culprit of youth violence, as put by Jenkins (2006), were almost a natural reaction, and video games an easy target. Regardless of whether it is a minor dispute between children that escalates to maybe scary looking, but overall harmless,

punches, or a tragedy of yet another young man arriving to the school and firing the shots at their peers, one will always try to seek answers as to why did these things that happened, happen.

Sternheimer (2007), in his reflection on the “folk devil” that video games became, has also made a valuable observation on why exactly this medium seems to have been so eagerly brought up as the one responsible for tragedies time and time again. With the killers being white, middle-class boys that up until that moment seemed to have lived a perfectly normal life, they do not fit the stereotypical profile of a dangerous criminal, and in many other, white, middle-class people’s minds, they can’t be placed in the same category as, for example, violent African-American youths since that would be a direct threat to their own sense of identity. A scapegoat, in this case a video game, helps to deflect the blame, portray the shooter not as a ruthless killer but a victim themselves - a child that fell under the violent game’s influence and would have never committed their crimes if it wasn’t for them being subjected to violent imagery (Sternheimer, 2007). Such culprit, even if it’s an imaginary one, lets people protect themselves, feel for a moment that they reclaimed control - and so they stick to it as the fears grow stronger and the panic greater, with media picking up the subject and doing that which the audience wants from them – validating these fears by selecting the materials that work best with their agendas (Ferguson, 2008).

So intense were these fears that many attempts to assuage them or present a differing point of view were bound to be met with deaf ears, hostility or ridicule, as Jenkins (2002) witnessed first-hand during his appearance on talk show “Donahue”, and wrote about further in the article relaying his experience. Seemingly intended to have an open discussion and allow Jenkins to present his arguments in defence of the video game industry, the show turned into yet another case of sensationalizing and fearmongering. Neither the showrunners nor the audience really wanted to challenge their fears and listen to the experts that expressed views that did not align with theirs. The episode of “Donahue” was not the only such case – few years later, Fox News ran a segment devoted to the newly released *Mass Effect*, claiming that the game features pornographic scenes. As the segment progressed, it quickly became apparent one of the guests, psychologist Dr Cooper Lawrence, bemoaning the game’s content, has never had contact with the game. However, when the other guest, game journalist Geoff Keighley tried to correct some of her assumptions, his attempts were met with dismissal. (Dutton, Consalvo & Harper, 2011). While such treatment of the topic was met with an uproar among online gaming news sites and fan communities, segments like this fit well into the larger theme of maintaining the panics and may find receptive audience in these viewers that are less familiar with video games.

It is of no surprise then that the research on the subject also grew plentiful, especially in the aftermath of the Columbine massacre (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). This has the potential to go even further, as it could have been seen in the case of Sandy Hook Shooting, when the tragedy in which 28

people lost their lives was followed by an explicit call from the Senator Jay Rockefeller for the researchers to look at the impact of violent video games on children, already suggesting the agenda that the research is supposed to support through its results (Bachman, 2012).

Another set of issues regarding the various research conducted on this topic is the multitude of attempts to make aggression and violence *measurable*. In particular in studies where participants are briefly exposed to content considered violent enough (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010). In some cases, the presence of aggressive tendencies is decided based on participants answering the questions related to the feelings of loneliness, being friendly or being irritable in social interactions (Anderson & Dill, 2000). Although that may possibly tell one something about whether the participant is a pleasant person to be around, it hardly translates exactly into the amount of aggression the person has in themselves (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). In other situations, some of the elements used for measuring violence in children were their expressed stances on self-defence and attitudes towards people with no friends, as well as the task of interpreting the vignettes showing everyday situations, completed after 15 minutes of video game play (Funk, Buchman, Jenks & Bechtoldt 2003).

A study connecting desensitization to violent tendencies included a measurement of the pupil dilation of adult participants when exposed to violent imageries as a measurement of aggression (Arriaga et al., 2015). One of the more widespread forms of measurement usually involves participants being asked to subject the other, non-existent in reality, participants, to unpleasant tastes or sounds to a degree of their choice. These activities ranged from issuing the noise blasts (Arriaga et al., 2015) to administering a portion of wasabi paste to others (Sauer, Drummond & Nova, 2015). Still, critics of such measurements argue that they can be scored and interpreted in a wide array of ways to suit the researcher's preference (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). Besides that, treating the expressions of slight annoyance or malice as a predictor for serious aggression is still a significant stretch which one should be wary of.

Besides that, potential researcher bias based on the person's age and experience with video games can also contribute to the perception of aggression among the players. Older adults that have been less exposed to video games throughout their lives are more likely to assume that antisocial motivations play some part in a person choosing to engage with violent games, although they still tend to place fun and challenge seeking as the main motivation (Kneer, Jacobs, Ferguson, 2018). What needs pointing out as well as numerous researcher's inclination to connect participant's violent tendencies to video game use and rarely, if ever, consider them simply as two elements that can coexist without being essentially tied to each other. This connection can be further reinforced by making a conscious choice to exclude other factors that could explain one's violent behaviours, such as social climate of the time, one's economic situation or home life, which can provide a better insight into what motivates an individual (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010; Sternheimer, 2007). Another

possibility that is also skimmed over is that people that are already seen as aggressive could choose the violent entertainment media more than the others, potentially becoming a part of the “players turned violent after video game use” statistic while the order of things is actually reversed (Sternheimer, 2007).

Those who take this particular side of the dispute, standing by their conviction of violent games’ detrimental effects, are also quick to defend their positions when faced with attempts to challenge their claims – some do that with reason, others with religious fervour, and still others with the arguments resembling an elevated version of “no you”. Nauroth and others (2014) came to a conclusion that both the scholars and other readers’ tendency to devalue research on negative effects of violent games stems primarily from the perceived threat to one’s identity as a gamer and a fear of stigmatization, resulting in defensive responses. While such hostile reactions do take place sometimes, this notion should not be used as a tool for instant disapproval of opposite side’s doubts towards the research on this matter. The article’s title itself, starting with a slogan “gamers against science”, could be seen as a tongue-in-cheek commentary, but, on the other hand, could also sound dismissive to a significant part of the audience.

#### 2.1.2 – Discussing violence beyond its “effects”

All of these elements, enabling further fearmongering and allowing the dispute itself to make rounds year after year, with the same arguments being repeated by both sides even as new research is being published, comes with another detrimental consequence to the discussions on the topic, immensely narrowing down the number of ways in which it seems to be talked about. These ongoing disputes, as noted by Jenkins (2002), were overshadowing the immense potential of the medium – he pointed out that its economic significance as part of the entertainment industry, its role as a tool for expanding the forms of interactive storytelling, and chance of making it accessible to everyone as part of popular culture all tended to get ignored in the media in favour of bemoaning the presence of violent themes and mechanics. What’s more, with everybody’s focus being on the video game violence’s *effects*, much less attention is being given to the *violence itself*. The varied ways in which violence is depicted, the contexts in which it is set, the purposes it may serve and the potential interpretations of it by the audience, have all been often overlooked in favour of tunnel-visioning the amount of violence seen in the game and issuing judgements or recommendations based solely on that. Meanwhile, elements such as the game’s genre, the story, its direction or art style, can shape the contexts and influence the player’s perception of and reactions to violence (Goldstein, 2005). Of course, that is not the case with every game, as many releases had and still have the tendency to trivialize violence, offering the players tried-and-true formulas and little to provoke any sort of contemplation (Jenkins, 2002), and these are the ones that tend to make the news most often. As

time went by, however, game designers became increasingly reflective about the players' experiences of violent in-game fantasies. Some grew to see perceive games as "ethical testing grounds" (Jenkins, 2013, pp.26-27) even, a safe environment to examine what we as the players are capable of and willing to do when given the chance and the tools (Jenkins, 2013).

Sometimes, it is indeed the pure bloodshed indeed that still serves as the game's main focus, allowing people to not hold back and destroy their opponents in the most gruesome ways just for the joy of it, as is the case with one of the mainstream media's favourite punching bags – the *Mortal Kombat* series. Other times, cruel actions may be forced on the player if they wish to move the game forward. In some cases, the player can be instead given freedom to do as they please, being given all the tools necessary to wreak havoc but not having to use any of them to complete the game if such is their preference. That is the case in the *Dishonored* series (Arkane Studios, 2012) or *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), with both of these games' worlds undergoing significant changes to reflect the player's choices, giving them more weight (Jørgensen, 2015; Seraphine, 2018). In yet other cases, the prevalent violent hero fantasy can be taken to the extremes and put on its head, prompting the player to reflect on the righteousness of both the player character's actions as well as their own, Sometimes despite of it, and sometimes *exactly due to the skilful use of the violent imagery*, video games offer us stories that can be touching, thought-provoking, or just plain entertaining and valuable to the players. This was also the belief that led to the choice of *NieR: Automata* as a subject of this analysis - while violent imagery takes the main stage there both due to the hack n' slash mechanics being the basis of the gameplay and the story focusing on the main characters placed in the middle of a never-ending war, taking a closer look at the game's contents reveals that these violent acts are not that worthy of attention *on their own*, and it is the contexts that they are presented in that makes these acts seem truly impactful and meaningful to some. The following sections seek to clarify the matter of defining violence beyond physical acts, and introduce the concepts that contribute to perception of violence as justified and legitimate both in real life and in the world of *N:A*.

#### 2.1.2.1 – The matter of definitions.

Going back to the basics, the sole task of defining what exactly is recognized as "violence" is not as simple as it seems at a glance, yet it is necessary to understand what exact acts in-game are of interest in this analysis. Even when the most prominent elements contained in many definitions are almost identical, the changing minutiae between them might prompt doubts or arguments. What connects most of them, though, is the emphasis put on physical injuries. Stanko provides one with the definition of violence for the use in criminology as "any form of behaviour by an individual that intentionally threatens to or does cause physical, sexual or psychological harm to others or

themselves” (2001, pp. 316). The definition differentiates between various forms of damage but describing such acts as done by an individual, not mentioning the vast possibilities of violence being carried out collectively. Exploring it as one of four major forms of power, on the other hand, Popitz perceived it as

a power action, leading to the intended bodily damaging of others, no matter whether for the actor it finds its meaning in its being carried out (as mere power of action) or, translated into threats, is supposed to establish the durable subjection of the other party (as binding power of action) (Popitz, 2017, p.29).

Extending the list of ways of inflicting harm, putting less emphasis on the goal of subjugation, instead focusing more on interpersonal relations, the World Health Organization defines the term in its publications as the “intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg & Zwi, 2002).

From a glimpse of these few definitions, similar as they may be, as well as the areas of interest they are related to, one can note another issue with the analysis of violence that was also brought up by Jackman (2002). With a wide array of types of violence being present in social life and studied, ranging from child abuse or sexual violence to slavery and labour violence, the literature that emerges is both specialized and “balkanized”, suffering from a lack of cohesion (Jackman, 2002). Yet, it doesn’t stop some from ignoring the difficulties and talking about violence in a way that implies it to be a clear-cut, well defined and easily understandable concept. What’s also pointed out by the author is the disconnect between the research on interpersonal violence, related in huge part to the prominence of the topic in legal and criminology studies, and collective/corporate acts of violence such as warfare and genocide.

Jackman (2002) acknowledges the role of other actions beyond physical, such as written or verbal, that also can be utilized to inflict harm and discusses the role of motivations for actions and how they can influence one’s decision to recognize or deny certain acts being violence, with certain violent practices, such as boxing or plastic surgery being widely accepted in society and seen at times as even exemplary. With that in mind, she proposes a generic definition of violence as: “Actions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury. Actions may be corporal, written, or verbal. Injuries may be corporal, psychological, material, or social” (Jackman 2002, p.405).

As she explains, this description is to serve as a template that “provides a consistent, autonomous basis for identifying the full population of injurious social behaviours”, and “forces us to



confront the diverse forms of violence in social life” (Jackman, 2002, p.405). Still though, these behaviours should not all be seen as equal just on the principle of falling into the definition, but instead should be analysed to see where do they place depending on the character and severity of the act. With this perspective, it is possible for one to realize in the process how violence, across various acts, is not an outlier but rather a “pervasive part of the normal social repertoire” (Jackman, 2002, p.405). A somewhat similar approach to defining violence was also brought up by Bufacchi (2005) who introduced a general differentiation between two types of conceptions of violence. The minimalist concept is limiting the understanding of violence to “intentional, direct, physical acts against other persons” (Bufacchi, 2005, p. 197), thus missing out on various other important aspects related to the phenomenon, such as violence being psychological rather than physical or directed at beings other than persons. The second conception however, the comprehensive one, resembles Jackman’s description as it includes the targets and types of violence seen to be excluded in the former approach. It is acknowledged that by going beyond the understanding of violence given by the minimalist concept, this comprehensive conception also faces a set of issues due to being more obscure and less precise. Here, Jackman’s approach is helpful, since the comprehensive understanding of violence can, just like her definition, be perceived as a tool for recognizing violence in different settings in life, remaining critical but aware of its many forms. Viewed thus, the conception’s vagueness stops being an issue. This approach was helpful in the analysis conducted in this thesis – numerous instances of violence witnessed in N:A are easily and instantly spotted due to the game drawing upon hack'n'slash genre and making the player frequently engage in combat. At the same time however, these situations themselves are of little interest. The acts of fighting the enemies are brought up in this analysis, but they only become meaningful in the broader context where they are related to the issues like ethical status of the enemy or the main characters’ beliefs. Beyond that, the broad ways of defining violence suggested by Bufacchi and Jackman encourage one to scrutinize the game’s contents and look for more subtle situations where violence is manifested or discussed in ways that are almost symbolic.

#### 2.1.2.2 Authority, myths and legitimization of violence.

Many chose to move on from trying to craft any sort of a stiff definition, and instead explore their chosen forms or aspects of violence more thoroughly, looking at the sources, motives, meanings, and their places in the social context. Human relationship to violence and, more particularly, warfare, is examined by Malešević (2010) who acknowledges the role of social organization and legitimizing doctrines in creating conditions for individuals, who otherwise would be neither too capable nor willing, to participate in large-scale acts of violence. She points out how the bureaucratization of organisation, as seen in both civil and military settings, involves utilizing

coercive control to maintain obedience, regular execution of orders and loyalty among the individuals under the threat of penalties. As a result, the individuals' obedience is increasing over time, further leading to the increase of the organisation's destructive capabilities. This is then paired with the act of centrifugal ideologization, providing coherence and structure to actions, images and events in order to legitimize power relations and actions performed by the organisation, giving individuals a feeling that their fighting and suffering happens for a just cause and that violence inflicted on enemies is a necessary evil. These two elements are seen by the author as the main processes responsible for the increase of organised violence in modern times and are also, to an extent, applicable to organisational structures of android forces as seen in the game.

Malešević, revisiting the approaches to violence and war in classical social thought, brings up, among others, Weber's perception of political life as highly coercive, linking power with violence and the modern state with physical force as one of its most important tools, as well as pointing out the connection between developments in warfare and the changes in disciplinary ethics and practices. Political sphere's mobilizing potency is emphasized, with the act of war invoking the feelings of pathos, community, and meaning in the face of a constant threat of death, which also provides the soldiers with a sense of sacrificing for a particular, noble purpose (Weber, 2004).

Whitmer's thorough work (1997) has also provided valuable reflections on the nature of violence and the Western mythos that is related to it, which have proved useful during the analysis of N:A's themes. The first crucial element she brings up is the distinction of three terms that oftentimes tend to be treated as one entity. The *behaviour* of violence, as she notes, tends to oftentimes be confused with the *emotion* of anger, constituting a category mistake. While violence can serve as one of the expressions of anger, this is, to a degree, dependent on one's social values, beliefs and carried expectations related to the interpretation and expression of emotions. Further on, violence and anger are also distinguished from the  *motive* of aggression as an intent to do harm (Whitmer, 1997, pp.25-26). Whitmer then goes through the two main discourses on human propensity for violence being either innate or acquired, that attempted to explain man's violent acts throughout ages as either a natural given, thus partially relieving humans' of some of their responsibility and feelings of guilt, or part of a programming that was learned by an individual or a group through experiences, symbols, or training.

In one of the book's sections, Whitmer brings up the role of violent myths in war and history, where they can serve as ways to present individuals with the overview of traditions and transmission of authoritative beliefs throughout generations, thus maintaining the current authority's legitimacy and, in turn, ensuring the continued survival of the institution, its values, ideas, goals and even

models of action. This, to a degree, relates to previously brought up by Malešević role that ideologies play in ensuring compliance from the individuals in organizational structures, providing them with a sense of purpose and being justified in their actions against the enemies. Looking into the significance of such myths is quite worthwhile in case of the institutions seen in the world of N:A, where the story of humanity's exile and the messages that accompany the ongoing efforts to reclaim the planet give the impression of having reached the status of a myth.

The role of institutions and their authority, as well as a matter of power relations between the YoRHa command, its forces, and the other androids, might also be better understood with the help of Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic violence', which appeared in his work multiple times in varied settings. To a degree, it was related to another concept of his, the *habitus*, understood as a set of durable dispositions that are a product of structures of a particular environment and the conditions it sets for an individual's existence (Thompson, 1984). The institutional arrangements of society determine these dispositions' characteristics, and *habitus* as a whole is reflected in the way one carries themselves, speaks and acts. A person's actions, even though they have free will, always take place within a certain, structured scope of possibilities determining their lifestyle and, what follows, social group they belong to (p. 53). Between these social groups may happen instances of that 'symbolic violence' – a "gentle, invisible violence, unrecognized as such, chosen as much as undergone, that of trust, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, debts, piety, in a word, of all the virtues honoured by the ethic of honour" (Bourdieu, 1980, as cited in Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991). Manifesting itself through a power imbalance between the social groups, it is a form of collective deception enabled by the group's *habitus* and, often unconscious, compliance of all sides involved. It manifests itself somewhat differently in societies where such power relations are enforced by objectified institutions, as violence is built into these institutions themselves (Thompson, 1984). This concept allows systems of hierarchy and domination persist, lasting through generations without the individual's resistance and recognition, due to the dominated side perceiving such state of things as natural. Symbolic violence can manifest itself through means such as classifications, labels and meanings that contribute to, both social and symbolic, inclusion and exclusion of individuals (Swartz, 2011).

Looking at the main institution encountered during the playthrough, that is the android military organization YoRHa, as well as the myths and ideas present in the game's world also provides one with a better grasp of some of the values that are represented at certain points, helping to understand how they came to be, and to monitor how/whether they changed throughout the course of the game. It is worth keeping in mind that although "values" usually tend to be associated with positive elements, this doesn't always have to be the case. Especially in case of discussing violence

and warfare, there is a great potential for spotting negative values just as often as the positive ones. These can then be analysed with help of the toolbox that Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014) introduced in their work *Values at Play*, where they encourage in readers the approach to values in games that is critical rather than moralistic, allowing one to explore their moral, social and political significance. To that end, they provided their three core beliefs that guide the analyses of games in terms of values: societies having common values; technologies, games included, exhibiting particular ethical and political values, and game designers being capable of shaping the ways in which the players engage with these values (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014, p.11). Video games being capable of conveying values was also acknowledged by Jenkins, who highlighted some of the games' potential usefulness in education, acknowledging that violent games too might serve such purposes, helping people make sense of senseless acts, self-reflect or work through and discuss different values and scenarios in safe environment (2013). Some of the tools and approaches that can be helpful in shaping the player's engagement with values, including, or sometimes even emphasising, the negative ones, are those brought up in the following sections.

## 2.2. "Dark play" in games

Just like all the other forms of media, video games do not shy away from the portrayal of topics that are generally perceived as unsettling and/or controversial such as dystopian futures, war, substance abuse or moral dilemmas left in player's hands to solve and bear the consequences. On the "testing grounds" of the virtual worlds however, the player oftentimes has a chance to engage with such themes in a safe environment, free to ponder his choices and try out different approaches, including the ones that are more morally dubious, or even villainous, than traditionally heroic (Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015). Other times, the game might encourage the player to engage in play behaviours that are typically treated as controversial, such as deception, or it may perform similar acts on the player himself, deceiving them or posing in front of them a seemingly impossible challenge. All such elements can be described with the help of the term "dark play", first established in late 1980s that went on to be altered and, while not exactly widespread, began to be used by some game scholars to refer to contents and actions that can be seen as controversial, subversive or problematic, that are taking place within the game (Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015). Due to the multitude of themes and elements related to it, there are numerous ways in which dark play can be approached and discussed; from among them, the works focused on elements most applicable to N:A and the topic at hand were chosen. The previous, albeit scarce, research focused on N:A has also, to a degree, touched upon aspects that can be categorized as "dark play".

### 2.2.1. Heroic protagonists, mass slaughter of enemies and the player's sense of dissonance

The highly normalized convention of playing the role of a hero yet while through the game killing countless generic enemies, especially in the action-adventure genre, has been seen by Glas (2015) as an inconsistency that is also a potential source of occasional ludonarrative dissonance – a state caused by inconsistencies between the game's mechanics and narrative, potentially resulting in aesthetic and ethical problems in how the game is designed and experienced (Hocking, 2009). Generic enemies themselves have always been an important element of game design patterns as well as genre conventions, used for structuring both the game's storytelling and gameplay. Despite their importance as an asset however, there is rarely, if ever, anything remarkable about them or consequential in their deaths. Most of the time they are depicted more as the obstacles to be removed rather than social objects, encouraging the feeling of moral disengagement. There has been evidence, however, that players do perceive the in-game characters as "quasi-social", with some moral status and rules of justice seemingly being applicable (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). Still, the gratification felt by players following the slaughter of enemies seemed to be enough to compensate the cost of violating some of one's inner moral standards and prevent one's enjoyment from being hindered.

Examining the issue, Glas (2015) traces back the origins of action-adventure genre in melodrama and notes how some of its characteristics, namely sensationalism – an "emphasis on action, violence, thrills, awesome sights, and spectacles of physical peril", and moral polarization – a "moral absolutism and transparency" with each character's ethical status being clearly stated (Singer, 2001, as cited in Glas, 2015, p. 40), have been brought over to video games. Glas brings up how the concept of situational dramaturgy, a narrative construction used in theatre and film defined as a "model of narrative as a series of pictorial, sensational moments, or situations" (Higgins, 2008, as cited in Glas, 2015, p. 41), is also utilized by dramaturgical situations being incorporated into games and easily distinguished in their segmented structure. These situations, focused purely on sensation and spectacle - which mass slaughter of enemies can be - rather than logic, are treated as a part of long standing tradition of the genre and as such rarely cause the player to have conflicted feelings. Following that, moral polarization is oftentimes used to position the player as a clearly defined and inherently good hero against the clearly defined, inherently evil, enemies, which do not have to be complex as long as their wickedness is backed by even the simplest explanation. The goal of dehumanizing these adversaries can be achieved faster the more they are removed from humans – taking the form of aliens, demons, or machines as is the case in N:A. Such characterization leaves little place to doubt the legitimacy of the player controlled characters' actions as they repeatedly engage in slaughter of enemies throughout the games, unless steps are taken to humanize them,

invoking the sense of doubt in the player. As a result, they may begin to see them as more than just an object towards which they previously felt nothing, making moral disengagement no longer possible. Another approach to this matter of mass extermination of enemies was taken by Sicart (2009), who linked this ethical challenge to Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil as described in her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This concept, related to industrial and bureaucratic procedures being applied to mass extermination of individuals, emphasises how atrocities may be committed not out of evil intentions, but rather the need to keep the existing systems running. The consequences of these acts are not witnessed by the individuals that enabled them, and their moral nature is not discussed. Seeing the banality of evil as a "consequence of systems designed to obscure the causality of decisions", a "designed limitation" (Sicart, 2009, p.192), Sicart relates this idea to video games as "ethically dangerous experiences" (2009, p.193), where the system design frequently requires the players to engage in mass killings of enemies. That well-established convention, as mentioned before, not only sets limitations on the player's agency, but also tends to detach the player's in-game actions from the perception of these actions' consequences, making the act of killing in-game essentially not worth thinking about, contributing to "practicing the banality of simulated evil" (Sicart, 2009, p.192) and encouraging disengagement.

#### 2.2.2. Defamiliarization, subversion of in-game elements and the player's expectations.

Throughout the multiple definitions of games, it is possible to notice there are more similarities than differences among them. Noting that, Juul (2011) offered a definition that merges them - seeing games to be comprised of six basic elements, he describes them as

a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the players exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable (Juul, p. 36)

Gameplay is further defined as an interaction between the game's rules, the player's pursuit of a goal and the player's competence and playing methods. The importance of video games' fictional worlds, the ways they are projected to the player, and how these fictions interact with the game's rules, are also brought up by him following the discussion on defining games. In skilled hands, these features may be utilized to invoke particular feelings or reactions from the player.

Basing his reflections on the concepts applied to poetry and literature by 20th century's Russian Formalists, Gerrish (2018) introduces the reader to the idea of defamiliarization – a form of subversion, an act of poetic violence directed at the boundaries of genre's convention and, as follows, the way through which this genre may evolve – and applies it to video games. Acts of

defamiliarization, as he sees them, force the readers, or in this case, players, to pause and consider the unfamiliarity of the elements that have previously been very much familiar, potentially gaining new understanding or changing their perspective on what they see. Gerrish further notes how that goal can be achieved by an array of elements, one of them being changes to the gameplay style occurring at some points of the game, requiring the player to temporarily discard their already acquired habits and adapt to the new setting, thus never allowing them to become fully comfortable in their position during the playthrough. Another way of achieving that can be having the player switch between characters, gaining new perspective on the events thanks to seeing them through a different pair of eyes, possibly providing the player with new interpretative frameworks and better understanding of the in-game world and events

Gerrish (2018) also mentions the ways in which defamiliarization may potentially be utilized to “darkly play” the player and lure them into situations that might end up making them feel bad about the routes they’ve taken. In some cases, subversion can be done with the help of the user interface tricking the player through lies or simply failing to mention some of the information. Other times it can be done by the non-playable characters providing similar wrong information or tricking them into picking up quests that aren’t exactly what they seem. Such lies, acknowledged as potential elements of an abusive game design, might serve as prompts for the player to engage with the game or its parts in a way that is more conversational rather than instrumental (Wilson & Sicart, 2010). Game’s acts of secrecy or plain deceit, being a lure for the player to engage with, leading to the situations like the one described above, making the player feel bad about the course of events on a personal level, instead of just attributing their actions to the in-game character they control. Björk (2015) raises the question of whether the game itself can be held responsible for holding and expressing certain expectations of the player, only for them to be proven false afterwards; or if the onus is solely on the player that chose to follow the game’s directions without further consideration. Ultimately, such unpleasant experience can force the players after the fact to reflect on their actions and drives.

Jačević (2017) brings up the limitations that can be put on the player by the game in regards to the potential ethical and action related issues, and the tensions they might evoke as a result when the game interface tells the player one thing and their minds and hearts the other. To that end, he calls upon the concept of the “implied player”, as it was named by Aarseth (2014) in reference to the original notion of the “implied reader”. “Implied player”, as seen by Aarseth, encompasses an ideal role that is set by the game for the player, posing requirements to fulfil and limiting his freedom for the duration of the gameplay so that it can “exercise its effect”. Oftentimes, this is a non-issue and the player falls into the role naturally, enjoying the experience and willingly following the game’s

lead. Other times, however, the game might expect its player to act in ways that stand in conflict with his moral and ethical values, asking him to perform actions deemed problematic and unpleasant to progress in the game. By forcing the player's hand, a game seeks to invoke a sense of struggle and tension between the two conflicting identities that the player is supposed to take on: the implied player that should abide by a game's rules and requirements, and an individual that's invited to engage with a game's themes/storylines/storyworlds, etc., discussing and acknowledging its potentially problematic contents.

These theoretical insights, both on the prevalent tendency of analysing in-game violence from a media effects angle, as well as concepts that offer an alternative way of discussing it, focusing on what messages it seeks to convey, guided the analysis presented in the later section of this thesis. In the following chapter, the methodology for this study will be introduced in more detail.



### 3. Methodology.

The general process of content analysis of games has been posing a challenge to the researchers and an array of issues has been brought up over the time. The main issue presented is the selection of a proper approach to studying video games, with various frameworks for such studies being suggested and disputed over the years. Having experienced a somewhat rapid change from being just entertainment to becoming a worthy subject of studies, video games suffered from the lack of methodology that would be tailored to them. Konzack (2002), tried to alleviate that by giving an overview of seven “layers” of the game that should be subject to the analysis, these layers being hardware, code, functionality, gameplay, meaning, referentiality and socio-cultural aspects. Not much is said, however, on the exact ways in which they ought to be analysed, and their definitions remained not too clear as well, with each category encompassing an array of elements that is almost too wide. Aarseth (2003), on the other hand, went on to propose a more defined set of game research perspectives, present ways to obtain knowledge about the game one wants to analyse and offer general suggestions to keep in mind when attempting the analysis, but does not offer any specifics on methodology. Consalvo and Dutton (2006) created a detailed template for qualitative analysis consisting of four areas of the game that should be studied: Object Inventory, Interface Study, Interaction Map and Gameplay Log, which on their own serve as a useful toolkit to keep in mind when analysing games. Throughout these many suggestions on how to study games, researchers frequently drew on literary theories, sometimes bringing over just some elements of it, other times taking the whole methods and adjusting them for video games.

The following section provides an overview of chosen qualitative research methods accompanied by the explanation of what motivated the choice and example cases of research in which close reading was successfully applied to video games before. In section 3.2 the data collection process and decisions regarding sampling were discussed. Section 3.3 focuses on operationalization of previously discussed theoretical concepts, while in section 3.4, the process of data analysis, as well as particular challenges video games can pose in that regard, are discussed. The final section contains remarks regarding the issues of reliability and validity.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The exact method chosen for this research is a qualitative one, namely close reading. This practice, stemming from literary studies and having undergone a multitude of changes since its emergence in late 1920s from the movement of New Criticism, is focused on procuring a “a

technically informed, fine-grained analysis of some piece of writing, usually in connection with some broader question of interest.” (Smith, 2016). It involves the examination of the ways in which the text was formed and investigation of what makes the material work persuasively on the reader. Potentially varying in the results from one reader to another, the method aids the critic in uncovering the themes in the text that might have been otherwise ignored and allows one to better understand the reactions or feelings that the material sparked (Ruiz De Castilla, 2018). From the study of literature, it went on to be adapted to other mediums, such as movies and, later on, video games, changing the notion of what can be perceived as a text, allowing some digital media to be counted as such – the amalgamations of medium and the message. The use of close reading for this research was motivated by the conviction that such form of a detailed observation and analysis is an appropriate way to thoroughly examine the ways in which the game portrays, discusses and problematizes violence, understand what were the specific elements that contributed to it and how exactly they allowed the game to “exercise its effect” (Aarseth, 2014, p.184).

Adapting this method for the analysis of video games, however, did present a particular set of challenges: a) the potential indeterminacy resulting in varied experiences of the readers; b) the scale of some of the games, the playthrough and examination of which can end up being incredibly time-consuming, and c) the games’ difficulty levels which may in some cases become a barrier for the researcher that wishes to engage with them (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, pp.6-8). Another, even more significant challenge that is noted, is related to the need for the researcher to adapt, and switch between two perspectives: one of a critical reader strives to look objectively at the material at hand, maintaining a high level of awareness and paying attention to the details; and another of a naïve reader, a player that immerses themselves fully in the experience of gameplay (pp. 8-9). As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2016) point out, balancing these two attitudes allows one to make insightful observations on and interpretations of the material, albeit at the risk of losing empirical objectivity. Following such playthrough, it is required of the researcher to combine this experience with observational notes to make sense of the reading in relation to the posed question.

Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2006;2011;2012;2016), having introduced this approach in regard to video games, have also, through their work, provided examples of how this method works in practice. For example, they used it to analyse multiple playthroughs of the beginning sequence of *Oblivion* (2006) and the in-game non-playable characters’ behaviours through the lenses of adaptivity and believability, judging whether the game’s design rose up to the very ambitious task of depicting a rich, living worlds. Later, close reading was used by them again to study the narrative design of *Mass Effect 2* with the emphasis put on the characters, story world, interface, emotions and plot coherence analysed through multiple playthroughs (2012).

As such, to follow a similar path as the one undertaken by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, this study relies on gameplay as data. The in-depth, full individual playthrough of the game selected for the close reading was also necessary in order to gain a proper understanding of its content that could not have been achieved by just a partial playthrough or an observation of someone else's play, leading to understanding of the medium's communicated messages in their full depth, including the ones that are not explicit but are implied, and become more visible through the player's interpretations. This interpretive role in the analysis of such messages is fulfilled here by the researcher, whose task is to have such content "explained, described or made plausible, rather than quantified", as it "cannot be analysed in terms of a strict, quantitative coding scheme" (Kracauer, 1952). A choice to collect the data in form of superficial play, such as going through the game's first ten minutes, might, depending on the particular needs of a given research, be sufficient in cases such as the one where, for example, one's aim is to simply categorize a wide array of games. However, when focusing on a particular genre or an individual game, a thorough playthrough, or even a repeated one in some cases, is needed to ensure that the analysis of its contents is done correctly (Malliet, 2007). Due to the subject of this analysis being a singular game this was a relatively easy task to complete and a non-issue overall.

### 3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The data for this study, taking the form of the gameplay sessions, was recorded on a personal laptop with use of open source program Open Broadcast Software and totalled 31 hours. Due to the nature of the research, with its design being looser, and the material of the analysis being one game in its entirety, the sampling method applied here was a purposeful one, allowing for openness and flexibility (Rapley, 2014). As the previously posed research questions are concerning the whole game, selecting only a sample of these videos would be remiss and thus, the choice was made to have all of the video game footage analysed. It also has to be noted that previously, two other playthroughs of the game took place back in 2017, the year of the game's release. The first one of them saw me going into the game almost blindly, focusing mostly on the completion of the main story. The second playthrough was a slower one, done with the intention of further exploring the game's world, collecting missing items and completing numerous, previously omitted side quests. While neither of these experiences was memorized in full, the knowledge retained from them helped in going through the game more smoothly. The third playthrough, and, as follows, its recordings, were divided based on the scenario's progression, using "cut offs" such as boss battles, zone changes or points at which the change of controlled character took place signifying the end of a particular

chapter, with such segmentation providing one with a reliable overview of the game's content (Schmierbach, 2009). However, additional recordings were taken during and after the completion of the main scenario that focused on completion of some of the side quests and browsing in-game materials such as the short stories attached to the collected weapons, enemy information, picture books and pieces of story that are presented in form of in-game "novels". The files were named according to the story route they depicted – A/B/C, the character controlled and the more exact description of the events they portrayed, using the name of the explored areas, bosses, or certain quest names. With such division, it was significantly easier to track and point out the parts of the gameplay most relevant to the questions at hand, related to the interpretations of violence, narrative, and design choices that can be considered elements of dark play. In total, 33 files with recorded gameplay were made. The screenshots that can be seen accompanying the analysis were taken from that footage.

Notes were also taken during and after the playthrough, consisting mostly of an overview of the in-game events that took place during each gameplay session, such as visited areas or completed quests, brief remarks on the gameplay, characters' attitudes or actions, observations about the areas visited and quotes and remarks on the in-game information considered relevant to the discussion of the main questions leading the study, creating a sort of a "gameplay diary" chronicling this particular playthrough. The notes were separated and sorted based on the gameplay session during which they were taken. The notes were particularly useful for recalling the smaller bits of dialogue delivered off-hand, subtle cues on changes in the character's behaviours, and other seemingly insignificant moments of the playthrough that could otherwise easily slip one's mind and get lost among the numerous bigger, more attention-grabbing parts of the playthrough that constitute the major part of the experience.

### 3.3 Operationalization

The main theoretical concepts presented in the previous chapter were applied to the analysis of the gameplay diary and video footage to explore the ways in which they were discussed in the game. While the focus of this analysis was on the themes of violence, myths, dark play and values, which served as a basis of this framework, it was also constructed dynamically, allowing for the inclusion of other concepts not brought up initially, should they prove to be prominent and relevant to the topic.

Role of institutions in warfare and violence has been examined by both Whitmer (1997) and Malešević (2010) and the topic was seen as somewhat prominent in *N:A*. The theme in the analysis was applicable to instances where the importance of the elite military force, YoRHa, was emphasised,

either through bureaucratic matters being brought up, their acts of warfare being legitimised or the organisation's ideology being broadcasted, partially through myths.

Myths – understood by Whitmer as “cultural stories that embody symbolic discourse and authoritative beliefs in a culture” (1997, pp. 71) - provide people with the feeling of unity through shared convictions, attitudes, values and behaviours, ensuring continuity and allowing for collective learning. In the world of *N:A*, this was applicable to the fragments of cutscenes or in-game dialogue that either communicated stories that could be seen as elevated to the status of a myth, or commented on them in some way. These were considered important due to their influence on shaping and explaining the main characters' motivations throughout the game's events, providing the basis for their actions.

Regarding the concept of dark play, its definition as “content, themes, or actions that occur within games that in some contexts would be problematic, subversive, controversial, deviant, or tasteless” (Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015, p.5), was followed. Nevertheless, one is left with quite broad comprehension of what can be seen as an element of dark play. Since not all of the wide array of elements that have so far have been acknowledged as aspects of dark play are applicable to the case of *N:A*, only a selection of them was chosen in this study. Furthermore, the generality of dark play as concept allowed for a dose of flexibility in selecting the elements to analyse based on one's own sense of what's subversive or problematic. The concept of dark play as a whole was a valuable tool in understanding how the particular in-game scenes, quests, or dialogues, could impact the player and thus contribute, among others, to the game's problematization of violence. Among these selected aspects was the matter of dehumanizing the enemies raised by Glas (2015) that fits within the trope of generic adversaries used as obstacles to challenge the player. *N:A* thoroughly discusses the status of the enemies the player encounters in game where their humanity is both reinforced and denied, mostly through dialogue lines, cutscenes, and the topics of numerous side quests. It encourages the player to question their feelings of moral disengagement, prompting them to empathise with adversaries and possibly invoke feelings of guilt.

Exploiting the player – a form of subversion – was yet another element acknowledged under the umbrella of dark play. This theme was applicable to a range of scenes, dialogues, or quests where the player is prompted to commit acts based on either having received wrong information or some of the information being hidden from them. This can result in the players engaging in acts that they aren't fully comfortable in or feel bad about afterwards, treating the feeling on a personal level despite their actions being done through an avatar in a virtual environment. This element was partially tied to the issue of ethical tensions - feelings caused by in-game situations where the player might be at conflict with what is expected of them to continue the game, and what they perceive as a

morally correct thing to do, for example when they are instructed to attack defenceless enemies, potentially raising questions related to the game's framing of violence.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Regarding the analysis of video games, there is one characteristic feature of them that is frequently mentioned as a potentially problematic, that is their significant degree of interactivity in comparison to other forms of media, with which one typically engages through passively watching, reading or listening, without any input of their own. This in turn results in previously mentioned high indeterminacy and variance between the game play sessions, both those done by the same player at different points in time as well as the ones done by different individuals possessing different motivations for the play and skill levels. Certain problems have also been signalled in regard to unitizing and dividing the gameplay data in a way that allows the researcher to make sense of it (Schmierbach, 2009). Despite recognizing the potential issues with variance, the majority of studies of video game content have relied on a single individual playing through a given game, with their settings, skill level and overall attitude as a player having an impact on the results (Schmierbach, 2009). This study is no different in that regard, as the data for the analysis was collected by recording my own playthrough of the game. In this particular case, it is worth noticing that the main scenario of *N:A* is very much a linear one, ensuring that while the pace, gameplay style and the selection of completed side quests may vary from player to player, the experience of the game's crucial points remains unchanged and having only one set of recordings to work with was not an issue.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that there are playstyles alternative to the ones taken by us that could have been picked by other researchers or players engaging with the game (Aarseth, 2003). They could possibly fall into one of categories introduced by Bartle (1996), that is killers, socializers, explorers or the achievers, or land anywhere in between them, significantly changing the way one engages with the game. This, however, does not make one's play experience any less valid and valuable for the analysis than the other, as it is impossible to find an entity that could serve as an "ideal player" providing us with the one and only right way of playing through the material to analyse it. Playing the game essentially means influencing it, and allowing, or even requiring the players to be creative within the framework of the rules set by the games is their crucial element, encouraging variance in experiences to a certain degree (Kücklich, 2002). Thus, aside from the playthrough, the player context also needs to be taken into account.

It is also crucial for one to remain conscious of the level of their involvement with that particular text, taking into account personal goals, attitudes and level of expertise in dealing with the medium. Analysing the game entails engaging with it, be it through gameplay or observation, and ultimately leads to the object of analysis partially becoming a construction of the motivations and

preferences that the researcher carries with them and brings into the experience. (Malliet, 2007). The researcher not only takes a role of the interpreter, but also, as a player the one of a contributor to the messages conveyed in the game. Thus, one must strive to retain a sense of self-awareness, remaining able to detach oneself from such motivations to offer objective critique, and recognize that each play experience is unique.

Following the recorded playthrough of *N:A* accompanied by extensive note taking, the notes were arranged into a “gameplay diary” recounting the main gameplay activities. This file was then extensively reread in search for prominent themes while additional notes, insights and commentary emerged in the process as well. Textual analysis grounded in previously introduced theoretical concepts was chosen as a method to make sense of all gathered data. Interpretative in nature and thus fitting to accompany the close reading, this method aided in the process of making an educated guess at the most likely interpretations that might be made of a playable text that *N:A* is in regards to the research questions posed (McKee, 2003). These interpretations were then grouped based on their shared themes and messages conveyed. Having a choice of presenting the examples of interpretations or either transcribed pieces of dialogue or screenshots from the game which also included dialogue parts, decision was made to use screenshots as the game’s settings provide context for some of the dialogues. These examples were presented in the accompanying appendix.

### 3.5 Validity and Reliability

The main issue that could pose a challenge to both validity and reliability is a previously mentioned problem of indeterminacy from which new media, and especially games, suffer. It is impossible to assume that two readers will go through the same in-game encounters in the same order, complete the same optional activities and pay attention to the same details and aspects during their playthrough, even if the game is, to a huge degree, linear. An effort to alleviate it was made by providing a detailed overview of how the gameplay data was gathered and segmented. The “gameplay diary” written to compile the key points and observations taken during the experience, also provides description of the main activities and encounters, as well as their order, accounting not only for the game’s main storyline but also detailing completed side quests, additional endings, and times dedicated to exploration rather than completion, should one want to retrace the exact steps taken to potentially replicate it.

Due to the researcher’s significant role in analysing the data, it has to be taken account how one’s own experience contributes to shaping the interpretations (Silverman, 2011). All of this can bring into question whether it would be possible for a different researcher to utilize the same design and arrive at the same, or at least similar, conclusions. To ensure maximum reliability of this study, an overview was provided of all stages of the research design, accompanied by an explanation of the main

elements that grounded the analysis that followed. Despite that, it is quite likely that in case of textual analysis, even when provided with the same text, different researchers, drawing on their own knowledge of the topic, will come up with interpretations that vary to a degree (McKee, 2003). Acknowledging that, a poststructuralist approach towards textual analysis was adopted, understanding that multiple interpretations of the same text can be recognized and valued when determining its meanings (Hawkins, 2018). Nevertheless, a thorough overview of the main theoretical concepts that guided this analysis serves to ensure a degree of similarity in conclusions if one were to conduct another analysis based on the same research questions and framework. The concepts introduced there were prominent enough to be recognized on sight.

The insights from the analysis are introduced in the following chapter.



## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 YoRHa and legitimisation of violence.

#### 4.1.1 The androids' bureaucratic feat.

N:A's first hour of gameplay already provides the player with a chance to reasonably acquaint themselves with the most prominent form of organization they'll get to witness throughout the entirety of the game, YoRHa – elite military force who the game's heroes – 2B, 9S and A2 – are, or, at some point, were a part of. The prologue, beginning with the android's descent on Earth and ending with neutralization of machine enemies by self-destruction, provides a glimpse of the organization's inner workings such as the variety of unit designations, relationships between said units and the ways in which they cooperate, and the decision-making processes being dependent on being green-lit by the Command. The sequence that follows in the "Reboot" quest, has the player transported for the first time to the hub which serves as YoRHa's main base of operations, and to which they will be returning multiple times throughout the game - the Bunker, situated on a space station orbiting Earth.

The facility's design, as well as encounters with NPCs in there, also give an impression of the organization being an impressive, well-oiled machine. Some units are busy conducting maintenance in the Hangar filled with flight units utilized for androids' descents to Earth's surface, with which the player will become very familiar by the end of the game. Other units can be spotted occupying uniform rooms scattered across the construction. Command room is at all times filled with Operators – logistical models monitoring statuses of the units assigned to work in the field, providing them with intel and forwarding orders from the unit presiding over the force – the Commander. What also becomes noticeable fast is the social organisation stemming from the division of roles among androids through different designations. Initially, the player is introduced to three models – the already mentioned Operators, combat oriented Battle types, which 2B is designated as, and represented by 9S Scanner units, focused on scouting and gathering data in the field. Two more types, Defenders and Healers, are briefly mentioned in the prologue sequence as well but do not have significant presence in the game's world, aside from one Defender model having a small role in one of the side quests.

This division, with androids being not only assigned, but manufactured, with one specific role in mind for each, contributes to the perception of YoRHa as highly structured and valuing obedience. The overall bureaucratization, seen within the organization's structure and the way it works, including the androids' regularly enforced contacts with the Operators, requests for authorization of

certain actions during combat and the issuing of orders and equipment, contribute to enforcing that sense of control over the android units and ensuring that, as Malešević (2010) noted, maintaining loyalty and efficiency within the institution contributes to its increasing destructive potential that the androids constantly need more of.

Nevertheless, even with obedience being quite literally programmed into an individual, no one fights without a reason. The androids from the Bunker, 2B and 9S included, are given all the tools to wage war, but what they also need is purpose – the machines they target, after all, are not killed for entertainment purposes. This is where the organisation’s second pillar comes into play.

#### 4.1.2 Humanity – “a god worth dying for.”

When 2B’s rebooting in the Bunker right after the prologue, her short exchange with 9S ends with a customary salute accompanied by a phrase “Glory to Mankind.” Moments later, a cutscene plays with the whole Command room filled with androids standing at attention. On the room’s largest screen, a simple animation plays as everyone listens to the solemnly narrated overview of the day from over six millennia before, when “the mankind’s glorious history came to a sudden and abrupt end”, with an alien invasion resulting in mankind’s exile to the moon. From there, as the player learns, they’ve spent the last thousands of years counterattacking by sending android forces, out of which YoRHa are newest, elite group, set to tirelessly work to break the stalemate, destroy the machines and reclaim Earth for their human masters. “Glory to Mankind!” – the salutation spreads



*Image 2. A single broadcast explains to the player all that the YoRHa stand for.*

across the room as this short broadcast from so called Council of Humanity has just explained to the gathered androids the reasons for their existence and the motives for their fight.

Being at their 14<sup>th</sup> war against the machines over the course of six thousand years, the androids are mostly left to their own devices with barely any contact with the human station on the moon – yet, humanity’s plight is internalized, treated as their own. Even more than that – humanity as a whole has been elevated to the status akin to the one of a myth. The idea of their war efforts contributing to a noble and just cause of restoring mankind’s home is exactly the legitimizing element that, as Malešević (2010) pointed out, is required to unite and prompt the individuals to participate in large-scale, violent acts. This serves as a justification not only to the androids but also to the player, who is led to believe that their actions will ultimately lead to humanity’s salvation before being sent on a series of missions and getting involved into more combat against the machines, only for the basis for their actions being exposed as a lie later on. While the YoRHa are deceived by other androids, the player gets tricked by both the in-game characters and the game’s design that contributes to maintaining the deception through inconspicuous quest descriptions and pointers. This leads to creating the situation of defamiliarization, exploiting and subverting the player’s expectations towards the game, thus prompting them to question the reliability of the characters and even the game’s menus – the element that rarely, if ever, is considered a part of video games’ worlds and even less frequently is considered to be suspicious (Gerrish, 2018)

Even aside from combat operations, the androids can be seen expressing both fascination and fondness towards humans that they seem to perceive at the same time as their masters and very peculiar creatures, to say the least. Exploring the area of an abandoned commercial facility, 9S can be heard promising 2B to go to a shopping centre just like humans used to, adamant on buying her a T-shirt when the war ends. Upon entering a particular section of the desert area, conversation begins on the weirdness of humans choosing to inhabit concrete and metal shelters in forms of apartment complexes. Sending 9S on a quest to fuel her hobby of gathering old data, Operator 210 becomes engrossed in the lecture of a journal detailing work habits of a factory employee and ponders what would it be like for androids to form familial units. Throughout the course of the game’s story, the premise of which is fighting for mankind’s sake, the only contact the player and the characters have with humans is through old pieces of data scattered across the areas and rare broadcasts from the Council of Humanity, reminding them of their duty, which, taking into the account the circumstances in the game’s world, doesn’t even strike the player as suspicious at first. For the androids, humans are elusive and even the most mundane pieces of information related to their lives appear to have great value attached to them, reaching the status of myths that explain the world, giving the meaning and shape to it (Whitmer, 1997). On one hand, this myth of humanity recalled by all the

androids imbues them with sense of solidarity and shared purpose explains their reasons for fight, making the experience of war meaningful and legitimate (Malešević, 2010). However, it what is also prominent here is the other way in which these human myths are perceived aside from their relation to YoRHa's war efforts. As previously mentioned, the androids and machines alike show fascination with varied aspects of humanity. Myths focused on passing on the cultures' traditions are telling the stories of "ultimate meaning and destiny of human existence" (Gibbs, 1975, as cited in Whitmer, 1997, p. 73), confirming the authority of certain practices and traditions (Whitmer, 1997). In a way, the data on humanity encountered throughout the game can be seen as an element that preserves certain forms of behaviours, as the machines proceed to use this data to recreate human societies, including practices like clothing, religion and families, without exactly understanding why, which is further talked about in the next section. Progressing through the story, however, new information becomes available as it becomes apparent that the main characters, and the player, are the ones being actually played as myth is all that actually remained from humanity.

During the Route B – the second playthrough which sees the game's first part of the story being retold from the perspective of 9S, said android gets injured and is sent back up to the Bunker to recover. During another hacking sequence, his programmed curiosity leads to uncovering files related to the origins of YoRHa project, where the Council of Humanity is said to be created as its part of it, instead of being YoRHa's creators. This delving into data leads later on to a conversation with the Commander, who decides to reveal to 9S the truth about mankind's extinction taking place long before the aliens' first attack, leading to losses in android morale as those they were programmed to protect were gone. Almost 2/3<sup>rd</sup> into the game, the player learns that the purpose of YoRHa force, that he serves as a part of by playing, is revealed to be not fighting for humanity, but perpetuating the lie, lifting the spirits of androids stationed on earth. In the absence of a god, a master to grant them a sense of purpose, the androids decided that lying and creating an illusion of mankind still being alive was better than falling into despair. Initially, symbolic violence is manifested in here through plain deception on the side of YoRHa, enabled by the *habitus* that the organisation fostered, creating the setting where the android's conduct was strictly determined by the environment of YoRHa's Bunker, to a point that the power relation, the ideas, and the lies, were met with unquestioned acceptance and compliance (Thompson, 1984). The organisation preserved the perceived power imbalance between them and the other androids by getting control over the narrative and maintaining an elaborate lie, a myth that legitimizes their actions and ensures that the remaining androids retain their values, goals and modes of action (Whitmer, 1997). As the game progresses, however, this whole act, designed to maintain the in-game characters' sanity, is shown to backfire in a spectacular way. The realization of the ongoing deception, as well as the falsity of the

organizational structures and the ideals that guided the androids, is what ultimately destroys them. 2B continuously struggles with guilt and despair over knowing about YoRHa's lies and having to stay silent, serving as both 9S's companion *and* his executioner multiple times. 9S, having learned about the deception and witnessed YoRHa's destruction, is driven to madness and suicidal, seeing his situation as a hysterical joke before falling into despair, having been programmed to protect and long for humans that don't exist. Once the established power hierarchy collapses and the beliefs that held it together are exposed as lies, the androids are not prepared to deal with it, resulting in hostile reactions and, at times, despair deeper than it would be if the humanity's myth wasn't made up in the first place.

This lie, that served as the base of the game's story, as well as a general reaction to it, was summarized in one of in-game archive files written by Jackass:

*"... So then! To sum up: For hundreds of years, we've been fighting a network of machines with the ghost of humanity at its core. We've been living in a stupid f\*\*\*ing world where we fight an endless war that we COULDN'T POSSIBLY LOSE, all for the sake of some Council of Humanity on the moon that doesn't even exist."*

Even before that huge reveal, however, the player is exposed to multiple situations that are designed to challenge the initially acquired belief about the justness of the androids' cause. After all, it is not so easy to raise one's sword when the adversary proves to have much more in common with us instead of being a mindless obstacle to be removed.

#### 4.2 Humanizing the enemy, dehumanizing the hero.

Upon being sent to the surface once the initial sequence of the game in paths A and B ends, 2B and 9S are tasked with exterminating the machines that have been gathering in the desert area – an order that seems to be almost a routine one. As the player leads the characters to designated areas to destroy the machines, they can be heard talking – a phenomenon that, according to 9S, has become more widespread. Engaged in a fight, the main sentiment expressed by the machines is the one of being scared as they were gradually slaughtered. Even upon hearing that, 9S expresses doubts regarding whether the machines are able of even comprehending the concept of being scared, reassuring 2B, who seems to be more hesitant due to the machines' pleas, that she should not worry about that, and so the player should not feel anxious about it either.

Such clear distinction between the heroes and enemies in the action-adventure genre, with the latter reduced to the role of an expendable nuisance, serves to reduce the previously mentioned feeling of dissonance between the gameplay and the narrative. After all, the player shouldn't really

have any reason to feel bad about exterminating the alien lifeforms said to have caused humanity's exile, just like one doesn't feel bad when killing virtual zombies or demonic creatures. The player in these situations is put in a comfortable position, allowed to enjoy the mass slaughter while completely disengaged from its moral implications (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). However, a seed of doubt has already been planted during the desert encounter – the moral polarization introduced in the game's first hour begins to fall apart almost immediately after having been established.

Delving further into the desert, the androids land in a pit filled with machines busy imitating sexual acts, taking care of non-existent children and pleading with each other for love. Yet again, 9S offers encouragement to disregard all these actions and proceed with taking them out. Among the slaughter, however, the desperate machines begin to lose their minds before forming themselves in a cocoon above the pit. From it, Adam - a single, strikingly human-like and docile machine emerges, only to be attacked by 2B and 9S moments after its birth. During that encounter, Adam doesn't strike first – it is the player that has to deal the first hit. Once that happens, however, he quickly adapts and counters, despite expressing lack of understanding for this need to fight. Upon his defeat, another identical machine<sup>1</sup>, emerges out of his wounds and forces the androids, dumbfounded by the encounter, to escape.

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<sup>1</sup> This machine is revealed to be named Eve in one of the game's later encounters. The situation itself, with Eve coming to existence out of Adam's wounds, is a nod to Genesis, where Eve is formed out of Adam's rib. Unlike biblical Eve, however, her in-game counterpart is presented and referred to as male, just like his brother, Adam.



*Image 3. As absurd as they might've seemed, the machines' pleas are eventually answered.*

Adam and his brother, Eve, go on to be crucial characters throughout the rest of the story. During the androids' journey, however, this is just another case of machines expressing traits that are surprisingly human, with many more to come. One of the most explicit examples of it is found not much further into the game, when the player is introduced to a village filled with pacifistic machines disconnected from the network and led by Pascal – a machine that, as he explains at one point, couldn't bear getting used to seeing his friends die in a war without end, and instead chose to create

a place for machines to live freely, hoping that one day them and androids will manage to coexist in peace.

Throughout the playthrough, these instances of machine lifeforms being depicted with a surprising amount of humanity in them, are constantly interwoven with interactions where this humanity is denied to them still. Even as the leader of an android Resistance, Anemone<sup>2</sup>, vouches for the character of machine villagers, 9S remains unconvinced and, when contacted by Pascal, somewhat lashes out, doubting his words and denying him having a heart unlike, as it is implied, the androids built in the image of their human masters. Through an array of sidequests, the player is invited to aid the machines that are busy helping their “siblings”, arguing with their “children”, falling in love, isolating out of anxiety and pondering the meaning of their existence. Nevertheless, as 2B reminds 9S at one point, they remain the enemy.

Route B, when the player witnesses the same story arc as in route A but this time from the perspective of 9S, proceeds to humanize the enemies even further. What Glas (2015) noticed, with action-adventure games having utilizing rules of sensational melodrama, where focus is put on action and violence instead of emotion and complexity, here seems to be reversed. The route itself begins with the player being given control of a small machine determined to help his “brother”, and is tasked with bringing a bucket of oil as the machine reassures itself that it will make the other one move again, before 9S is revealed watching the event from afar with a dose of dismissiveness.

As a Scanner unit, naturally insightful and skilled in hacking, 9S has the ability to look into some of the machines’ thoughts. These are presented to the player throughout the game in an unusual form of picture stories and, at one point, even a click-through novel sequence. Through picture books shown around the main plot points, the player learns how the machines became aware of human emotions, grew to embrace different values they called “treasures”, and how they struggled to find their place in the world following them killing their alien masters. Not only is the player encouraged to empathize some more with the machines, but, in some cases, prompted to reexamine their previous actions. The gameplay and the game’s fiction work together to first create a fabrication of innocence, as Björk (2015) put it, only to tear it down later, resulting in a “feel-bad game”, and N:A labours to make the player feel bad indeed.

At one point in the game, 9S and 2B end up exploring a forest zone, prompted by Pascal’s mention of the machines there being incredibly territorial and hostile. During this chapter in Route A,

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<sup>2</sup> The Resistance is a makeshift android army that resides on Earth. It is composed of older android models that were sent from orbital bases to Earth before YoRHa’s establishment and has no form of command above them. They are independent, but cooperate with YoRHa during a number of military operations, with some of them seen in-game.



the player witnesses machines there undergoing military training, giving motivational speeches and, upon seeing the android intruders, proclaiming that they attack “for the Forest King!”. Their “king” turns out to be a baby-like machine residing in the crib in the castle, and ends up being killed by a fugitive YoRHa android A2. In the scheme of the story, the chapter seems to be quite inconsequential save for the player being introduced to A2, who later on, in Route C, becomes a playable character and has her narrative arc fleshed out further. Upon going through the same chapter as 9S, however, new flashback cutscenes are played at three points, shining new light on the forest machines’ behaviour. As it turns out, over two centuries before, one machine gained awareness and decided to declare this place their kingdom, gifting their parts to other machines to grant them will as well. The kind machine king died years later, but his loyal subjects placed his memories inside the baby machine that they swore to protect with their lives. In route A, the forest zone with its machines may seem like just another curiosity. In route B, the player is made aware of being an invader. Ultimately, hostile as they were, the forest machines’ whole existence revolved around protecting that which was the most precious to them. The aftermath of it can be seen in route C, when, upon returning to the zone, the machines are disorganized and berserk, promising revenge for the king’s murder.



*Image 4. Revisiting the forest in route B shines new light on the kingdom’s machines’ purpose.*

So very human, grief and revenge are also the two elements that lead to the final boss encounter in routes A and B, where the player faces Eve. Responsible for controlling a full half of the machine network beside Adam, Eve, just like his brother, is not interested in continuing the fight started millennia ago by his alien masters. When, near the end of the route, the machines around the

city area go berserk due to his influence, it's not any strategic goal that motivates him, but madness as a result of his brother's demise. Soon after, the androids begin to receive broadcasts with Eve calling out for his brother while the nearby machines begin to wail, as if they cried with him. When approached by the player in a final encounter, he states it explicitly – Adam was his everything and through 2B killing him, he is left with no meaning in his life and in this world. This part of the story began with 2B and 9S being sent on Earth as part of yet another war effort against the machines – the goal that, in a way, looked quite grand. The way it ends, however, is much more personal and profoundly human. The machines' acquired humanity, repeatedly questioned and reinforced throughout the game, is confirmed in this last stage where the final adversary is a machine explicitly overcome with grief. The machine network is dismantled, and the androids finally gain an upper hand in the conflict, just as 2B puts her sword through Eve who, in his final moments, simply calls out for his brother once more. When playing as 2B, the final speech before credits has her pondering what exactly separates the machines and androids as she finally acknowledges them gaining consciousness. The answer to her question is, as it turns out, set to be found by the player once the game's final route becomes accessible.

In route C, leading 9S, distraught by witnessing 2B's death, on a quest to gain access to the tower that emerged in the middle of a city, the player is tasked with exploring three resource units scattered across the maps. It is in one of them, fittingly named "Soul Box", that, through an obligatory hacking sequence, the player obtains a piece of archive related to YoRHa, detailing the construction of the units' black boxes – items constituting their consciousness. The file explains that, instead of being equipped with standard android Artificial Intelligence systems like the one possessed by the Resistance members, the YoRHa, seen as units destined for disposal, are equipped with reused machine cores. With this crucial piece of information, delivered in a reveal that's anything but grand, a sign of equality is put between the two sides that, for the most part of the game, remained opposed to each other. Knowing that, the whole power relations between the YoRHa and the remaining androids can be seen in a completely different light. Being the newest, elite military force regarded for its combat capabilities and rigid organisation structure that the player is also exposed to, YoRHa initially appears to be a small group that is recognized to be standing somewhat higher in the android hierarchy. A power differential, akin to symbolic violence, can be seen in their relations as it is the YoRHa that's supposedly leading the recent assaults against the machines and it is them who have direct contact with androids' beloved humanity on exile, legitimising their superior position which isn't often explicitly stated, but rather is unconsciously acknowledged (Thompson, 1984). In a way, the reveal of YoRHa's origin and propagandist purpose reverses the target of symbolic violence, making YoRHa the inferior side in relation to other androids,

despite the genuine combat and institutional powers they hold. In a way, YoRHa's power is both very tangible *and* just symbolic at the same time. In the text file found by 9S, symbolic violence against the YoRHa is manifested through the label they are given as units made to fulfil their task of perpetuating the lie about humanity and be killed once the task is complete. Another line in the file which states that equipping them with standard AI would be inhumane and a waste, further accentuates them being classified as inferior and thus, symbolically excluded from the general populace of androids (Swartz, 2011). Their appearance and behaviour as a superior force was ultimately symbolic, as the core part of their existence placed them on the losing position.

In that moment, the player is given the opportunity to re-examine their in-game actions leading up to this point. The generic adversaries encountered all throughout the game, fulfilling their roles as villains for the main characters and a challenge for the player to overcome, become kinsmen of sorts. Just as they are set to be viewed as expendable obstacles to defeat, so is YoRHa designed in the in-game world as expendable soldiers with one task to complete – perpetuate the lie about humanity's survival - and to be killed upon its completion. Throughout the course of the story, the game does not only strive to humanize the enemies, but also greatly humble, if not degrade, its heroes. To get there, however, both the player and the characters are forced to endure quite a lot, submitting to the story that forces the player's hand into participating in unpleasant encounters and perpetuating the cycles of violence.

#### 4.3 The unavoidability of violence.

Many of the actions taken by the player during the playthrough are the contributing to the ongoing conflict on the android-machine line. Small tasks for the Resistance, recon operations for the Command or assistance in larger operations. While 9S tends to express frustration at having to fulfil the role of a "gofer" where 2B rarely questions their assignments, the player may, most likely accidentally, come to a realization that the game's characters are actually given ample opportunities to walk away through an array of "joke" endings to accompany the main ones. Instead of assisting 2B in her fight in the abandoned factory, 9S can abandon his post to study the machines, never to be heard of again. When the Resistance camp is attacked by the machines, 2B may decide that she's done with it and go on to live a vagabond fisher life while hunted by machines and YoRHa alike. As entertaining as they may be, however, these are not the fates the game has prepared for its characters and, upon granting such endings, it promptly returns the player to the title screen and requires them to continue their journey from the last save point as there is still proper story to be told. As the game, however, one can very quickly begin to wish that there would be more to these endings than being just a joke, as it becomes apparent that some of them would grant the characters better fates than the main scenario.

Violence and death are constant companions throughout the course of the game to the point that they are initially granted little to no attention. The player is granted plenty of opportunities to engage in combat, and even should they fall to the enemy, the return to action is swift and happens with almost no consequence. Explained by the androids' ability to upload their consciousness data to the Bunker, death, throughout the major part of the playthrough, is simply a regular occurrence and a minor inconvenience, as it was also witnessed during the prologue where self-destruction was shown as a risky, yet valid, combat strategy which is made available to the player soon after. Upon death, the android characters will be shown exiting the last access point that the player saved their progress at, and the fight can continue almost immediately. The only drawback is the loss of installed upgrade parts – to retrieve them, the player has to seek out the android's former body. Death is treated very casually as a part of the cycle all androids go for, get used to and deal with fast in order to go back in the field and resume their endless fight. This attitude towards it, however, changes radically in route C where death suddenly becomes more like the way we know it – it becomes final. Not a part of the loop anymore, but its ending point.

The story's path is linear, with the player having little choice over the events that transpire. If the story is to be moved forward, the player has to fulfil the objectives set in-game which, to a huge degree, can be boiled down to engaging in combat with various machines across the world. Whether they imitate humans, plead for their lives or go through internal struggles – it doesn't matter. The game provides both goals and justifications, creating a situation of a, as Švelch put it, "fixed justice scenario", where the player is given a choice to complete the game's objectives, whether they consider them moral or not, or stop playing whatsoever (2010, pp.58-59). While in plenty of games such fixed scenarios are accepted with no need for second thoughts or any feelings of guilt, N:A forces the player's hand plenty of times and ensures they feel the pain of actions they haven't even got a say in.

After getting through the game's first two routes, witnessing the story resolving on a seemingly hopeful note, disregarding for a moment the unsettling truths learned by 9S, the player moves on to the final scenario in which the powerlessness over the story becomes much more vivid, as the violence towards both the androids and the sympathetic machines gets ramped up to the extreme. The beginning of route C sees the YoRHa forces undertaking a final major operation to claim victory over the machines, with 2B serving as a support force. The plan, however, gets out of control when the android forces get taken over by a virus, turning on their comrades – the player is left with no choice but to kill them. Upon returning to the Bunker, it became apparent that the virus has infiltrated the outpost as well, with all the units there falling victims. There was no joy or excitement in the fight against the maniacal operators, clearing out the command room before

marching through the whole of the Bunker in a murderous, but unavoidable, procession, accompanied by an audio of Operator 6O breaking down as she spends her last moments thanking 2B for the previously sent pictures of flowers. The in-game acts of killing in this sequence are of course physical, yet what's truly brutal here is the game's treatment of the player. The first two playthroughs were spent fostering relationships with androids and machines alike, overcoming the doubts and growing to see the enemies in a more humanized way. The story's conclusion up to this point seemed to have acknowledged both the player's and main characters' efforts and offered hope for the future. Route C then proceeds to instantly crush these hopes and destroying everything the player worked for, shocking them into recognizing how powerless they are in regard to affecting the narrative. This is also contrasted with the power accumulated by them on the ludic level typical for the genre – at this point in the game, the player is quite likely to have a reasonably high amount of accumulated experience points, as well as an arsenal of weapons that are either bought or collected. This sense of power connected to one's arsenal is destroyed, proved meaningless as the player cannot use it to change the course of events (Jačević, 2017). While not exactly constituting a singular quest, this sequence as a whole serves as a form of defamiliarization, bringing attention to itself by completely subverting the player's expectations of what is supposed to happen after emerging victorious in previous routes (Gerrish, 2018). The player is encouraged to continue playing and their reward for doing that is being tricked into being denied the achievements and relationships previously formed in-game. This deprivation is then accentuated by forcing them to actively, repeatedly participate in the destruction of all they built.

This cycle of destruction continues as, following the escape to Earth, the player is still not granted any respite, but instead has to guide a now virus-infected 2B through her last moments as she attempts to isolate herself from other androids. With the awareness of the impending death, unable to fight as her system gradually shuts down, indicated by distortions to the visuals, interface and the sound. This second, harrowing procession ends with 2B encountering A2, who the player gets to take control of as she is entrusted with 2B's memories before granting her a merciful death. The scene, witnessed by 9S from afar, marked the beginning of his descent into madness and quest for revenge on A2 that is a considerable part of Route C.

In the approximately one hour of gameplay during which all of these actions take place, *N:A* turned from entertainment into pure struggle, both to watch and participate in as a player. The tension between what the game wants its "implied player" to do, that is to continue and fulfil the given tasks to let the story reach its completion (Jačević, 2017), and what I as the player wanted to do in these moments, that is preferably not have any of the things I've just witnessed and contributed to happening, happen, was palpable. To stop playing, not engaging with any more of the

in-game violence and madness, was the only alternative to exercise control when the game provides the player with essentially none of it for a long time.



*Image 5. This is the scene that marks the beginning of the player's true struggle.*

Going further into this route, the tensions just keep rising. As A2, the player has to witness the destruction of Pascal's village and contribute to it by killing the remaining machines that have gone berserk, and, soon after, take control over Pascal himself as he goes against his peaceful ideals to protect the children that escaped the village, only for it to prove absolutely meaningless. Upon defeating the enemies, the player retains control of Pascal, having to lead him back to the factory where children hid just to see that they committed suicide out of fear. This scene is, in a way, a conclusion to the player's relationship with the machines over the course of the game. Machine lifeforms, as a whole, have been cycling between being depicted as expendable, soulless obstacles, eligible to be killed by the player for their pleasure (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010), and conscious characters capable of feelings and independent acts, with some of them becoming allies and friends. When the player is at the point in time by which they have likely acknowledged the machines' humanity and moral status as more than adversaries, they are yet again forced to unmake all the progress made in android-machine relationships. . With little to no traces of moral polarization left to ease the player's burden when killing (Glas, 2015), they are put into the role of an executioner. Unable to go on with his guilt, Pascal begs A2 to kill him or wipe out his memories, and the player is left with the choice. If one decides so, however, he can also be abandoned in the factory, with a

cutscene fragment later implying that he committed suicide. Either way, the Pascal the player got to know throughout the game is gone, broken by what he had to go through.

The sections in Route C during which the player is given control over 9S are by no means merciful on the player either. The, initially mundane-looking quest to obtain three keys needed to access the Tower sees 9S, still overcome with grief, growing more ruthless towards the machines than ever before, being forced to fight his former Operator, and learn the disturbing truth about his force's origins as his declining mental state is becoming the main topic of conversation for the Pods – the small robot units assisting the androids during their work. Once the Tower is accessed, 9S is going through a full mental breakdown and the player can do nothing but yet again, stop playing or go forward and accompany him to the end, knowing full well that nothing good can await there at this point.

N:A, however, gives the player one chance to take control and end the struggle, both theirs and the main characters, although not before having them go through the pain of all three routes and four main endings, seeing all the main characters die. If the player shares the sentiment of Pod 042 who is “unable to accept this resolution”, they are thrown into the fight against the game's creators in a gruelling bullet hell sequence that takes place in the ending credits of the game once Route C is completed twice. Should they succeed in this rebellion against the authors, be it alone or with other players' assistance, a cutscene shows the Pods in the process of repairing 2B, 9S and A2. The in-game cycle of conflict is over, and the player's cycle of playing is done as well, with the characters left free to decide their own fates, forging a brighter future or repeating the same mistakes.



Image 6. The game's one final ending lets the player literally fight the creators to change the characters' fates.

#### 4.4 Violence as an object of fascination.

##### 4.4.1 A human peculiarity to be studied.

As mentioned before, Adam is forced into combat mere moments after his “birth”. In the desert pit, speaking with fragmented sentences, he asked what a reason is there even to fight. Not so long after that, while welcoming the androids to the tomb of machines’ alien creators with his brother beside him, his tune has changed completely. While 9S is shocked to learn about the machines killing their own masters, Adam is quick to dismiss his worries, comparing the aliens to plants – simple, infantile and lacking in intelligence. What he is much more interested in discussing is humans – to the machines, they were enigmas that “killed uncountable numbers of their own, and yet loved in equal measure.”

Humanity, with all of the contradictions that seemingly constitute it, is what he strives to study and comprehend. When the player, as 2B, encounters Adam once again in the Copied City, he seems more than happy to share his findings. Family, love, religion – in his eyes, all these facets paled in comparison to *conflict*. Fighting, stealing, killing – that is what he understood to be humanity’s essence, what he saw as being alive, much to 2B’s dismay as she took it as an insult towards the androids’ masters. These truths, however, were still not enough for Adam and to grasp them more fully, he gave up his immortality and risked all in the battle, elated when he manages to incite true hate in 2B, making her determined enough to kill him. Adam embraced death purely to sate his scientific curiosity about what he saw as humanity’s core traits.



He, however, wasn't the only in-game individual to come up with such ideas – at one point Jackass, a Resistance member, also comes up with her own research project, albeit a less extreme one. Once the player chooses to aid her, 2B and 9S are faced with a series of combat trials to study “the excitement levels of androids while in battle”. After the first trial, she shares the information on the android's feeling of battle fever being similar to the human emotion of love, suggesting that beating each other up *could* provide a measure of understanding of what is it that humans used to feel. Data from the third trial reveals android brains to possess an algorithm that allows them to derive pleasure from combat. The fourth and final one makes her ecstatic, having enough information to proceed with cooking drugs to imitate the sensation. Throughout all that, she remains thoroughly amazed by her findings and pondering how the humans' behaviours influenced the androids' construction.

As it is seen here, humanity may be extinct, but both the machines and the androids remain fascinated by many of its facets. However, whenever they attempt to learn more about them, they have to do so by just consuming the data on the old world, bereft of contexts which would facilitate a better understanding. This, in turn, is prone to result in interpretations that are sometimes amusing and often questionable. The machine that established the forest kingdom explained the concept of “kingdom” to the others as “sort of a large house” inside of which all the people live as family. During one of the sidequests, hearing the old human saying stating that “a pen is mightier than a sword” leaves 2B absolutely dumbfounded, seeing the claim as absurd. A mad songstress machine fought in the Amusement Park area, Simone, is revealed to have delved into the old data to grasp the concept of beauty, thinking that obtaining beauty is a sure-fire way to make her beloved machine, the eccentric Jean-Paul from Pascal's village, notice her<sup>3</sup>. Not understanding why none of the methods she gathered from the data worked drove her to despair and madness when faced with the meaningless of all she had done. Violence remains a prominent theme among all these, not only because of in-game individuals dedicated to studying it in a way, but also because of how throughout the course of the story it keeps being frequently displayed in tandem with love.

#### 4.4.1 Blurring the lines between violence and love

During one of the sidequests late in the game that sends 2B and 9S on a trivial quest to gather a set of card stamps in the Amusement Part, the player revisits the theatre in which Simone was once fought. The area is shown to be repurposed by the machines who are staging their very

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<sup>3</sup> Simone is one of the first “boss” enemy machines the player encounters in the game, and is prominent for putting lots of attention to her appearance. Jean-Paul is a friendly machine unit mostly preoccupied with studying philosophy. He is also Simone's love interest, although he doesn't reciprocate the feelings. These characters are based on French philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. The relationship of their in-game counterparts is a distortion and a nod to the romantic relationship the two shared in real life.

own, peculiar rendition of Shakespeare's classic – "Romeos and Juliets". Three Romeos and three Juliets enter the stage, getting increasingly confused and unable to identify which one of them is "their" partner. The issue is solved through simple means of elimination – they share moments of passion promising to obliterate one another before a single Juliet remains that, having killed all the Romeos, promptly commits suicide. While the stage play happens as a one-time gimmick, it also serves as a summary of a troubled relationship between 2B and 9S, as well as fitting with the theme of love and violence frequently being tied to each other in the game.

During the ending sequence of the game and the encounter between 9S and A2 truth is revealed about 2B's real designation and purpose, which 9S seemed to be aware of and yet refused to accept. As an Executioner type, she was assigned as 9S's partner not to protect him, but to kill him when the Scanner's curiosity inevitably leads him to the discovery of YoRHa's lies. "It always ends like this", she cried when forced to kill infected 9S, because that is how it indeed always ended for them. What player sees then for the very first time, she is said to have been doing over and over long before that, during each assignment to 9S with his memories wiped, being the same and yet so very different unit each iteration. She grows fond of him over time, but remains unable to express it, knowing that her duty will force her hand and the painful cycle will be repeated. With that, it becomes quite fitting that the most intimate moments that they are given the chance to share are, just like for Romeos and Juliets, utterly violent. 2B allows herself a moment of fondness towards her companion only when they are both set to self-destruct to eliminate the enemies in the prologue sequence. After the final battle with Eve, when she obliges to infected 9S's begging for death, she straddles him, thrusting suggestively as she chokes him. In route C the roles become reversed when 9S plunges at the machine presence deleting the memories in his data scape, thrusting his sword repeatedly through it. Defeated, the creature transforms in 2B's bloodied corpse. When he is ambushed in the Tower by multiple 2B models, he breaks apart, glad to see her image and glad to tear it apart, hating her but still seeking her comfort.

The pair's troubled relationship, as well as 9S's conflicted feelings, are aptly summed up in one of the sections in route B where he is kidnapped by Adam. The machine, going on about finding the meaning of life in hatred in a click-through text sequence, proceeds to reveal the feelings which 9S keeps denying – his contradicting wishes to "destroy everything" and yet to "be loved by all", with both desire and hatred overflowing him. What follows is quite a direct statement:

*"You're thinking about how much you want to \*\*\*\* 2B, aren't you?"*

This intentionally ambiguous line invites a couple of interpretations. Initially, it's easy to assume the obscured word to be "fuck", addressing 9S's sexual desire towards 2B. However, witnessing the events that transpire throughout the rest of the game, concluding with the reveal of 2B's assignment and how it affected the androids' relationship, the interpretation of this word as "kill" also becomes likely and even more perverse for 9S who struggles with loving her while still hating the pain she's been causing him all this time. The desires that Adam brought up before turning out to not be so contradictory at all, overlapping instead. Propensity to love and kill "in equal measure" – the mankind's paradox, as Adam sees it, goes on to be discussed as one of the game's major themes, leading to a point where both these elements become pretty much synonymous.

Both the situations in which the androids researched human customs and behaviours, and the ones where they are trying to deal with their complicated feelings that are also derived from their human masters, are a somewhat peculiar case of defamiliarizing humanity. While Gerrish (2018) was focused mostly on defamiliarization and subversion within the game's structure, he provided an overview of how that process functioned in poetry, where language gets arranged in a way that makes the person conscious of it, forcing the reader to "confront the unfamiliarity of what was previously familiar" (p. 2), renewing their perceptions. In a world bereft of humans, the androids made in their image have all the data but none of the explanations, having to "figure out" humanity on their own. What results is that a very human player is exposed to interpretations of humanity's facets that can be amusing, upsetting or simply baffling, but most importantly, seen through the lens that is not exactly human. In the game's world, the aspects of our daily lives, usually treated as nothing noteworthy, are put through the process of defamiliarization, highlighted and re-examined from a distanced perspective, encouraging the player to engage with them by acknowledging and giving them more consideration.

## 5. Conclusion

This study's main goal was to explore the ways in which *N:A* problematizes and discusses the topic of violence, and how the elements of dark play and humanization of the enemies contributed to it. The intent was to examine this video game as a text, through a process of thorough gameplay paired with close reading and a textual analysis that followed. The goal was to look at the text in a way that varied from the frequently used approach to in-game violence from the angle of media effects.

What was instantly observable after looking at the analysis as a whole, was one particular element present, to a degree, in all of its parts, unifying it – subversion. Subversion of player expectations, gameplay elements, story themes and clichés, to a degree that extends beyond being a set of generic plot-twists. The player is initially exposed to an innocuous game that, during its first 6-8 hours appears to be a fairly entertaining action-adventure piece and not much more than that. Continuing the playthrough sees the game utilizing the concepts of dark play by tricking and manipulating the player, putting them through uncomfortable or ethically questionable situations, establishing relationships and sense of achievement only to exercise its symbolic violence by forcibly taking them away soon after. It was especially poignant when the player sees the whole premise of the game, that is fighting for humanity, being subverted and dismantled, rendering most of the game's events pointless and stripping the committed acts of violence of both legitimacy and justification.

Subversion was also observed as prominent and skilfully used in relation to the matter of the enemies and the protagonists' moral status, changing the perceptions of violence enacted on the player's foes. Repeated denials and affirmations of the machine lifeforms' humanity served to encourage player's reflection on the machines' potential to be more than an adversary put there by the developers to maintain the player's sense of progression. This element, however, would not be so effective if a decision wasn't made to also commit to an act of subversion through dehumanizing the protagonists, bringing their moral status down to the level of their enemies, forcing the player to retroactively examine their conduct due to the characters being stripped of the element of superiority which tends to be expected from the in-game protagonists.

Symbolic violence also emerged as an important concept related to situations that were oftentimes violent but not in physical sense. It manifested in situations where power difference between the android units and YoRHa was signalled, highlighting some of the characters powerlessness that led them to despair, madness, or further violence. It also made visible the discrepancy between the YoRHa's power in combat, and their inferiority as disposable units,

contributing to their dehumanization. Physical violence itself, as it is seen and engaged in in-game, ended up being of little interest. The elements surrounding it, with the main ones presented above, were the main contributors to the problematization and discussion of violence as seen in-game, dealing with the topics of its nature, legitimacy and motives.

This study aimed to take the conversation on in-game violence further away from the old approach to it from the media effects perspective that was presented in the first section of the theoretical framework. Working to understand the contexts surrounding violence, as well as its meanings, which Goldstein (2005) seen as important, instead of engaging with violence on just surface level, provided a better understanding of how exactly is the topic problematized in this title. The findings also aligned, to a degree, with Glas's views on the killing of generic in-game adversaries being widely normalized and justifiable (2015) – in *N:A*, this theme was found to be used in order to be subverted later on. He does also bring up the matter of humanizing the enemies, although it is mentioned very briefly. It is this element of humanization, however, that was expanded upon in this thesis, as it emerged as one of *N:A*'s crucial themes. Despite the literature concerning *N:A* itself being scarce, the one that is already existing proved to be a valuable source. The findings of this analysis support Jaćević's claims regarding problematization of one's perspective when discussing war, and the role of shifting perspectives in-game as a tool encouraging the players to be critical of what they are exposed to (2017). The issue of the player's agency being limited, with them being thrown into ethically questionable situations, creating tensions between what's expected of the player and what they see as right was also discussed by Jaćević and emerged as an important theme during this analysis. This study also echoes Gerrish's conclusions about the processes of defamiliarization contributing to broadening the game's narrative capabilities and prompting the players to engage more consciously with the texts they're playing (2018).

Despite best efforts, there are certain elements related to both theoretical framework and this study's methodology that could either be improved or should be taken into account in case of future research. When working on the analysis, it quickly became clear that the process of defamiliarization, first presented as just one of potentially useful concepts to keep in mind, was more prominent than expected. While it was indeed noticed as a valuable tool used to break boundaries between the player, game mechanics, and narrative, creating synergy (Gerrish, 2018), it also was used in service to dark play exploiting the player's expectations towards the game. What is more, defamiliarization in the form more similar to what's meant by it in poetry, was noticed in the instances of androids and machines engaging with data related to humanity, examining their feelings, customs and propensity to violence through a foreign lens. Player is constantly invited to an exploration of his own humanity through that perspective. While findings on the use of

defamiliarization through gameplay were expected, just to a somewhat lesser degree, findings on defamiliarization processes happening through dialogues and in-game archives, resembling the processes seen in poetry, were not expected at all back when the theoretical framework was being constructed. As a result, the concept of defamiliarization as a whole was not covered extensively enough. This lack was then acutely felt when a significant portion of the analysis focusing on the androids and machines' perceptions of human behaviours and traits could be traced back to a single source on this topic.

Highly interpretative nature of textual analysis also has to be kept in mind, as researcher's bias and own experiences have the potential to affect the understanding of the text and the analysis that emerges following the reading (Silverman, 2011). Each person's playthrough and impressions of the game may, after all, differ to a degree. While detailed theoretical framework and coding scheme was provided to minimize that by presenting points of interest for this paper, conducting a joint analysis on the same topic could aid by confronting at least two different playthrough experiences. Another qualitative analysis of *N:A's* problematization of violence as seen by other players who shared their impression through online articles, comments, and posts, could also contribute to broadening one's view on the matter.

The findings presented in this thesis are, on their own, not applicable to any other video game title. They also were not expected to, as the very intention of this work was to be an extensive exploration and discussion of themes contained in this title, and the techniques used to convey them. However, analyses of certain titles, like the one in here, may serve as pointers towards the design and narrative choices and techniques that can be used to achieve the desired reactions among the players, and which may not always be the obvious ones. The games directed by Yoko are already recognized for their specific structures as well as skilful, and extensive, use of dark topics and violence. Learning how exactly they are used and problematized in his works might let other creators to join the process of fighting the invisible walls of industry and consumer expectations of video games, further questioning the social norm of video games being violent and encouraging more thoughtful approaches to the matter.

*Nier: Automata* is a title rich in themes and topic worth examining beyond the one of violence. Future explorations could focus on the game's discussion of the matters of gender identity signalled in frequent instances of gender ambiguous machines choices and acts done to define themselves. A matter of one's identity in general, as well as understanding the consequences of its loss as one's "death", could be a worthy endeavour, seeing how that topic is prominent in the case of androids allowed to repeatedly die and resurrect themselves, with the loss of memories and

personality being seen as true death. A more structured analysis of *N:A*'s gameplay and narrative choices that does not revolve around one particular theme would provide a clear understanding of the elements that made its storytelling regarded as innovative by some of its reviewers and the audience.

While to some it may seem obvious, there is also a gap to be filled in regard to Yoko's previous titles. Since *N:A* was the first game of his to be met with both huge critical acclaim and a financial success, it already caught an eye of some of the scholars. His previous titles, however, remain hugely ignored, both due to their unavailability and dated gameplay features. Still, if one is to understand Yoko's work over the years on breaking the video game industry's invisible walls to use the medium to its fullest potential, it is necessary to examine all steps of his campaign to reinvent the games as a genre of text. Analysis of narrative and gameplay choices made in *Drakengard*, *Drakengard 3* and *NieR*, as well as their dominant themes *and* chosen approaches to violence, would contribute to fitting that gap and obtaining a more complete picture of what Yoko strives to achieve through his games.

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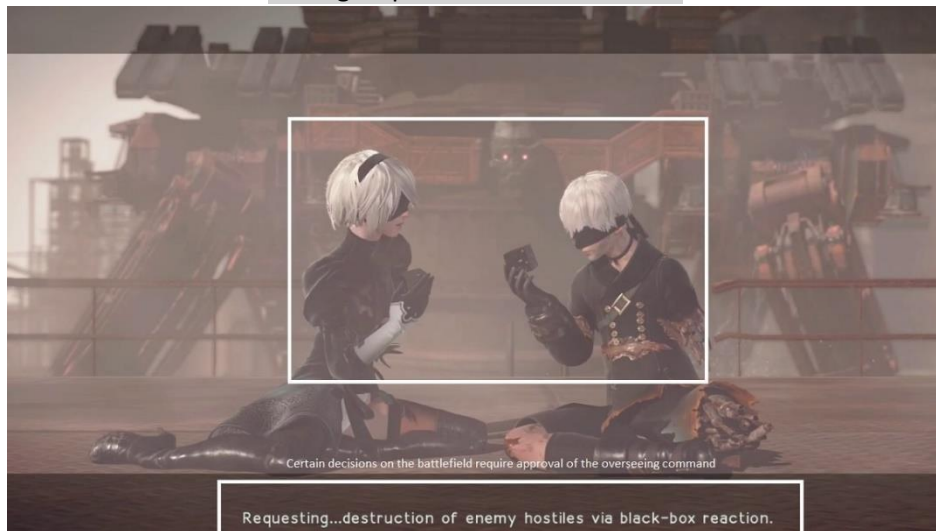
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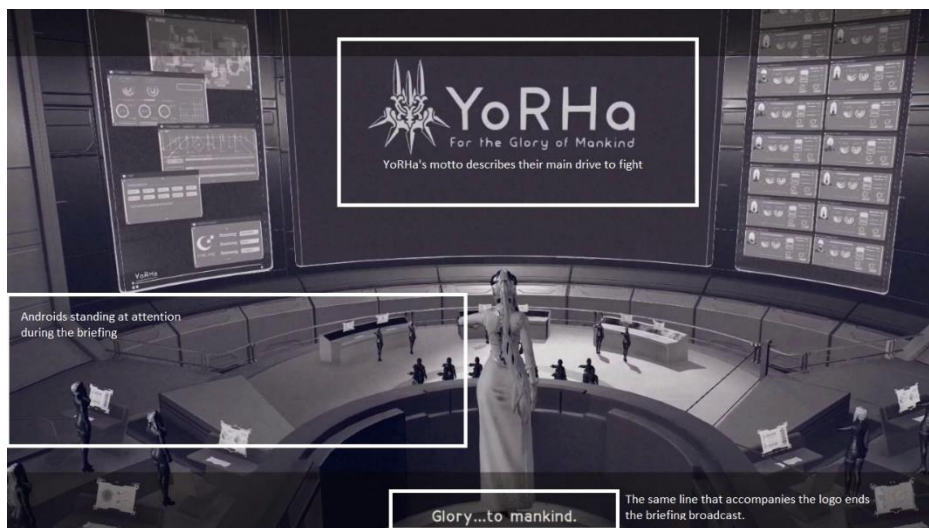
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Appendix. Coding examples.

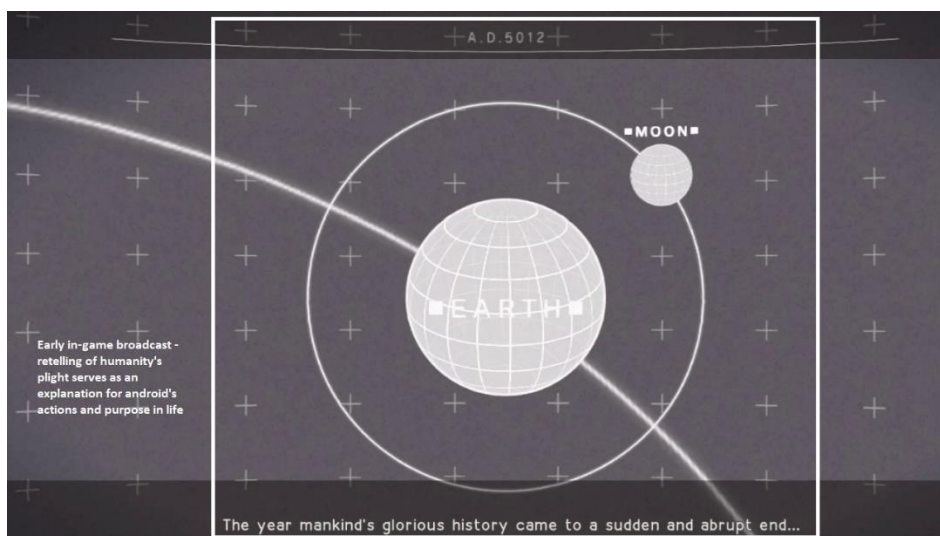
Code group: role of the institution.



Code 1. Bureaucratization

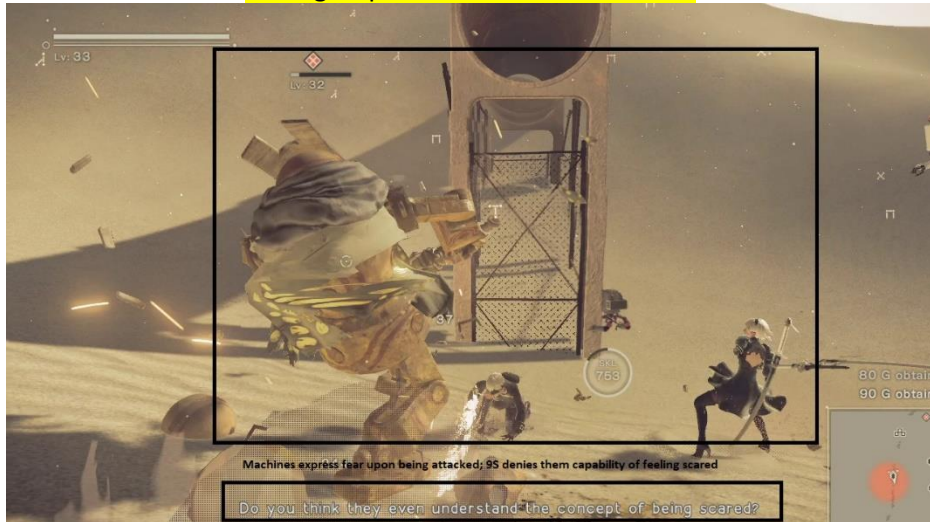


Code 2. Ideologization



Code 3. Humanity as a myth

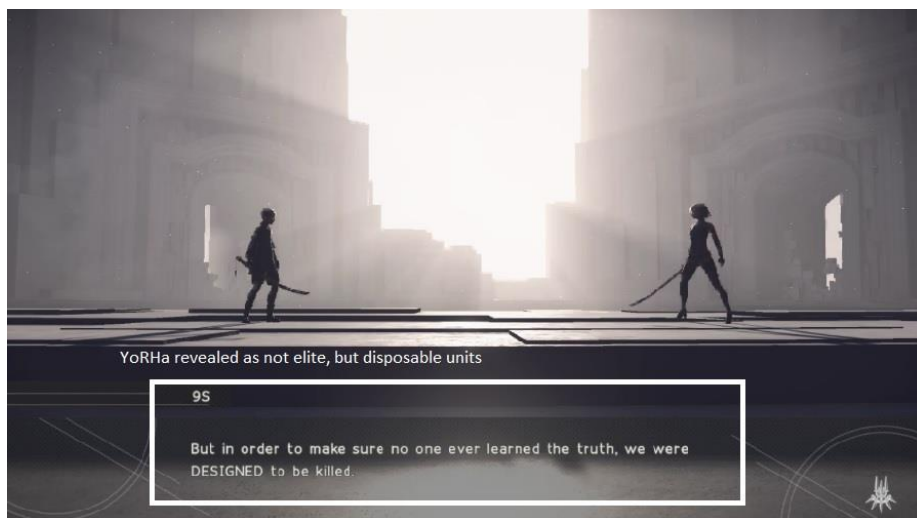
Code group: individual's moral status.



Code 4. Dehumanizing the enemy



Code 5. Humanizing the enemy



Code 6. Dehumanizing the protagonists



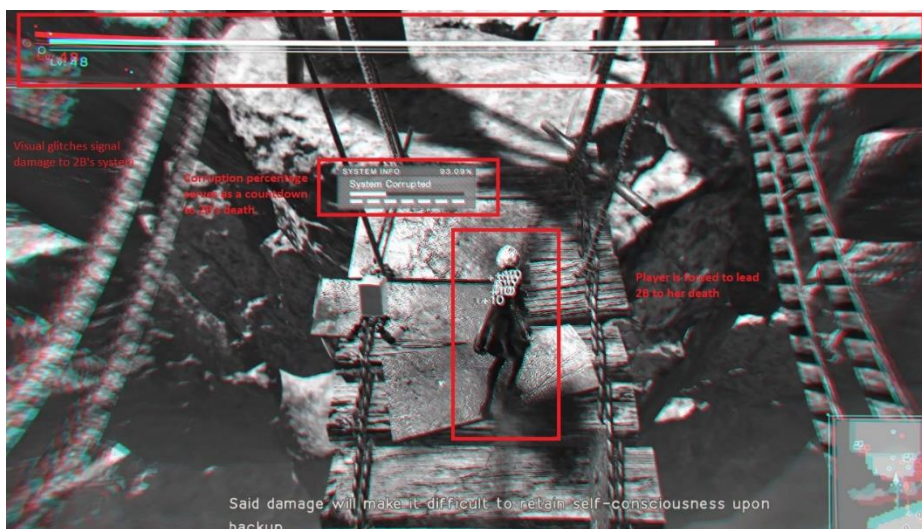
Code group: player exploitation



Code 7. Exploiting the player



Code 8. Ethical tensions

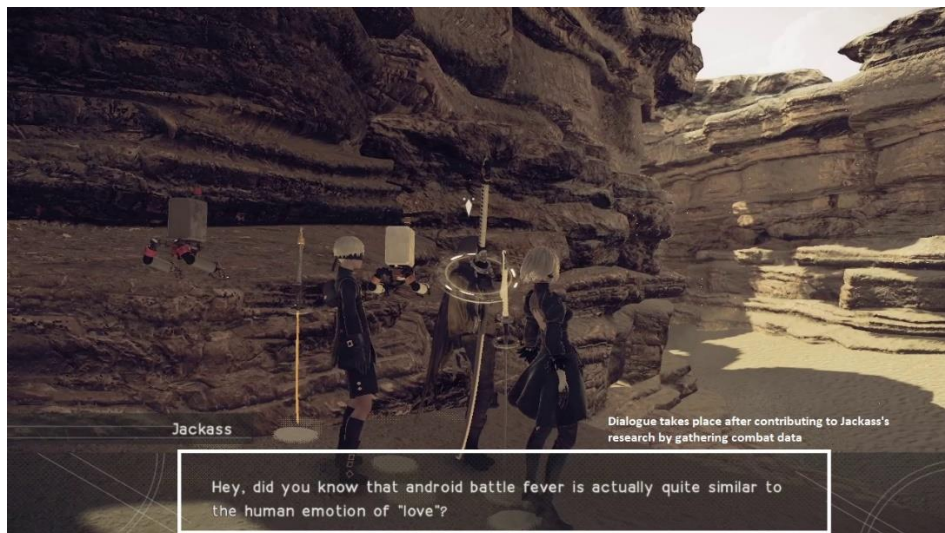


Code 9. Making the player feel uneasy

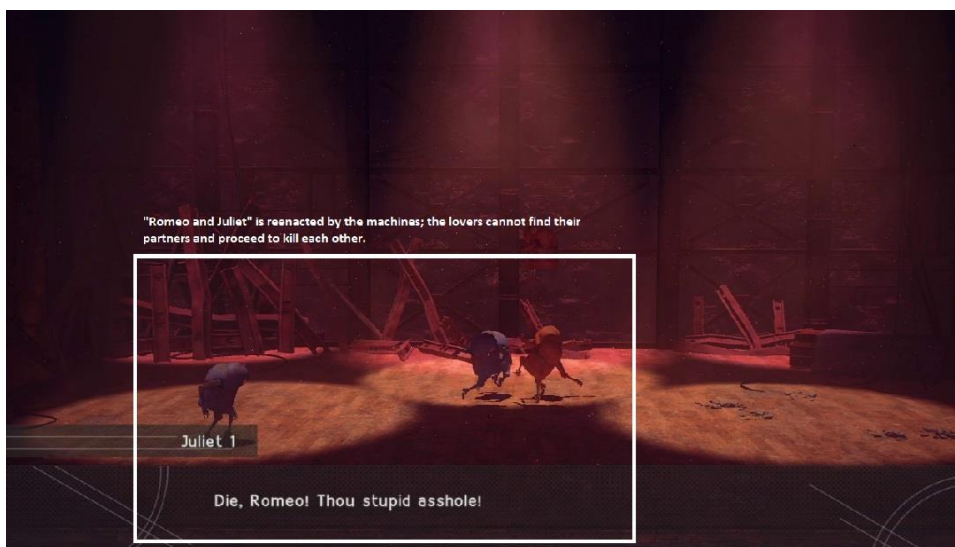
Code group: approaches to humanity and violence



Code 10. Fascination with humanity



Code 11. Studying violence



Code 12. Mixing violence with love