

“Do you accept defeat? Is it all pointless? Give up here?”

Anti-violence Rhetoric in the NieR Series Within a Japanese Context

Damian Savchev



Master's thesis in Media Studies
Department of Media and Communication
Faculty of Humanities

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

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Damian Savchev

<http://www.duo.uio.no>

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Summary

Video games seem to currently find themselves in a weird place between critical communicators of meaning or of entertainment. Sometimes they can be both, in a communication which seems to be rhetorical in a sense. This seems to be the particular case of *NieR: Replicant* (Toylogic, 2021) and *NieR: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017), a series of games which places itself in a somewhat critical position in terms of the violence and depictions it makes the player partake in. In terms of game elements like the combat and dialogue of the games, the intent of the rhetoric seems to be one of critique against the player, hence why it is important to look at such elements and research how they may appear and what their outlining characteristics are represented by.

This rhetoric seems to be critical to the point where one may even talk about a video game anti-violence rhetoric. In many ways, the rhetoric itself seems to resemble some ideas observed from within a Japanese context, hence why the paper further discusses the game elements in terms of similar ideas and perspectives observed within the Japanese socio-cultural context, which may in part explain the ways in which the anti-violence rhetoric in *NieR* presents itself to the player.

The goal of this paper is to examine what such a rhetorical communication of anti-violence might look like in a game context, both in terms of the more technical aspects of a game like *NieR*, such as its gameplay and combat systems, but also in-game elements the player might not have as much direct control over, such as the characters and how they are depicted in the games. The environments of the games also point to a critical depiction of violence, and their appearance is also further researched in the paper.

One finds various forms of critique in *NieR*, even though its titles adhere to a the *hack'n'slash* genre where violence usually appears to be glorified. There also seems to be a contradiction between the rhetoric of the gameplay, and the meaning delivered to the player. Such contradictions are relevant to analyze, research and discuss, in an effort to further understand the video game medium. Although many of these in-game elements in *NieR* come across as somewhat experimental in nature, they are important to research in an effort to understand the more beneficial aspects of video games and how they may question themes of violence through the rhetorical situations they present to the player.

Preface

This thesis has been a collaborative effort. I would like to thank everyone who has helped and supported me along the way.

I would first like to express my gratitude to my academic supervisor, Senior Lecturer Joakim Johansen Østby, who has helped me immensely in the writing of this paper, from Spring 2021 to Spring of 2022, with his kind, helpful and supportive approach, not only in giving me great knowledge and academic experience but also always helping me ask the right questions. Each time, I found myself looking forward to our meetings, which I always learned so much from.

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I would like to thank my family, my mom and dad, my brother, and my Siberian husky Ares who always keeps me company during my writings and who has constantly ensured to keep me company in the process of writing the thesis for the past year.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the topic of anti-violence game rhetoric

It is important to look at how games might mediate anti-violence. In Japan, some modern video games seem to adopt an increasingly more self-aware approach to addressing themes of violence. Particularly this seems to be the case seen in *NieR: Replicant* (Toylogic, 2021) a game focusing on themes of bullying and violence, but also its sequel *NieR: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017) focuses on similar topics surrounding violence against others, albeit explored from a militaristic point of view in light of authoritarian dictatorships.

What separates *NieR* somewhat as a series from other entertainment focused games, is that the game belongs to the action entertainment genre, while also largely being marketed by its creators as a self-aware, anti-violent game, making it an interesting case study in finding out what such a rhetoric might look like. This kind of rhetoric seems connected to Japanese media depictions and belief systems. It is therefore relevant to discuss how this rhetoric presents itself, and how the *NieR* series shares some common gameplay elements of anti-violence with other Japanese games, and how other rhetorical depictions correlate to a broader Japanese societal context.

Anti-violence in games could be a partial result of video games being shunned in society throughout the years, with articles such as “Computer games linked to violence” published by *The Guardian*, stating that video games “affect aggression by priming aggressive thoughts” (Radford, 2000). Such a depiction of video games perhaps may perhaps overlook the ways in which video games can be useful, particularly in causing a sense of introspection regarding difficult topics for players. If such a potential for introspection through a rhetoric of anti-violence exists in games, then it is important to look at how that rhetoric presents itself and what it might look like.

There are, indeed, copious amounts of violence in *NieR*. However, it appears critical in its presentation. This does not imply that depicting violence is perfectly okay as long as it is critical. At the same time, there is the potential to reflect on difficult topics through playing self-aware games, which is why they make for useful objects for research.

In fact, Creative Director Yoko Taro said in an interview in 2014 that the events which transpired on the 11th of September inspired him to explore the themes of how each side of a war conflict believes themselves to be in the correct moral position, as he further adds that his

goal has been to influence or move players through his games (Moore, 2014). Influencing someone with regards to a specific topic is what largely defines rhetorical communication, which is why it is so relevant to examine *NieR* from a rhetorical point of view through a textual analysis in an effort to understand what type of meaning is conveyed to players and what that communication looks like.

In *NieR*, as one plays through either of the two games, so too does the game content turn increasingly violent, yet not in a way which intends to encourage players in their actions or make them feel good about what they are doing. In particular, the depictions themselves, often including various military themes with different societal implications, tend to depict violence as an ugly, abhorrent sort of endeavor. As a Japanese series, the rhetoric of *NieR* should be viewed from within a Japanese anthropological and belief system context, as much of it relates to Japan in terms of the way it is presented to the player. Such is also the aim of this paper.

At the same time, these depictions are more reflective in nature, aiming to persuade players on a topic by showing something through a different angle, rather than educational. In other words, the rhetoric of *NieR* seems to focus not on whether violence is bad. Rather, the games show what makes violence ugly and unethical. The thesis analyzes these rhetorical visual and verbal elements by looking at the Japanese anthropological and belief system and societal factors which relate to them.

1.1 Research question

What this thesis aims to explore, are the anti-violent rhetorical elements found in *NieR: Replicant* and *NieR: Automata*, what they look like, and how they relate to their country of origin, which is Japan. The research question which the thesis aims to answer is:

How does the anti-violence rhetoric in NieR present itself, and what are some of the ways in which it seems connected to a broader range of Japanese contextual elements?

The two games are highly experimental in nature, often including various magical or sci-fi elements, yet they are also rooted in social commentary about our own world, its geographical locations, events and politics. It is important to look at each game from a textual analysis point of view in order to understand what an anti-violence rhetoric in video games might look like and how such elements stem from their cultural context of origin.

In this way, the thesis aims to understand what the rhetorical communication looks like, while also examining why the rhetorical elements look the way they do, and how this may be connected with the context of Japanese societal perspectives or other kinds of media depictions. To answer the research question, therefore, the thesis examines primarily, mostly in a Game Studies theoretical field, the rhetoric of anti-violence of the two games within a broader picture of Japan, which necessitates explanations not only of the rhetorical communication in question, but also partly the ideas delivered to the player and how they may be shaped by, or relate to, the field of Japanese Studies.

1.2 Research background for the thesis

Scientific interest around some of the beneficial aspects of video games, such as learning through games, has increased. Educators have begun using violence in video games as a form of classroom learning on real world ethics, through games such as *The Walking Dead* (2012), which highlight topics such as Nihilism, assisted suicide and, more specifically, the difficulty in doing the right thing, where ethical views from the player lead to various outcomes they have to witness and grapple with (Staaby, 2016, p.2). Such a type of learning may be more reflectional than educational, yet it is still important to understand what such meanings might look like.

What makes the visuality and verbal communication useful in such games, is therefore important to examine and highlight. The goal of the thesis is centered on this topic. Such research can help expand our current knowledge of video game rhetoric, as it has real life applications, such as the ability to help people reflect on difficult topics by rhetorical means. To game creators, the research may also highlight possible ways of using rhetoric as a way of communicating ethical meaning to the audience.

1.3 Thesis limitations

The goal of the research is to observe media phenomena and their rhetorical appearance. For this goal, the thesis will look at *NieR: Replicant* and *NieR: Automata* and their contexts. Both games are accessible on console platforms and PC. The research is founded on the specific elements which may be relevant to anti-violence in each game, rather than an encompassing overview of the entire narrative of each game. Since the analysis adheres to the Game Studies field primarily through a focus on the contextual meaning and communication of the game itself, there is no player to be analyzed through interviews or surveys as a separate entity. The

research deals mostly with what the game aims to do with its audience and how it communicates meaning, rather than what players choose to do with the games.

The Japanese context is also examined in terms of similarities with other games, when it comes to the first category or section of the analysis, which deals with the formal gameplay structures of each game. As such, the second and third chapter deal mostly with the anthropological and societal implications in a Japanese context, since the gameplay elements are perhaps not as applicable to Japanese society in the same way in which a concept such as ethos might be. In terms of the gameplay elements of *NieR*, I therefore analyze these in terms of similarities with other games, as opposed to the anthropological perspective adopted in the second and third categories of the analysis.

Neither is this a comprehensive overview of each cultural element in Japan which is relevant to a rhetorical element, for most of the topics discussed in conjunction with the points in the thesis could, and have been, discussed at length by scholars in fields such as Japanese Studies. The thesis is not really an in depth look into Japan, as the goal is to cover a wide range of anthropological, media portrayals, religion and societal Japanese contextual topics which may help clarify the anti-violence rhetorical elements in *NieR*. The thesis also does not imply that the depictions of *NieR* are somehow entirely revolutionary or different from other media content, such as films and even other video games, as it seems that modern media content of the aforementioned categories is, as a whole, becoming increasingly more self-aware and critical in its depictions.

Rather, this is a study of video games which borrows some examples from rhetorical, Japanese cultural, anthropological and religious studies to offer an explanation for the rhetorical elements in each game and why they present themselves the way they do in terms of the intended communicated meaning of the series, which is anti-violence. Hopefully towards the conclusion of the thesis, the reader will have gathered insight into some of the elements which make video games a worthy rhetorical study.

The scope of the research is quite broad as it encompasses a multitude of elements, both pertaining to the rhetorical communication and the meaning conveyed through it. However, the focus will be on a textual analysis of the two games pertaining to useful anti-violent rhetorical elements and their meaning, rather than an examination of audience effects and impact.

For instance, the thesis encompasses much of the dialogue of each game in order to understand what it looks like in the particular rhetorical situation, but it is also a rather high expectation set to players by the games themselves, that they should pay attention to what an in-game character is saying when they simply want to have fun during gameplay sequences.

1.4 Choice of games

There are many ways to use critical depictions of violence, and whether a piece of media critiques violence directly or indirectly, can be debatable. For instance, the Netflix film *The King* (2019). features a young king who vows to fix the kingdom of England after inheriting the throne from his father. He goes to battle with France, resulting in the deaths of thousands, including his best friend, as his victory is depicted as meaningless by the end of the film.

There seems to be a media trend occurring in recent times where even some superheroes are depicted more critically with an emphasis on the havoc they cause to infrastructure and private property by chasing the villain, who in reality is also humanized by the fact that they do not accept society the way it is, rather than adopting some kind of evil mastermind plan. *NieR* seems to include such patterns, while also focusing heavily on renouncing violence in its rhetoric, which makes the series a particularly relevant study in the exploration of anti-violent games. The series also shares some ideas with other Japanese games, as well as societal issues, which makes it relevant to examine the game from within a Japanese contextual viewpoint.

Indeed, there have existed main characters who have had negative traits, such as Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) but these fictionalized works usually involve the character committing the crime very early on in the fictional work, as if from a fear that the audience would prematurely empathize with a villainous character. In today's fiction, it seems that characters who are initially framed as being good and noble are shown performing questionable actions as the story unfolds gradually, as a way of questioning what the audience truly can get behind in terms of morality.

This seems to be a modern trend which affects the video game medium yet is not exclusive to it. Both *NieR: Replicant* and *NieR: Automata* seem to fall within the realm of being primarily created to serve as entertainment, while making use of characters who are depicted as heroic and empathetic throughout the story, before revealing them as unethical entities later on in each game. There is also a broad usage of philosophical topics and social commentary in each game, as they each present themselves as quirky in the beginning while gradually increasing the

amounts of consequences of violence and humanization of the enemies, which in some ways seem to place the player in a position of being unethical and judged for their previous actions of indulging in the gameplay.

1.5 Methodological approach

The two games are analyzed by method of textual analysis with a focus on visual and verbal rhetoric and some of its corresponding Japanese contextual elements. Furthermore, the rhetorical manners in which meaning is conveyed by visual means is examined. The methodological approach is therefore comprised of three main rhetorical analytical categories or sections in the two *NieR* games: *gameplay*, *characters* and *environments*. Other more abstract non-verbal, visual rhetorical elements are discussed through the lenses of Japanese culture and the ways in which these anti-violence depictions stem from the country of Japan which the games were created in.

1.6 Overall structure

Chapter 2 explains the theoretical concepts which create much of the foundational theory of the thesis. The methodological approach is then explained in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 consists of the analysis, comprised of three main categories, also referred to as sections in the analysis itself, observed in terms of the *gameplay*, *characters*, and *environments* of the games. Chapter 5 discusses the findings from the analysis, as well as their implications. Here, I lastly propose some suggestions for further studies pertaining to anti-violent video games in general, before the conclusion of the thesis in Chapter 6.

1.7 Summary of this chapter

This chapter has clarified the area of study in light of some of the perspectives surrounding video games in an anti-violence rhetorical context, as well as the structure of the research and its scientific relevance. Furthermore, a clarification on the choice of games, as well as any research limitations to the thesis have each been explained in this chapter.

Chapter 2: Theoretical concepts

This chapter clarifies some of the theoretical concepts relevant to this study, such as the study of rhetoric and how it relates to the medium of video games, before defining how video games express ethical views and the relevance of the genre of serious games. This thesis also uses various terms such as gameplay, player agency and player character, which are defined thereafter. Finally, the chapter problematizes the concepts of violence and anti-violence, to showcase the perspectives from which the thesis will research these themes.

2.1 Game Studies

The thesis adheres to a broader field of Game Studies which aims to clarify the implications of the video game medium, of which there are several. As Mäyrä (2008, p.2) clarifies, Game Studies can revolve around researching and analyzing the factors surrounding the game medium, such as the players, or how an audience of games chooses to interact with them, the medium itself, or its context. In the context of the thesis, many of the rhetorical elements of each game are explained through some of the societal factors surrounding the Japanese context and media.

There are several ways to research the subjects of video games through Game Studies. When studying players, a common methodology can imply the usage of surveys or interviews for a theoretical inspiration in sociology, ethnography or cultural studies. Interviews and textual analysis may also be conducted as part of research into games as cultural objects. This clarification is important to the thesis, as it shows that Game Studies can feature various approaches and theoretical aspects.

The cultural aspects in the thesis are therefore primarily discussed in terms of their rhetorical depictions in *NieR*, as the contexts of the game itself are analyzed through a Game Studies perspective which places priority most on the game itself, secondly on the rhetorical depictions through its imagery, structures and dialogue, which are then discussed in terms of their corresponding cultural contexts. The research of the thesis adheres to Game Studies by focusing also on the structural elements of the game, the ways in which they are rhetorical, as well as the ways in which they fit into the Japanese context.

As Hutchinson (2019, p.1-2) points out, Japan is home to some of the largest video game production companies such as *Square Enix* and *Bandai Namco*. Here the author implies that Japanese video games sometimes overlap with real life events, offering portrayals from

different perspectives of actual people, events or phenomena. The same can be said about *NieR: Replicant* and its sequel, which is also developed by Square Enix, including depictions of Pearl Harbor, Tokyo, and some rhetorical elements hinting at actual political speeches, albeit in a highly fictionalized format.

As such, the thesis views the different rhetorical elements of *NieR* both in terms of their depictions stemming from a specific Japanese societal context, but also as a form of social commentary on the unpleasant consequences of violence, among which there are several depictions of violence in *NieR*, such as general human conflict or purposeful military mobilization efforts.

Such an example of Game Studies which includes a cultural aspect partly explaining why a depiction looks the way it does, how it is affected by the real-life phenomena surrounding it, and how it may also serve as a form of social critique. As such, looking at Game Studies in a wider discussion of societal, cultural and anthropological lenses, can show how games are both influenced, and have the capacity to communicate ideas.

2.2 Rhetoric

Rhetoric is another important aspect in terms of how *NieR* can be understood as a game critical of violent conduct. Rhetoric, according to Aristotle (350 B.C.E./n.d., p.3-4, Trans.Roberts) is the art of using modes of persuasion, which can either rely on hard facts or the arousal of emotions such as pity, prejudice or anger. The word *persuasion*, “persuasive things”, or *pithanon* as referred to by Aristotle, consist of means to change how an audience feels or thinks regarding a certain issue at hand (Schmidt, 2021, p.61). Whether a rhetorical element is persuasive can therefore be viewed as the extent to which a form of communication manages to influence the thoughts and feelings of an audience. As such, the three categories or sections of the thesis, along with all other objects of analysis, are to be viewed from a rhetorical perspective, as they are constructed in an effort to persuade players regarding ideas of anti-violence.

Much of the rhetorical study normally revolves around what the speaker says, or verbal persuasion, such as *kairos*, meaning the utterance of something at an appropriate occasion, *ethos*, or creating a persuasive, authentic, or relatable impression of the speaker’s character, with the arousal of emotions through speech belonging to the rhetorical term *pathos*, and *logos* adhering to the appeal to facts and argumentation in rhetorical communication, as defined by

Kjeldsen (2017, p. 33, 69, 116). Furthermore, Kjeldsen (2017, p. 24-25) defines rhetoric as a message meant to be received by an audience and is “purposeful and impactful communication.” Many of the common video game elements can fall into this definition, as they seem both purposeful and goal oriented, aiming to achieve some kind of effect in their audience, the players.

How just a person is, their morality and values, are relevant parts of ethos relating to a person’s character, according to Yakutina, et al. (2020, p. 113). Furthermore, the author here also argues dramatization and visualization are relevant components of pathos, which is the intended emotional response achieved in a rhetorical audience.

Kjeldsen (2017, p. 264-267) writes that even non-verbal, visual imagery has the power to call fourth strong feelings in the observer through appealing to images which people relate closely to from their own past experiences. This is one example of visual rhetoric. The thesis refers to examples of visual rhetoric as a non-verbal, purposeful communication occurring through visual cues such imagery or animations. From this explanation, it becomes apparent how rhetoric can extend beyond what has normally been understood as persuasive communication throughout most of the history of the field of study.

2.2.1 Rhetoric in video games

Other scholars have continued to problematize the field, attempting to create a framework for a rhetoric which is more compatible to the study of video games. For instance, Wood (2018, p. 10,12) argues that games are rhetorical in the sense that they can serve the public good through entertaining and teaching, while at the same time the author also places a higher emphasis on the emotions invoked in players in ways which a traditional rhetoric might not account for. The implication is that video games somehow differ from other rhetorical modes of communication, and the author supports this claim by referring to strictly game related situations, such as obstacles players might meet in a game and the emotions which can arise from their experiences of failure (2018, Wood, p.23). This is one example of how a traditional concept such as pathos can be expanded upon to more accurately account for a modern form of persuasive communication like video games.

There are other reasons for why video games are rhetorical ways of communicating socially beneficial and useful ideas through persuasive ways. Bogost (2008, 118, p.126) finds that video games can be useful forms of critique through using gameplay mechanics to illustrate the

usually unknown aspects of grander realities of life and societal problems, for instance, why some company practices simply do not work through games such as *The McDonalds Videogame*, which makes the player choose between several equally immoral actions, such as bulldozing rainforests or bribing the local government to acquire more crops. This is part of what the author views as procedural rhetoric reliant on game representations through rules, which are “explored through play” (Bogost, 2008, 122-124). In this sense, persuasion is created through the specifics of the medium, through unethical actions players are made to perform and reflect on.

Even though rhetoric presents itself differently depending on the specifics of the communication taking place, many rhetorical concepts can be applicable to modern video games in terms of how this highly visual and often non-verbal, digital way of communication may be different from traditional, Aristotelean rhetoric in its reliance on alternative aspects to a wider extent, such as the invocation of emotions in the audience through what they see and experience visually, and the actions the game invites them to engage in.

As the chapter further clarifies, different ethical elements can be incorporated into games in what is known as the Serious Games genre, and even though not all games fall under this category, some of the ways in which the genre creates meaning, can find its way into other video game genres.

2.3 Japanese Studies

Many of the structural rhetorical and verbal aspects of the research are discussed in terms of Japanese Studies. Japanese Studies as a field is defined as “*the interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary study of Japan in the social sciences and humanities, in which analysis of Japan in domestic, international or comparative contexts using both Japanese and non-Japanese sources is disseminated to an international audience*” (Ogawa & Seaton 2020, p.1-2). What is noticeable from the definition, is that Japan can be studied through the lenses of various social sciences, among which Game Studies may also factor into as a research area which can benefit from the inclusion of video games and their societal relation to Japan. When researching Japan, one may use sources from other scholars who have researched their respective topics, or one may make independent observations of the Japanese context.

In the context of the thesis, research from Japanese Studies scholars is implemented in order to explain some of the rhetorical elements in *NieR* and why they present themselves the way they

do, but some Japanese contextual explanations for the game rhetoric are also given at times when I have found that the discussion could be expanded upon by my own observations. In this way, some of the covered topics in relation to the rhetoric of *NieR* have been covered extensively by researchers, but not particularly within the context of *NieR* and the ways in which the Japanese contexts could explain a possible anti-violence game rhetoric.

Japanese Studies, or Japan Studies, focus on questions regarding what Japan really is, its geographical boundaries and what might be typical or not so typical for Japanese society, with such perspectives within the discipline also discussing Japan as a historical location or a modern “cool Japan” context in which scholars aim to understand contexts which might be more relevant today than they were from a historical point of view (Gaitanidis, 2017, p.2).

Furthermore, the thesis similarly features both Japanese and international perspectives with scholars who have resided in Japan or observed the country’s relevant contexts from outside of Japan. Here the word “culture” itself can also be understood as the phenomena taking place in the aspect of a country. However, the challenge of understanding the concept arises from the fact it is fleeting in how some societal aspects relevant years ago may not be relevant today, or they may persist regardless of time period. In this way, culture cannot really be accurately described or interpreted, since the concept itself has uncertain boundaries, as argued by Tai (2003, p.4).

For this reason, the research of the thesis discussed the rhetorical aspects of *NieR* from several angles which include historical, religious and cultural aspects written during different time periods of Japanese society by other scholars, as well as observations in the game as part of the analysis which reference real world events relating to Japan. Games can also function as expressions of ethical values which is particularly what the genre of serious games concerns itself with. As such, the thesis also clarifies some of the aspects of games which have the potential to transcend the medium beyond its entertainment value, into a form of meaningful mediation to the player.

2.4 Video game ethics and the genre of serious games

There are different ways in which games can express ethics. Players may be tasked with eliminating enemies, only to be confronted with the deaths caused through gameplay means and characters, such as interacting with a river which confronts players with the souls of people who perished at their hands. The more reckless the player has been, the more extended that

sequence becomes. Even games involving killing have values they communicate, and punishments associated with playing unethically (2009, Sicart, 107-109). This is instance in which a game gives the player the choice between playing ethically and unethically. In some cases, however, games can put a situation in which the only means to progress are offered by means of unethical conduct, which is a situation which is equally critical, albeit more constrained.

Looking at games in this way is part of what Sicart (2009, p.110-111) calls *virtue ethics*, which is how communities examine their own experiences of what is virtuous and, in the case of games, central to the concept is the set of values experienced in the game, with the game as object with its goals and system along with their embedded values, being more peripheral. The author further insists on the acknowledgment of the player when looking at the ethics of video games, as opposed to applying methodological film studies approaches in an uncritical way in an effort to understand the ethics of games. This is, in particular, why this thesis aims to include examples which somehow distinguish the rhetoric of *NieR* as a video game as opposed to other types of media content, such as cinematic experiences which audiences are not in direct control of.

From this description, it becomes apparent that players have, to some extent, influence over how a game is played, and that a game is responsible for the ethical judgements it generates through its rules, because there also exists *unethical game design* (Sicart, 2009, p. 144-145). Perhaps one notable example of a game unintentionally being unethical, is *Battlefield 2042* (2021), where soldiers utter unserious sounding dialogue in which they boast or jokingly brag about their actions with lines such as “Well, well, well. That was fun!” in what is supposed to be a game depicting the realities of war where soldiers are killed in various violent ways.

This kind of dialogue could alternatively serve as a critique of war, yet there is nothing in the gameplay which indicates this, as the game does not particularly bring up the uneasiness of being in an actual war conflict. This is perhaps one challenging aspect of gaming to be mindful of, as it is important that military games take their subject matter seriously as opposed to focusing on the sole goal of entertainment in an effort to drive further profits from an industrial perspective. In this balance between entertainment and ethics, some games fall more within the *serious games* genre.

The concept of “serious games” is a collective term encompassing a wide range of subgenres of digital games, which aim to achieve a positive or otherwise useful effect for players or

society. For instance, there are games-for-change, which specifically deal with societal issues, with Papers Please putting the player in the role of an immigration officer who decides over the fates of other people, or games-for-health which revolve around rehabilitation, physical activity and health treatments (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2020, 242-244, 248). One common thread which can be observed in this particular genre, is that serious games are not developed with the intrinsic intent to entertain, but to bring light to a certain issue, the focus is shifted away from the technological capabilities of the video game medium as a method of entertainment, such as realistic, flashy graphics.

Instead, the focus in this genre lies on communicating ideas about real life issues in a design which can be simplistic or intentionally unpleasant, but the goal of serious games is usually not to bring profit to the game creators through appealing to players in an entertaining way. The focus also seems to not be on players receiving rewards for their actions, and the rewards received can be initially presented as appealing, before being shown in a negative light, provided players were tasked with engaging in an unethical act.

Hints of these elements can be seen in games not adhering to the genre of serious games exclusively. Entertainment oriented video games have progressively begun including aspects from the serious games genre, such as horrific depictions of violence which aim to achieve the opposite effect of idolization. *NieR* as a series is simply part of a larger trend, with games such as *Spec Ops: The Line* from 2012 where players are tasked with releasing chemical weapons onto enemy soldiers, before having to walk through the area, observing the mayhem caused in third person as the soldiers are shown crawling on the ground in agony amidst burning tanks, incinerated bodies and vehicles. Then there is also *The Last of Us* (2013), a zombie survival game, ending with the player tasked with killing a room full of surgeons to save a young girl the protagonist befriends and takes care of along the game storyline, in an ethical conflict where one has to choose between letting a child die or killing strangers.

Even if there is only one possible choice and outcome for the player, the gameplay situation still raises questions about the player as a moral being. Players being made to directly engage with the consequences of what they were made to do in both cases, as well as the fact that the experience is purposefully made to appear unpleasant, is a part of how games create persuasion regarding serious topics such as violence and war through *player agency*. The next part of this chapter looks further into what player agency is, and how it relates to other game related concepts which are relevant to the persuasion of the video game medium.

2.5 Gameplay and player agency

One of the most important terms in game studies, is gameplay. Gameplay can be viewed as the amalgamation of game elements which comprise the experience of the player, with the intent of keeping players attentive and thus in tune with the game (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2020, p. 13). Yet gameplay as a concept seems to be separate from elements such as storyline or what happens to the characters of the game within that story because gameplay as a concept is connected with player agency, or the ability of the player to interact with the game. A major part of gameplay is the player's ability to influence what happens in the game.

Aarseth, (2003, p.2) further correlates elements such as the strategies, social relations, communication and the rules of the game, with what gameplay is. It would be easy to misconstrue player agency as simply players being in control of a game character, since Sicart (2009, p.156) also relates player agency with the ability of players to be able to reflect on the capacity of their actions and in-game values.

Herein lie the differences between the concepts of the character and the player character, since there is a difference between a player controlling or not controlling the behavior of the character. What is meant in this context within this thesis, is the difference between the character as a part of the game's story, an entity which is somewhat free from the player, moving along the events of the game in a chronological way, and the player character as a design meant to represent and become inhabited by the player.

The player is the middle entity of this structure, they are the audience and the individuals the rhetorical communication aims to persuade through what the game allows or disallows one to do with it. In the context of the thesis, when referencing the character, this is done from the point of view of the story or cutscenes which play out regardless of player input. On its own, on the other hand, the player character is at a passive standstill, and it needs the player to give it life and movement.

2.6 Summary

This chapter has conceptualized some of the main terms relevant to the thesis, such as rhetoric and its relevance to video games, how ethics can be an important part of the video game medium, how they relate to the genre of serious games, as well as the meaning of gameplay and how it is defined by what players are able to do in a game, which further helps to understand other game related terms used in the thesis, such as player, character and player character.

Chapter 3: Methodological approach

Herein the thesis clarifies the structure of the research design. In this section of the thesis, the concept of textual analysis will be further elaborated upon. Subsequently the method of textual analysis as a method for understanding videogames, will be explained. An overview of previous research will be described, as well as the approach. The thesis will then explain why this particular game is relevant to this study and what my role and challenges as a researcher have been whilst conducting the study.

3.1 Textual analysis

Fernández-Vara, (2015, p.5-6) argues that the word text can be applied to activities and visually expressed forms such as theatre and films. In general, different types of textual analysis exist. For example, a researcher can observe how players interact with each other within a game, or the cultural significance of a game. More typically perhaps, however, textual analysis may revolve around a case study of a media text, and the ways in which we can use our perspectives to understand and make sense of it (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p. 8-9). A systematic textual analysis focuses on frameworks for understanding larger implications of media texts (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p.6-7). This systematic textual analysis type is an integral part of how the methodological research for this thesis is structured.

This analysis type is useful in understanding culture. After all, culture can be one factor shaping how individuals see reality (Mckee, 2003, p.10,14). Such varying value differences and similarities are especially important when analyzing, for example, games originating in Japan. In analyzing such a media text, it is most relevant to analyze it from the perspective of the specific sociohistorical culture its meaning comes from.

Analysing the rhetorical communication of media texts can be a part of textual analysis. As Østbye et al. (2013, p.71) argue, the concept of textual analysis is well adjusted to researching rhetorical texts where the aim of the argumentation to convince the audience becomes a central part of the research. The ability of the text to “awaken feelings” through rhetorical measures within such texts is analyzed, according to the author, by returning to previously written rhetorical works which provide examples of how speakers convince their audience.

This standard research approach will be applicable in the research design throughout the thesis. Furthermore, when researching media depictions of anti-violence, it can be relevant to uncover

how these relate to the specific nature of the medium itself, as well as the culture such depictions were created in (Østbye et al., 2013, p. 67).

In this case, that would be the medium of video games, and the sociocultural factors relating to the phenomenon are those found in Japan. For this reason, research within videogame studies, together with research by authors discussing common Japanese phenomena, will be used throughout the thesis in order to understand how rhetoric in particular is relevant to the aspects of the medium and is shaped by Japan.

3.1.1 Textual analysis specific to games

Video games, together with most media content, can be understood through the lenses of textual analysis. Witnessing dialogue within the game and then writing it down is a proper way to reflect on it afterwards and decode the “range of meanings” surrounding it and, although challenging to pinpoint, such meanings may be interpreted, nonetheless (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006). This is also the method employed when conducting this research thesis. Various other elements can be analyzed in video game textual analysis.

Textual analysis may adhere to a Game Studies approach, which aims to make sense of games, their different forms of interpretation, and their socio-historical contexts, since “no cultural artefact is created in a void”, and within from this research perspective, one may, for instance, analyze a game in conjunction with other games, or their dialogue and combat systems (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p.9,33). Engaging with the game implies that one, in turn, receives feedback from the game, which is also a part of what separates games as a medium from things like literature or movies (Aarseth, 2003, p.5). Therefore, the rules which dispose players to interaction within a game, can also be analyzed as part of a Game Studies research. The idea herein is that players have some influence over what happens in a game, which is why games can also be goal oriented, in the same vein *NieR* often is, in terms of the goal being of importance in the game, yet paradoxically not being positively rewarded through rhetorical means such as dialogue.

In video game textual analysis, one may choose to focus on the themes present in a game, or its “shell”, which here imply its rules, structures and core gameplay (Mäyrä, 2008, p.165). Put otherwise, game textual analysis focuses either on the ideas a game conveys, or the game itself. Specifically in the thesis, these elements are examined through a hermeneutical textual analysis, *hermeneutics* implying interpretation as a way of understanding a text. Thus, Ricoeur (2016,

p.1-2) writes that hermeneutics is “the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts.”

To sum up, textual analysis is the method of study employed by looking at a media text. For this thesis, the media texts are two video games from the entertainment genre belonging to the *NieR* series. The textual analysis for this thesis is interpretational and systematic in nature and focuses on the rhetorical communication of anti-violent rhetoric and meaning of the two games, along with frameworks for understanding these elements. One may differentiate between the themes of a game and its gameplay structures, which are both examined in equal parts in this thesis.

3.2 Earlier research into game rhetoric and ethics

In many ways, Løvlie’s *The rhetoric of videogames: Freedom and discipline in America’s Army* (2007) has many themes in common with a rhetorical analysis of the anti-violence in *NieR*. It is particularly interesting, because it asks the question “Can video games be used for evil?” in its own way. For one, the author problematizes the usage of rhetoric to examine a majorly visual medium such as video games, referencing semiological works by Barthes and the way concepts surrounding the signifier and the signified can be applicable to visual content.

Thus, the author manages to show how rhetoric is valuable to any study of moving images, since even the cinematography sphere has benefitted from the writings from Barthes (Løvlie, 2007 p. 21-22, 66-67, 91). The author builds upon these concepts to show how a slower speed of running, for instance, is what the game is supposed to use in creating *authenticity*. Therefore, it is highly useful to understand how game mechanics can be viewed as creating their own authenticity despite the fact they are an amalgamation of many different in-game elements as opposed to a centralized, human rhetorical communicator.

Authenticity is a major part of rhetorical studies, so the way in which the research is conducted is highly fitting, especially since the author compares game characteristics such as autonomy, vote-kicks, punishments for teamkilling, and ranking system, in a comparative analysis with two other shooters, *Counter-Strike: Source* and *Battlefield 2*. The comparative analysis of *America’s Army* is both quantitative and qualitative in nature, as the author examines, describes and systematically arranges rhetorical models for how the game differs from other shooters, as the findings ultimately suggest that if a game could, in theory, aim to influence youth in a negative way, then it would certainly rely on ethos to a high degree. The author also examines

how the game enforces its own systemic values, such as discipline, and what that kind of rhetoric looks like (Løvlie, 2007, p.51, 108,109-110).

From a more Japanese cultural perspective in terms of anime, Szatmari (2021) looks at how the UN is depicted in anime. The author looks at both how media has been used as a way to tackle political relations, but also to encourage societal ideals, or ones of propaganda. The research is conducted by means of literature review, examining various historical and cultural works which detail the role anime has had in depicting political issues. There seem to be some Japanese contextual similarities between this research and my thesis concerning the anti-violence in *NieR* in a Japanese context. As such, this research is relevant to the anti-violence contexts in *NieR* as seen in the context of things like critiquing authority, as well as Japanese portrayals of societal issues, albeit the context of Japan after the rhetorical element in my own thesis, as opposed to an analysis of the Japanese context to a wider extent.

Several anime portrayals are analyzed, such as Season 1 of *Gundam 00* (2007) and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), with each depiction categorized into different characteristics, from having capacities as being effective or ineffective, to motivations which can be supportive or antagonistic, for example. The findings suggest that Japanese society is somewhat divided on the role of the UN, a factor which is reflected in how the organization is depicted in anime (Szatmari, 2021, p.4,24,45). As *NieR* shares some characteristics with the anime genre particularly in terms of the ethos of the protagonists, this kind of Japanese cultural exploration is very important to this thesis.

On the other hand, what makes the research paper by Wood (2018) so useful to this thesis and the field of video games, is the ways in which the author expands the current understanding of what an emotional rhetoric looks like in terms of video games. The author examines both narrative and game mechanics in a dissertation which is part narratology and part ludology, before applying affect theory to the video game sphere.

In this way, not only does Wood (2018) expand upon the understanding of how video games could affect emotions, but also how rhetoric in itself relies on the emotionality of modern media. The author concludes that game content is worth learning, highlighting the need for a student digital game literacy which helps a person read and understand the content of video games (Wood, 2018, p.11-12, 202-203, 207).

3.3 Selection of game

The thesis includes a systematic choice of two *NieR* games in particular, due to the kind of persuasion they offer. *NieR: Replicant* includes a wide range of different ethical themes concerning things like bullying, discrimination or assault on people who appear different to oneself. On the other hand, the sequel to the game titled *NieR: Automata* focuses more on ideas of ideological propaganda, military regimes, authoritarianism and dictatorships.

The similarities and differences in rhetorical depictions and their meanings will therefore be an important aspect of this thesis. In terms of their dialogue, the games offer an anti-violence rhetoric which seems very pronounced and noticeable. From the gameplay of both games, one gathers a sense of starting off one way and finishing the games on a different note, in ways which are not always particularly pleasant, with regards to the on-screen portrayals or the ethical actions and decisions the games engage the player in.

Recently, the first game received a remake titled *NieR: Replicant ver.1.22474487139...*, helping the game garner a larger audience since it had previously only been accessible on PC and older consoles. *NieR: Automata* received a Game of the Year award in 2017. To say that either of the games is obscure, would therefore be somewhat incorrect. Examining these games through textual analysis is relevant due to their unorthodox way of communicating anti-violence, a factor which makes it so important to understand what this kind of rhetoric looks like, also given that it has reached a widespread global audience.

3.3.1 NieR: Replicant

This thesis analyzes a version of *NieR: Replicant* released in 2010, which is a remake from the year 2021 titled *NieR Replicant ver. 1.22474487139...* To examine the story of the *NieR* series, it is relevant to note that each game consists of several “routes” or parts of the game, which follow a non-linear structure where players have to choose between different paths, leading to varying outcomes such as one character surviving while another perishes. Most often, however, a route is simply intended to be replayed several times so that the same story events are seen from the perspectives of different characters.

The goal of the game *NieR: Replicant* itself is relatively simple. It starts with a young boy in a supermarket in some kind of apocalyptic situation in what seemingly resembles modern Japan. His sister Yonah offers him a cookie that she found, and when he insists she eat it instead, she begins to cough profusely. It is evident she is ill. The game then cuts forward to 1,412 years

later in a Medieval village. The unnamed boy protagonist, whose name can be interpreted as being *Nier* from the title of the game, is now dressed in matching Medieval clothes and has to help his sick sister by finding a cure for her illness.

The main character traverses the world doing quests for other people who live in his village and other villages surrounding it, such as the two village doctors Devola and Popola, who take care of the two children. He also befriends a couple in one of the villages, the man being a postman carrying a red bag, and other characters such as Emil who turns other people to stone by looking at them, and Kainè who is an intersex person. In the beginning of the game, he meets and acquires Grimoire Weiss, who is a book floating by his side shooting magic projectiles at enemies. At one point, Yonah is kidnapped. The protagonist grows up, still looking for her while killing any and all Shade enemies who oppose his quest. He begins to firmly believe Shades need to be eliminated for separating him from his sister.

The game is replayed several times, towards the end from the perspective of Kainè, after Nier chooses to cure her of her illness by sacrificing his entire existence and memories, which in turn also deletes all save files for the player, after he kills his Shade version named the Shadowlord. Kainè regains her memory of Nier and saves him. Ending [E] shows the two embracing each other in a giant flower sprawling from the ground. Before this, the game gradually reveals Shades are sick humans who have separated their souls from their physical copies, or Replicants, with the end goal of reuniting with them, thereby curing their illness but trapping the Replicants into their own bodies. The game implies that Replicants cannot exist without Shades, as Shades are the human souls of Replicants whom they cannot live without.

Route	Actions
A	The game is played as the protagonist Nier.
B	The game is replayed, this time showing the true feelings and dialogue of the enemies Nier is killing.
C	The game is replayed again, leading to ending [D] and the “true” ending [E].

Figure 3.3.1 Chart of the game structure in *NieR: Replicant*.

3.3.2 *NieR: Automata*

Similarly to *NieR: Replicant*, *NieR: Automata* as a sequel is divided into four main routes which really are just sections of the game which emphasize large parts of the story which are to be

replayed through different perspectives. The difference between the two games is the division of each route into several chapters which can be accessed again after completing the game. Like *NieR: Replicant*, there are four main endings, however, there are twenty-six endings in total, some of which show a different side to the story where the player can avoid conflict or be especially brutal in some situations.

These are not real parts of the narrative, since a black screen with dialogue shows up with a row of credits, after which the game picks off at the last save point. *NieR: Automata* begins with two main characters, 2B and 9S, who are part of YoRHa, a military group of androids who obey the will of humans, which is to rid the world of the more simplistic machines created by an alien species which is no longer present on Earth, in order to make the planet once again habitable for humanity. The year is 11945, and the player dictates both 2B and 9S as they partake in various military conflicts.

As a recon model who fights from a distance using hacking abilities, 9S is repeatedly killed by 2B in order to delete his memories, since, because of his intelligence, he always eventually ends up knowing something about the cruel military regime he is forced to take part in. After deleting his memories, their relationship always ends up evolving again.

Along the way, the characters fight different enemies like Adam and Eve, Simone, and Red Girl, who are all part of the same network which has recorded parts of the behaviors and violence of humanity, which the robotic lifeforms repeat simply because they are not interested in humans as a species but are inspired by humanity. At one point, the simple machine lifeforms rebel, which ends up killing 2B and destroying YoRHa. Here 9S also learns humans went extinct thousands of years ago, and any messages received from them on the Moon were simply a form of propaganda created by the androids in their struggle to find meaning. 9S is killed by another older model android named A2, 2B is stabbed and 9S, upon seeing this, vows to take revenge on the android as his mental state deteriorates. The game ends with the 9S and his former enemies on a kind of spaceship into space, as they no longer despise each other, before he is reassembled along with 2B back on Earth, in a more hopeful kind of Ending [E].

The game as a whole presents social commentary on humans through the idea of robots as humanity's legacy or offspring, by showing the uglier sides of war conflicts, without even including any humans in the game at all.

Route	Chapters
A	Chapter 01-01_01 – Chapter 01-09_3
B	The game is replayed, through the perspective of 9S.
C	Chapter 10-05_2 – Chapter 17-11

Figure 3.3.2 Chart of the game structure in NieR: Automata.

3.4 Approach

The thesis predominantly focuses on the rhetoric of the characters, their ethos and dialogue, the environments of the game world, the gameplay, quests and ethical choices therein. These elements comprise the research which occurs by means of textual analysis, by actually engaging with and playing the game and taking screenshots of the rhetorical situation, which are then included in the relevant section which is to be exemplified by a picture which helps with exemplifying the described situation.

Fernández-Vara, C (2015, p.55-56) provides a specific framework for game analysis, which constitutes a large part of the structure of the thesis. According to the author, three main components can be seen as the basis of video game analysis. Providing the context of the game helps clarify how a game is a product of its time, as well as the industry factors which helped shape it. For instance, people who made the game may be brought up in the analysis as a way of finding common patterns in how a game is produced, and with what intentions, according to the author. Situating the game in a sociohistorical context, analyzing what aspects of the game reflect its culture, is another part of defining the context of a game (Fernández-Vara, C., 2015, p.65, 75).

The second fundament of game analysis described by the author, is an overview of the game itself, its goals and, more specifically, its *spaces*. The author here also notes that spaces appear differently and are characterized by the boundaries of the world presented to the player, the space the player is placed in is also here referred to as the levels of the game (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p.100-102). Common questions to ask in this regard, are how spaces are arranged, and how the objects in the space move or otherwise behave. The space can also be explored as a fictional, or more simplistic world such as *Tetris*, argues (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p. 105) The final area of analysis concerns the formal elements of the game, which the author argues consist of game elements such as control schemes, game balance and difficulty and save games (Fernández-Vara, 2015, p.122).

The analysis falls very much into this already established framework, with some changes and differences even though each of the analysis can be seen as consisting of one part discussing the fundamental, formal elements of of *NieR*, the second analyzing its context with a heavy emphasis on its social and cultural aspects, and the third part analyzing the spaces of *NieR* in a broader overview of how the environments of the series appear.

What becomes apparent is that some of the elements overlap with one another, particularly taking into account how levels or spaces can also be explored as being parts of formal elements like gameplay. For instance, the second part of the analysis concerning the characters as rhetorical elements does, indeed, heavily focus on the Japanese societal context in the game. However, even though it is heavily emphasized in the character analysis, this perspective is relevant throughout most of the analysis, as the spaces of the game and the items found within it also sometimes make a commentary on real life counterparts. I also look at dialogue, or what characters tend to verbalize, is similarly explored across all three categories or sections, both in terms of a verbalized part of the formal gameplay elements, such as combat, the ways in which the characters reference themselves in a dictatorial regime, or what character NPCs might utter in a way which defines the spaces around them.

The analysis of the thesis makes a distinction between the three main categories, or sections, of analytical approach, although some of the elements of analysis tend to overlap. The first part of the analysis concerns the formal elements of the game largely described above, such as gameplay and combat. The second part of the analysis deals with characters and enemies in an analysis which largely falls into defining the context of the game and why the characters present themselves the way they do rhetorically.

When talking about the enemies here, once again the analysis examined how they are depicted through gameplay, albeit more from the perspective of how the game presents itself and the spaces the player is made to occupy, rather than the combat itself as a formal structure of the game. There is a heavy emphasis on the social aspect of the game in a Japanese context. Lastly the analysis looks at the environments as levels of *NieR* and how they relate to each other, but also how the characters, or NPCs, are arranged in each level, or environment, and what happens to them. When looking at the first analysis category in terms of the formal gameplay elements, the analysis discusses these mostly in light of other Japanese games, rather than the role of the Japanese context, as the technicalities of a game are largely shaped by the medium itself as

opposed to elements like ethos which can further help exemplify a broader discussion of societal contexts and perspectives.

In some cases, it is relevant to observe the different outcomes of the same situation in order to think about how meaning is derived from them and what that meaning constitutes for this research. Some sections have been played multiple times by exiting the game without using the saving function, because completing a quest renders that quest inaccessible for the rest of the playthrough. For *NieR: Automata*, Chapter Select is revisited for each non-questline element, such as character interactions and gameplay sequences. *NieR: Replicant* does not have a similar Chapter Select, so the analysis of this game is mostly based on the three available slots for save file which are accessible, one at the start of the game, one in the middle and one before the final ending of the game. This is mainly done to observe whether there perhaps exist other outcomes to separate gameplay situations I have not encountered in previous playthroughs.

In total, I have played *NieR: Automata* for about 450 hours whereas *NieR: Replicant* I have played through for 300 hours. To write this thesis, I have played through each game from start to finish 5 times from Route A to Route C, including Ending [E] before revisiting each moment which I found to have some rhetorical importance later on while writing the thesis. About 300 hours of each game played, along with every replay, occurred while I played the game on my own for one year before beginning this research. Then, when the time came to begin writing the thesis, I revisited each element of rhetorical importance by memorization, either by using Chapter Select for the major story and gameplay elements in *NieR: Automata*, or starting 2 new save files in order to play through the quests one more time in an attempt to rediscovery questline dialogue which seemed to criticize the player or otherwise promote anti-violence, through what the NPCs were saying. This is due to the fact that quests become completely locked to the player once they are completed, and the only way to revisit them is to start a new game.

In other words, the questlines have been revisited using separate save files, as well as other points of the game which were inaccessible due to a lack of Chapter Select. The 3 save files I already had were only in separate parts of the game, making it impossible to go back and revisit already completed parts of the game. Some parts of *NieR: Automata* include a form of social interaction in terms of expressing anti-violence, although this aspect of the games is very limited, which is why the social interaction is not a specific point of focus in this particular

thesis, but is also brought up in terms of how gameplay is used for social interaction in the game, and to what end.

For *NieR: Automata*, specifically, I firstly revisited my own memory and recollection of the game, before using Chapter Select to locate relevant parts of the game, but here I also needed to start a new save file to analyze the missions, which become locked once they are completed. In this game, the Debug Room was also used, which is essentially an arena for testing out combat mechanics through customizing the enemy models, their appearance, strength and total amount.

For each game, screenshots were taken using the built in PlayStation snapshot feature, and then used to exemplify rhetorical elements in the thesis which may be difficult to explain by purely non-visual means. Relevant points have then been noted and re-examined in the research after each playthrough. Other elements which are important to look at throughout the research within each of these rhetorical situations, are central concepts such as ethos, logos and pathos. The goal is a broader discussion of rhetoric, the Japanese context, and what games do and have the potential to do, overall. Apart from screenshots as examples of Japanese popular culture, as well as one picture example of a rhetorical situation in *NieR: Replicant*, YouTube clips or outside content have largely not been used for the rhetorical analysis.

In *NieR: Replicant*, on the other hand, most elements have been gathered from various open spaces throughout the game, due to the fact that there is no Debug Room here, as this is a slightly older game. In both instances, footage of combat is slowed down and then screenshots exemplifying the argument are subtracted for the purpose of further analysis and argumentation in the thesis. Similarly to the Debug Room, I used the built-in lore record interfaces of both games to observe verbal communication written in game items such as outfits and weapons, in order to then reflect these communication points in the analysis. The built-in lore records were also used as visual material in the form of screenshots taken from some enemies, for the purposes of examining how the enemies present themselves visually to the player.

Dialogue is also analyzed in the thesis in terms of non-visual cues, such as the behavior of the characters, questline outcomes or the reactions from enemies. The dialogue is either a direct or indirect citation from within the game. When it comes to discussing the societal Japanese elements factoring into *NieR*, the main argument usually comes first, followed by an example of identical depictions seen in other parts of Japanese media and society. These descriptions are

based on works from scholars who have researched Japan, ranging from the field of Japanese Studies religious and historical studies in Japan.

Isolated moments are taken from the game and examined in order to look at their rhetorical means of critiquing violence. There is a focus on what the rhetorical situations and game mechanics aim to achieve, whether these are persuasive and how they present themselves to the player.

3.5 The researcher's role

Dilemmas the researcher faces within this type of particular analysis usually revolve around ethical issues. Are the claims raised sufficiently backed up by reliable arguments? This is what Østbye et al. (2013, p.31) refer to as one way of reaching “truth”, although here the author places the word in quotation marks while emphasizing the importance of accepting criticism. In other words, “truth” has many aspects. Such aspects may only be unveiled by discussion and discourse among many individuals. It is important that the objects of analysis are represented truthfully and honestly, meaning that each element is beneficial to study of rhetoric and video games in some capacity.

The views of the developer are likely expressed through the representations within the game, the visual characteristics of character, the costumes, and the narrative of the game world in general (Hutchinson, 2019 p.70). In order to achieve truthful and honest depictions of these elements, one has to be at least somewhat impartial through creating distance between oneself and object of research, not adding unintended meanings to an analysis object.

By impartiality, it is meant that one is neither too attached to the elements themselves, digging for findings which perhaps may not be there in the first place, or being willing to not use some findings which simply do not relate to the issue at hand. In other words, a researcher must be neither too attached to what is analyzed, nor what the analysis shows, to the point where irrelevant points are a part of the argumentation. On the other hand, I have also ensured to actually look at elements in the games which might not be very apparent at a first glance, in an effort be thorough in my analytical research.

3.6 Research challenges

One of the main challenges when writing the thesis, concerns separating between what rhetoric is traditionally used for, as well as the rhetoric which can be made applicable to games in

particular. In particular, many rhetorical instruments are solely verbal. Video games, on the other hand, are a modern phenomenon. Therefore, a clear distinction should be made between rhetorical analysis in the traditional sense, such as an analysis of the authenticity of the characters in terms of their ethos, and a pathos which does something differently to the audience than it otherwise would have in a regular speech. Normally, speeches are held with the goal of changing the mind of an audience, to motivate them to make a decision based on their feeling. One can easily determine the effects of pathos on an audience, depending their occupation.

For instance, a judge may be inclined to feel anger or pity towards a defendant, which brings apparent and predictable consequences to the defendant (Braet, 1992, p.314). In video games, on the other hand, many of the outcomes an element such as pathos may achieve, are unclear, which is why pathos may extend beyond emotions which are previously known in the rhetorical sphere, to include more unknown feelings such as mixtures of shock and disgust, or motivation to engage or disengage from the actions of the character in the game.

Rhetoric seems to be vastly different in video games than in other ways of expression. It is therefore an important challenge to, when appropriate, clarify the ways in which either cultural factors, or factors relating to the medium of video games itself, may alter a rhetorical element and make it look differently.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has clarified the methodological approach. Firstly, an overview of textual analysis is presented, along with how textual analysis presents itself in the study of video games. Relevant research theses and dissertations were thereafter presented, and these are works which are relevant herein, given their similar areas of study and usefulness with regards to some of the arguments presented in this thesis.

A justification on why *NieR* is the object of study for the thesis is then explained, together with a somewhat brief summary of the relevant in-game events which are to be discussed further. The methodological approach then moves beyond to examine the how the object of analysis has been examined. Lastly comes a description of some points I as a researcher have had to bear in mind while conducting this study, before a brief description of the challenges encountered along the way in terms of analyzing the modern medium of video games by rhetorical means.

Chapter 4: Analysis

This chapter covers the following three game sections, or analysis categories, which comprise the analysis chapter: gameplay, characters, environments. First and foremost, gameplay is largely what defines games as a digital medium, given that the player more or less has influence over what happens on screen. This also includes in-game activities like quests, in which the player is directly engaged. Secondly, characters are analyzed, both protagonists and enemies, and what kinds of meanings they communicate. Then some of the environments of each game are discussed in terms of the different ways in which they communicate consequences of violence. Along the way, the dialogue of in-game characters is also looked at, at times when consequence of violent acts is verbalized overtly. The contextual aspects of each element are also discussed in terms of their real life Japanese societal counterparts.

4.1 Section 1: Gameplay and combat in relation to anti-violence

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. (2020, p. 13) define *gameplay* as the effect of all elements in a game, along with their combined ability to command the attention of the player. Furthermore, the authors clarify that gameplay is a collective term for the elements in the game which comprise the total experience for players, which are designed to command their attention (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2020, p. 13). Looking at the conceptualization of gameplay by Aarseth (2003, p.2) once again describes how each element deals with player influence over the game in the interaction between the medium and the audience, as the author further correlates gameplay with characteristics such as *strategies, actions, player knowledge and motives*, as well as *in-character and out-character communication*.

From these definitions, one may find that gameplay has to do with player agency, when a player has control over a character as opposed to a cutscene which is more akin to a cinematic experience. One of the most relevant aspects of gameplay discussed in terms of videogame violence, is *combat*, or a conflict which is solved by means of fighting, punching, kicking or using weaponry to melee strike or shoot projectiles.

From a game design point of view, *NieR: Automata* was designed to include a combat which feels enjoyable. As lead game designer Takahisa Taura said in an interview, ““*If pressing a button doesn't cause an immediate action, then the player will become frustrated while playing. And if playing is frustrating, then it's not going to feel good. It's pretty simple.*” Emphasis is therefore placed on players being able to immediately perform an action without delay, upon pressing a button. Yet, at the same time,

the game designer here also finds that frustration is also an important part of feeling satisfied through gameplay, which is why the game was designed to disable dodging during certain segments, wherein the inability to dodge attacks, akin to *Bayonetta* (2009), a similar *hack'n'slash* game, is presented to the player “from the very beginning” (Wawro, 2018, para. 3,5).

The statement by Takahisa Taura illustrates a conundrum of games as entertainment versus games as communicating meaning. If there is frustration to be experienced by players in the game, then it is a kind of controlled frustration, experienced only in separate, isolated instances. One might therefore ask whether setting a goal from the start, which revolves around not frustrating or punishing players through combat, either because of more or less unethical behavior or not, is an ideal way to communicate anti-violence through gameplay means.

A similar game design philosophy can be seen in *NieR: Replicant* where enemies, upon being sufficiently hit, will slouch down, with a bright countdown timer appearing on a vital part of their bodies, with the intent of players hitting the round timer sufficiently until a glass breaking noise is heard and the enemy is defeated. The timer is bright and flashy, and breaking it in order to kill the enemy emits a sound of glass breaking. What the designers say about *NieR: Automata* highlights an issue with how anti-violence is mediated, because games rely on giving enjoyment, and if a game is not viewed as giving enjoyment, it is not played.

It is therefore difficult to find a balance between enjoyment through combat and an anti-violent rhetoric, which is not supposed to feel fun. There are Japanese games like *Elden Ring* (2022) or *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019), in which players are made to attack and dodge slowly, with heavier enemy attacks removing any chance of movement from the player for the next few moments, with enemies being able to hit players while they are knocked off balance from a previous attack, finishing them off entirely.

In this case, even though anti-violence persuasion is not the goal the same way *NieR* prioritizes the concept, enemies are also characterized in this way primarily through combat, and there is a wider degree of opportunity for introspection for players regarding the in-game world and their own actions mostly because the gameplay relies so heavily on repetition where the same elements can be examined by players many times during a playthrough.

Such a combat system also serves to highlight the vulnerability of the player character in a dangerous world. Then again, the combat system of *NieR* could be seen as the way of both

games defying expectations by coming off as games with quirky and fun gameplay, which ultimately devolves into tragedy. Developers create an enjoyable combat, in which they then create situations in which they judge players for their enjoyment. The kind of persuasion through combat in *NieR* can therefore be viewed as relying on the element of surprise, even if one can imagine that other types of gameplay could also efficiently align with the ideas the series wants to communicate, such as a combat system which purposefully aims to frustrate, not only in separate isolated instances, but throughout the entirety of each game.

NieR: Automata and *NieR: Replicant* are similar to the Japanese *Devil May Cry* from 2001 and onwards, and the *Bayonetta* series from 2009, in that they are third person action style combat games where the goal of the gameplay itself is to kill enemies in the flashiest, most over the top way possible. There are strings of combos which the player can perform, and there is a low barrier of actually getting through the combat scenarios versus a high skill ceiling for being able to destroy enemies in many different ways. *NieR: Automata* contains more of these elements than *NieR: Replicant* does, yet the latter also gives more opportunities to perform combos by switching weapons mid-air or alternating between attacks with long and short button presses. In both games it is possible to cancel attacking animations, one method of doing this is through evading in the midst of a combo, so it would not be false to say that the combat is very forgiving to the player even when their actions might be unethical.

In addition to this, *NieR: Replicant* and *NieR: Automata* have very large hitboxes for their enemies, meaning that they are highly susceptible to player attacks, which rarely ever fail to connect and damage them. This kind of reward system which clearly values combat and elaborate ways to express violence would initially seem to go against the anti-violence rhetoric a game is trying to convey. At the same time, there are other combat elements other than the animations themselves, which can be used as alternative means of critiquing violence.

In this regard, it is evident that the games rely most heavily on their dialogue, which is meant to criticize players for their enjoyment of a combat system which is designed to make them feel good from playing. In other words, the dialogue aims to critique the player for engaging in a combat which prioritizes enjoyment from the experience. It is therefore relevant to examine the verbal rhetoric and aesthetic persuasion through gameplay, and whether combat can be useful in delivering an anti-violent meaning, as paradoxical as this idea might appear at a first glance.

4.1.1 Dialogue before, during and after combat

Logos is the argumentation of the speaker and the concept itself seems relevant to video game dialogue. Being that which the speaker chooses to make of a given communicative situation and the space they have been given to operate within, is part of how Kjeldsen, (2017, p. 135) defines the concept. Logos might help illustrate how there are several contextual variables in any given combative action. For instance, there is a critique of both player and player character when the enemies openly express their disagreement with what is being done to them in each game. Dividing a certain combat move into three parts can more easily distinguish the *logos* which is being communicated, and at which point it occurs during combat.

We can look at a combative action as having a period in which it has not yet occurred, when it occurs and impacts another NPC, and when it has already occurred and some kind of damage to the enemies can be observed. These I refer to as *pre-combative*, *combative* and *post-combative stages*. This can be a useful framework which helps to understand exactly when a piece of dialogue or reaction happens in the game and what its effects are. Additionally, different enemies die in different ways. Some remain on the ground while dying for a few moments while others disappear immediately, breaking off into several pieces.



Figure 4.1.1 The three combative stages.

One situation from *NieR: Automata* relevant to this example, because of the dialogue which occurs after players attack a certain enemy. Here the player plays as 2B with 9S to the side and the goal is to kill Golden Units of machines in Flooded City. Upon killing the second little machine known as Vengeful Child, it begins speaking during the post-combative stage as it lies on the ground motionless with a depleted health bar. It says: “...Go on. Finish me. Even if I had achieved my revenge, I was planning to die regardless. My friends are dead. My family is dead. You killed them all and left me alone. I don't have the strength to continue... It hurts... I'm sorry, everyone... I couldn't avenge you. Accursed androids. How long will you torment us?! You damn monsters!” Then he explodes, before 9S comments on the absurdity of a machine avenging his family. Such dialogue situations typically occur in the post-combative stages of *NieR* games.

There are other such events with machines like *Courageous Brother*, who is also a golden machine found in the City Ruins area and upon defeated says “Nnngh...D-Damn it all,” and *Hateful Sister* who, likewise, utters the dialogue line “I am...undone... Forgive me...Brother”, where the player is openly criticized through dialogue. These depictions are entirely skippable, which implies some kind of free choice or judgement on player actions. This kind of gameplay might resemble something more than mere violent entertainment, as the post-combative dialogue apparently intends to do the opposite of hype the player up about the actions they have committed.

In fact, the critique in instances such as these seems to rely on an extended period of time required to kill an enemy unit, amplifying the desire to obtain the reward from defeating them, in turn critiquing the intent to perform combat against these types of machines. Thus, when enemies react negatively, the critique becomes more prominent because of the previous desire to achieve the outcome, which the dialogue portrays in a negative light.

A similar event occurs in both Route A and B of *NieR: Replicant* in which the three main characters kill a boy's sister in The Aerie area during the boss battle. The boy exclaims “You people are the monsters here!” as she is struck down by Kainè. The sister then returns to the form of a shade, striking Kainè as she falls to the ground. During this time as the cutscene ends, the boy yells “Stop it! Don't hurt my sister!” The player then resumes control and finishes off the Shade enemy, already made aware that this is someone's sister. This is an identical combat segment as the one found in *NieR: Automata*, except here it is the character of Grimoire Weiss who is portrayed as being the character who does not understand the other side, as he proclaims his dismay at the villagers perceiving the trio as villains. This is another way of portraying how good intentions can lead to suffering when the character does not take into account the other side of the conflict, albeit here the critical logos occurs in the pre-combative stage.

These are some of the dialogue lines which occur either in the pre-combative or post-combative stages, before or after an enemy is hit. During the middle, combative stage, right as the enemy is struck, a gameplay mechanic by the name *hit stop* occurs. This is a relevant rhetorical tool used by some video games, albeit one which is not easily noticed by players even though it has a considerable impact on the feelings a game communicates. A kind of subtle game mechanic which serves as the foundation of the enjoyment players receive in a game, hit stop gives players feedback that their impact on the game has been registered in the form of a blow to the enemy. As such, hit stop may not only be perceived as a rhetorical tool in games, but also a fundamental

element of how games are created and subsequently played. Even if unnoticed, hit stop is an important aspect of gameplay combat.

4.1.2 The rhetorical implications of hit stop mechanics in combat and dialogue

Dialogue can occur at any point of the three combative stages, which is why it is also relevant to examine the concept of *hitstop*, or *hit stop*, in games as a tool for rhetorical persuasion. Hit stop is a slight break in the animation of a character's movement, which commonly occurs in the middle of the combative stage, right when the weapon lands on the enemy, occurring to either the player character, the enemy, or both. *NieR: Replicant* in particular uses hit stop to a wide extent.

This game mechanic is a way for players to receive feedback on how efficiently their attack has landed on the enemy, appearing as an intentional delay in animation. In many Japanese fighting games like *Super Smash Bros*, hit stop is used to emphasize pain, as the more damage is inflicted on an enemy, the longer they will stagger or remain frozen (SG Team, 2015). In hit stop, the player character freezes mid attack, and they may slightly revert in movement, even, as if they are going backwards in time. Ban & Ujitoko (2021, p. 1,2,5) discuss the importance of hit stop for player enjoyment, particularly in Virtual Reality games, where hit stop can be more prolonged, or short and sudden. The careful adjustment of hit stop is also explained by the authors, who note that having a far too prolonged hit stop animation seems to take away the feeling of players that they have agency over the game (Ban & Ujitoko, 2021, p.5)

In *NieR*, this game mechanic, like in many other games, is very short and nearly unseen consciously by the player. This is because this very short, subtle movement is difficult to spot with the naked eye, yet it occurs somewhere between the attack commencing and finishing in the post-combative state of the player character, serving as an indicator to the player that they have successfully landed the attack. Hit stop is more easily observed through slowing down footage of an in-game attack. It would not be incorrect to say that most popular video games include some amount of hit stop. Perhaps this game mechanic is part of how games can critique players for their enjoyment from a given combat system. In this way, the dialogue is communicated through the way in which the player experiences the combat in the game as a

satisfactory situation, in which the rhetorical communication goes against the enjoyment of the combat. At the same time, there are ways to punish players through gameplay too.



Figure 4.1.2 Hit stop in *NieR: Replicant*.

The concept of *hit stun*, or *hitstun*, is more closely related to the player and their ability to be punished by enemy attacks, locked into a position in which they cannot jump, attack or flee after being hit (Fitzpatrick, 2009, p.2). One can see how hit stun can be a viable game mechanic in questioning player actions, as they are punished by the enemies they are encouraged to eliminate in unethical ways.

Hit stun can further be a useful way of critiquing players in a military game like *NieR: Automata*, as they are made to feel as though they have received comeuppance or made the wrong ethical decision which has led them into a situation in which their player character is being harmed by enemies repeatedly. But this game combat mechanic is very limited in *NieR*, as the series appears to aim to avoid giving players anxiety through gameplay.

Instead, it is somewhat apparent that hit stun in *NieR* is not widely used, apart from very rare instances in which Adam grabs 2B with a special grab attack, which she instantly recovers from after being thrown aside by a giant humanoid arm. Critiquing real life topics through negative feelings and imagery is one way in creating persuasion, and hit stop mechanics, particularly hit stun on the player, can be used to both make the player experience feelings such as satisfaction, or negative feelings such as frustration, during combat sequences. As such, the anti-violence of *NieR* seems to heavily depend on its dialogue which occurs during combat.

4.2 Combat animations and emotions

Anti-violence can also be communicated through the animations of the combat system which can portray how the in-game characters are feeling. Combat can be viewed as a kind of planned

performance akin to a choreographed set of movements. Not only speech, but also gestures which comprise a rhetorical performance in the form of gameplay, which is experienced, can be impactful through a process of *identification* where players respond to symbols, deviating from the Aristotelean rhetoric of audiences responding to an orator, as explained by Walz (2004, p.189,192). Examining combat in this way shows how it may be viewed as a set of non-verbal rhetorical gestures which players can perceive and identify with, to the point of understanding the implications of what the player character is going through by the way they move and behave during gameplay.

The rhetoric of combat can be further defined by who the player is pinned against, and how they are tasked with winning. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. (2020, p. 126-127) argue that players may either fight against the game system itself or amongst each other in a competitive way. This seems to be the case in *NieR*, which as a game, frames itself as rather antagonistic towards players, with enemies sometimes seemingly dropped from the sky in the middle of combat or makers of the sequel and everyone who created it being the final bosses of *NieR: Automata*, in the form of a text based arcade shooter. In both games there is even an idea that players are being watched, recorded by and then made to face off against an omnipotent A.I. named Red Girl. This kind of antagonistic atmosphere is also evident in the characters, who look genuinely unhappy during their combat animations. Combat animations and movement can be used as ways of portraying how violence can negatively impact individuals.

Gameplay expressed through physical combat may be viewed as a performance with a kind of emotional load which is choreographed, or scripted, like any other performance. Here it is relevant to point out the importance of non-verbal rhetorical communication. Atkinson (2004, p.342,354) argues that it is a common misconception that communication consists mostly of non-verbal gestures, while at the same time concluding with the idea that gestures do, in fact, bear some importance. Even if the meaning of a non-verbal gesture is up to interpretation, rhetoricians seem to agree on there at least being some kind of meaning behind a speaker's gestures.

Likewise, videogame interactions with enemies which seem violent on the surface could have an underlying meaning which criticizes violence or questions it in some way. One example which illustrates this, is the kicking motion which 2B, and subsequently A2, since they have the same combat animations, does on enemy machine units.



Figure 4.2 Kicking motion animation.

The animation occurs by the end of the regular sword combo by holding down the attack button for a prolonged window of time. The animation itself looks dismissive, as if the character does not want to deal with the consequences of her actions. If the player holds down that same button further, she ends the combo by doing a spinning motion on her knees while looking at the sky, in an animation signifying some kind of self-destruction, shifting responsibility, or hopelessness.

On the other hand, the character of 9S feels clunky in his movements, tossing his sword away from himself onto his enemies as if to purposefully create distance, often opening himself up to being struck, since he has to physically throw his sword at the enemy. These slow movements express the fact that he is not a combat model, he is a reckon android who was created to observe things from a distance, not partake in combat directly. He is also not a confrontational character.



Figure 4.2.1 The finishing animation of 2B's combo.

In this case, the combat of the characters communicates their ethos. As *NieR* games belong to the *hack'n'slash* genre, the combat is fast paced in nature which can make it difficult to discern the meaning behind their gameplay. Many of the more subtle animations are simply not easily distinguishable by the naked eye. On the other hand, this does not really negate that the meaning is both purposeful and present in the animations.

The persuasion in *NieR: Replicant* certainly comes across as different from the sequel. One cannot combine the moves of a primary weapon with those of a secondary one to form a new combination. The player seems to be more limited in what they can do as a whole. The identities of the player characters are not expressed specifically through movement in the same way they are in *NieR: Automata*, though the longer and more drawn-out animations give opportunities to reflect on the consequences of certain actions, particularly through equipping larger swords which use prolonged combat animations.

The combat examples of *NieR* illustrate the ways in which developers can express certain ideas, rhetoric pertaining to ethos, or emotions through non-verbal means of how a character engages with an enemy. These rhetorical ways of critiquing violence, through showing how the characters are affected by violence, can be expressed outside the realm of verbal dialogue. There are also other ways to communicate anti-violence, for instance through quests.

4.3 RPGs and their relevance to questline structures

Both games follow similar quest structures, given that they belong to the RPG genre. RPG games usually revolve around roles. What is typical of the genre is the act of assuming the role of another character in a game, of feeling someone else's emotions, interacting with a fictional world in a way which changes that world and the character the player is playing as, where playable characters may be separated by different classes or roles (Zagal & Deterding, Eds., 2018, p.3-4) For instance, playable characters may have different appearances, abilities or weapons, which gives players a free choice in who they wish to play as. In *NieR:Automata*, for instance, 9S is a scanner model who can hack into other machines, whereas 2B and A2 are combat models. In particular, the questline structures of both games seem to define *NieR* as part of the RPG genre. Observing the outcomes of the NPCs as part of this RPG structure can therefore help illustrate what an anti-violence questline rhetoric might look like.

The outcomes for the NPCs in RPG games are particularly relevant to examine, as they most often revolve around acquiring outcomes such as wealth, reputation, ability, conquest, comfort or knowledge (Machado et. al, 2017, p.82, 86). Usually, we engage with RPG quests because we want to help someone, to be acknowledged as a hero or achieve a reward in the game, for instance. These are some of the common motivators for NPCs. Both *NieR: Replicant* and *NieR: Automata* aim to make the player feel like a hero in their first quests, as a kind of soldier or friendly police officer archetype. In *NieR: Replicant*, the protagonist is a kind of village helper.

“Lost Girl” is one such quest in the sequel, where the player is tasked with escorting a little sister machine through the desert and into safety, which in turn is intended to make the player feel like a kind of peacekeeping hero. The NPC motivation here is therefore one of comfort, where the player is made to want to reunite the machine with her sister.

In other words, the player is usually aiding other characters in RPGs, and is rewarded through in-game objects such as items or gold, as well as the gratitude of the character they helped and as Machado, et. al (2017, p. 85) point out, there are some limitations and deviations to this

overall structure, especially if one attempts to create a quest generator of their own using solely these metrics, although it does display some common tropes of RPG games. Especially recent gaming trends in Japanese RPGs have challenged NPC outcomes in questline structures.

4.3.1 Breaking out of the traditional RPG questline structure

Newer trends in quest storylines can particularly be seen in Japanese games. For example, in *Bloodborne* (2015) the player can follow the questline of a young girl, yet the questline only ends in the player either unknowingly sending her off to be killed by a boar or turned into a monster. There are no happy alternatives. The game belongs to a subgenre of Japanese games developed by the company FromSoftware with titles like *Elden Ring* (2022) and *Dark Souls* (2011-2016), all of which are characterized by a generally tragic fictional world.

Much like the *NieR* series, these fantasy RPGs often offer no alternatives to the suffering of the characters in the game as an outcome of the player engaging with violence or simply progressing the game in general, other than to stop playing altogether. Upon finishing each game, players return to the original safety hub with NPCs befriended along the way, to either find them dead or gone from the area. In a similar vein, *NieR* also begins with tutorial quests where the player goes hunting or shopping for other people as they initially express their gratitude. However, after the first few quests this is rarely the case. In one of the first quests of *NieR: Replicant*, named “A Dog Astray”, the player is tasked with finding the lost dog of an elderly man in the starting area of the game, the village.

The outcome is that the player finds both the dog dead, as well as the elderly man who died from a heart problem. A medicinal leaf is found in the mouth of the dog, which was killed by Shades. The dialogue of the characters states that the dog was loyal to its owner until the end by attempting to bring him medicine. Quests such as this tend to reward players with items upon completion, yet their dialogue is fundamentally unhappy, once again highlighting a gameplay dissonance between games as entertainment versus as mediums mediating meaning.

There is a freedom to the quests in *NieR: Automata*, whereby not completing a quest will progress the story anyways, skipping out on the dialogue that would have occurred had they completed it. One example of this, is the “Find a Present” quest by 2B’s operator named 6O where she asks for the player to send her pictures of a Desert Rose, because she is in love with Earth but operators are not allowed to go there. After going to the desert and completing the quest, in Route C she thanks the player in a distorted voice, corrupted by the Logic Virus. She

says “2B. I am Operator 60. Thank you for the flowers. Desert flowers are beautif... aren't they? Someday I...” There is therefore a personal choice and freedom in this instance, as not completing the quest makes it so that the dialogue does not appear at all.

The quests in *NieR* are quite unhappy as a whole. *NieR: Replicant*, there is an NPC named The Red Bag man who loves yet often quarrels with his wife and his outcome and who befriends the protagonist at one point in the game. His death ties into the main story regardless of whether players complete his quest or not, making the commentary on conflict feel somewhat less personally directed towards the player. His outcome is essentially locked into the game regardless of what the player does, which can make this kind of consequence mediation feel less personal.

Even in quests framed as lighthearted competition with adversaries, the quests are unhappy. In *NieR: Automata*, the “Speed Star” and “Robo-Dojo” quests involve activities which are not violent in a typically militaristic way. The former involves racing a flying machine around the city a few times, while the latter revolves around a kind of consensual violence in which the player, either playing as 2B or 9S, is challenged with fighting a machine. Upon defeating both of these opponents, their outcomes involve the NPCs killing themselves by self-destructing. Their dialogue expresses that they are grateful to find a worthy opponent, but the experience remains unhappy, since the game implies the player has caused the self-destruction of other beings through a desire or goal to win a competition.

This shows how gaming quests can be seen as modern ways of telling a story with a poignant message, especially when the end result is unknown and does not lead to a typical victory or happiness for the person being helped. Similarly, the “Fisherman’s Gambit” questline in *NieR: Replicant* consists of 9 parts in which the player is tasked with fishing various breeds of fish with an advancing difficulty. By the end of the final quest, the player returns to the original spot of the NPC and finds that the elderly man has died. Other times, the player simply is made to perform unethical actions by being shown that they do not have a clear overview of events.

Such is the “Amnesia” side quest, in which the player goes hunting for the Pod device of a woman who was caught in an explosion and lost her memories. Hacking further into the pod as 9S and showing the memories to the woman helps her remember that she was actually a killer, an android tasked with executing her friends, who deleted her memories out of guilt. The player unknowingly helps her regain her memories and continue her path of violence. In “The Wandering Couple” side quest, the player meets a couple who detests violence and are

desperate for items to repair their bodies with, so it seems like they are both good people to begin with, unlike the NPC found in the “Amnesia” side quests.

Players are made to help the couple a few more times in the game. Finally, the female android asks the player to restart the memories of the couple so that they may go back to The Resistance Camp and live in peace. She, however, refuses to restart her own memory. As it turns out, the female android has been “reformatting” or deleting the memories of the male android in order to change his personality to her liking. This time, she says she needed a combat model and “someone more forceful” in her life. The player does not know this, as they click “Agree to help” on the prompt that follows, and this is only revealed after they players have agreed.

Quests have different types of violence being criticized, with various outcomes which judge the player as a moral being in different ways. What Sicart (2009) points out, is that games largely do not aim to question the player, instead hailing them as a hero, in which moral dilemmas are often not raised. Similar to the examples raised by the author in this vein, *NieR* often does not allow players to achieve any kind of positive, happy ending, as it games can be a form of expression for developers who are able to imprint a game with their own moral and ethical reflections on life (Sicart, 2009, 156-157).

This is one way in which RPG games can highlight not only topics of violence as war conflict, but also other versions of violence such as domestic abuse, gaslighting or toxic relationships, through a video game, miniature representation of reality. Bogost (2008 p.118, 123) discusses, in a similar vein, the ways in which game mechanics such as repaying debts in a game, or decorating one’s home, can serve as smaller representations highlighting a larger moral or societal issue, as well as the realities of being human. Other quests are more ethically dubious and philosophical, showing the suffering caused by negative experiences. In “Pascal’s Despair”, the devastated village machine Pascal looking after the children in his village asks the player, in control of A2, to wipe his memories or kill him after the village children all take their lives in fear of the war. There is an ethical conundrum expressed in this situation.

Deleting his memories makes him go back to his now empty village where he uses parts of the dead children to make new ones and start all over, not knowing what he has lost. There is also the option to leave him where he is, to which he responds with “How... How could you, A2...” His body can be seen in one of the final cutscenes of the game, implying he likely took his own life. The implication is that machines are incapable of dealing with grief. They want to be human, yet they cannot fully embrace it.

The quests in *NieR* generally have some kind of moral lesson behind each, and the emphasis is on the ethical challenge of what to choose. This uncertainty which quests can create by giving players agency and giving them a choice in what to do with it, highlights themes which surround violence and other tough topics surrounding it. Many of the quests involve a strong pathos or feelings they wish to create through the fact that these are genuinely unhappy quests which do not end well. How *NieR* uses *rhetorical questions* during gameplay is another example of communicating ideas surrounding violence by creating ethical dilemmas for the player.

4.4 Usage of rhetorical questions in gameplay

Rhetorical questions are commonly seen in speeches. Such questions are largely characterized by their ability to focus the audience's attention on a topic. The answer is most often clear to the person asking them, hence why they are aimed at underlining something the speaker already knows, rather than to receive an answer. The usage of rhetorical questions has been criticized. Rohde (2006, p. 134-135) argues that rhetorical questions are neither information-seeking nor informative, as the author further criticizes their usage, since they confirm already established beliefs or biases the audience has.

This critique is perhaps more applicable to rhetorical questions used in the context of a speech the audience already is in agreement with. However, in games, where persuasion often relies on unpredictability the first time one is playing a game, the case is different. Two examples come to mind. In *NieR: Replicant*, at the end of the first part of the game, which is Ending [A], the player has to call back the soul of Yonah into her body by reminiscing of good memories in the past.

The screen fades to black and a series of questions occur, such as "What's my favorite book?" where she replies, "My magic storybook of course!" with her own voice, answering her own question each time. She then asks who she loves the most, and the player has to write down the name of the character they made up. Thus, the obviousness of why the questions were asked, is made less obvious through the cryptic nature of the whole setup.

NieR: Automata elaborates further on this structure of asking questions. There is a specific genre in video games referenced in Japanese as *danmaku*, where players are barraged with projectiles in a simplistic arcade shooter, with the projectiles usually being round spheres, with the intention of being shot down or avoided by the player. This is a pretty standard genre of gameplay. However, the rhetorical questions preceding this gameplay sequence in *NieR*:

Automata display how the video game medium can distinguish itself from other media in the ways in which meaning is conveyed through gameplay in a verbal rhetoric. In this case, the values being communicated are emphasized through the adversarial and intentionally difficult nature of the gameplay of the final “bullet hell” sequence. After all the androids have died by the end of the game, the last remaining characters, Pod 142 and Pod 153 deliberate on whether to salvage the memories of the now dead androids, which would preserve the ability to revive them in the future. Pod 153 asks the player whether they would still like the android characters to survive, knowing that this goes against the rules set by YoRHa.

The only way to get the “true ending” [E], where the characters are seemingly saved, is to fight through a credits gameplay segment where the names of every character and staff member who worked on the game shoots dark pink and orange spheres at the player. An arcade shooter credits scene begins, where the player, represented by an arrow, shoots rectangular orbs at the names of staff members and developers, who also shoot orbs back at the player. The goal of this segment is one of purposeful failure for the player, as at some point the number of orbs becomes so overwhelming that it is nearly impossible to dodge. To survive, the player has to avoid the dark pink spheres and shoot down the orange ones, thus also hitting the names, exploding them. The background is a simple dark one dotted with small white spots. If the player is hit three times, they are asked a question, which they need to answer affirmatively, which restarts the segment. If they are killed again, they are asked a new question.

At each time of death, in capital letters, questions are asked to the player, such as “Do you accept defeat?”, “Is it all pointless?”, “Give up here?”, and “Do you admit that there is no meaning to this world?” Answering “Yes” to any of the questions is what fails the segment, making the player start the sequence anew. On the other hand, answering negatively is the only way to progress forward. After this, a prompt shows up, informing the player that someone has agreed to help them. Several smaller arrows attach themselves to the player, as they each shoot at the enemies. Their nickname is also displayed on the screen.

The sequence itself is nearly impossible to finish alone, as the experience is intended to give players feelings of fellowship and teamwork. In terms of anti-violence, the rhetoric communicates ideas of overcoming violence through friendship. This is particularly apparent both in the prompt received upon dying, as well as the pre-generated motivational quotes from other players who have already finished the game, along with their corresponding countries which can be seen in the background. This is one way in which including gameplay which is

different from the rest of the game, can mend some of the problematic issues surrounding rhetorical questions, by making their meaning less apparent.

The player agrees to receive help, and several things happen. Along the way, some arrows are shot down, displaying a message on the right-hand side of the screen which states “Player’s data has been lost”, indicating the sacrifice other players had to make in order to help. Once the credits end, the final ending of the game plays out in the form of a cutscene. After the cutscene ends, Pod 042 personally turns to the player, prompting them to create a quote to be read by others during the end credits of the game, before asking whether they have an interest in “helping the weak” which in actuality implies irrevocably deleting one’s in-game save files.

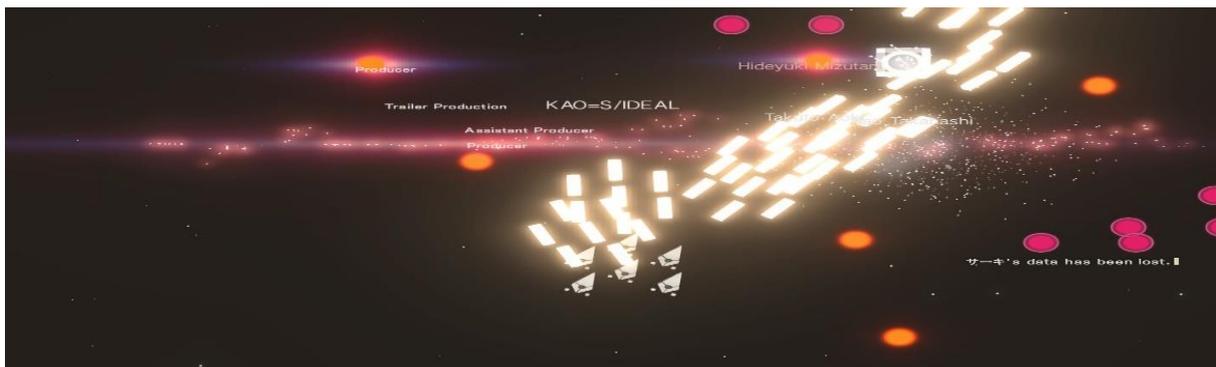


Figure 4.4 The final end credits gameplay sequence.

Answering affirmatively does several things. Pod 042 states to the player that the person being saved “may be someone you intensely dislike.”, followed by the question “Do you still wish to help?” which can be answered either with “Yes” or “No”. All of these features the player worked on will no longer be available to them, states the game, followed by the question “Do you... still wish to help?” The questions that follow sound harsher in nature. “You may not receive thanks for your efforts. Some may say that your efforts are purely for show.”, followed by the same question, and then for a final time whether the player is truly sure about this. It is clear that these questions were designed to put forward ethical dilemmas in a concise sort of way. Sacrifice is thus framed as a thankless, rough endeavor, albeit a necessary one.

The game then makes players watch their progress being deleted artificially by the game itself. In-game achievements, such as items gathered, are wiped out one by one, and the game starts anew. In gaming, progress is something very personal, so having it being deleted by the creators of the game due to no existing gameplay reason is an off-limits ordeal. This is a kind of personal rhetoric which relies on player identification with their experiences of the game. The game

essentially deletes every save file, bit by bit, everything from items to quests, weapons, and intel is deleted one by one, in both instances.

This example also shows how positive lessons and beneficial philosophical world views can be shown through rhetorical questions in social play. Games can create social play through online game mechanics, where a constructed situation represents social institutions and philosophical conundrums, argues Hayden (2017 p.180). This is further exemplified by the ending of the gameplay segment, in which the Pod 042 character asks the player whether they would also like to help another person somewhere by sacrificing their save file, a prompt which revolves around *sacrifice* as a philosophical theme. Each scenario can be defined as consisting of rhetorical questions, as developers already know the outcomes of each scenario and what answering positively in each situation entails. Yet it is also evident that these gameplay segments and the questions accompanying them are part of what Wood (2018, p.18) calls *affective rhetoric*, that is to say, a video game rhetoric which elicits strong emotions in its audience.

It is also relevant to note that these emotions are often directed at depictions which may represent social or philosophical issues, not only constrained within the bounds of the game, as Wood (2018, p. 31) argues that this affect "...escapes its containers, impacts other relationships in the environment." Players are not self-contained, immovable objects, since they reflect on their act of playing, and more emotional gameplay segments can have the ability to shape attitudes. In this way, developers consciously aim towards invoking emotional responses in players. Such emotions may be frustration or feeling supported by other players during gameplay in a communication which replaces violence with other ideas.

The bullet hell example shows how affective rhetoric may be framed as a social gameplay sequence. This *affective social play* also occurs in other Japanese games such as the *Dark Souls* series, in which players summon each other to defeat bosses. That same affective social play is missing in *NieR: Replicant's* ending. One example of this can be seen in Ending [D] of *NieR: Replicant*, as the player is made to choose between ending Kainè's life and freeing her from "her burden" or sacrificing one's own existence "to make Kainè human again".

Tyrann, a Shade living inside Kainè, then tells the player character that Nier's entire existence and memory of him will be erased. In this case, the decision has a wider implication on the gameplay than in *NieR: Automata*, because the player is then put into a scenario in which not only their progress, but also the existence of the player character is erased, which places an emphasis on the sacrifice itself, since players not only witness but also have to play through no

one remembering the good deeds that were performed while the consequences of violence committed remain more or less the same. This type of affective game rhetoric relies solely on the story of the game, rather than the incorporation of online player interaction.

However, that the game in this instance gives back the player their save file in the end. In the sequel, on the other hand, the rhetorical questions serve as a way to highlight the more philosophical themes of how to use sacrifice and gain friendships as a way to combat the general violence and unfairness of the world, and although the visual imagery ends on a positive note as well, the save files are never returned, highlighting that same theme of the finality of sacrifice communicated through rhetorical questions in combat.

It is true that both examples are seeking to persuade rather than to inform, which falls in line with what rhetorical questions have been criticized for. At the same time, the videogame medium seems to possibly obscure the idea that the developers and the audience are simply raising questions in order to agree with each other. Deleting someone's save file can be one way of achieving this effect, as well as incorporating an affective social play which encourages cooperative efforts through being made to fight the game itself, underlining themes such as the importance of friendship and sacrifice in the face of adversity.

5.1 Section 2: Characters and expressions of anti-violence

Generally speaking, the character of the rhetorical messenger seems to define how persuasive its meaning will be. Some games have silent protagonists who are not really defined by the game, but this does not seem to be the case for *NieR*, which seems to place a certain amount of importance on its protagonists.

The series relies heavily on its characters and their ethos to communicate an anti-violence rhetoric by showing what happens to them as a result of their partaking in war or even committing unethical actions themselves through the player. Ethos can be defined as the credibility of a rhetorical communicator, speaker or messenger, who aims to appear as being likeable to the audience (Krishnan et al., 2020, p.21) In other words, there is a personal connection established with the audience in this case through the character. *NieR* does this in particular through the usage of depictions of children.

Vulnerability can be a useful rhetorical display of ethos and a way to motivate players through having them identify with the plight of a character. By looking at *NieR*, an idea of a *vulnerable ethos* becomes apparent, in situations where a character is purposefully depicted as being in the

way of harm or danger to their life. For instance, the main character in *NieR: Replicant* appears to be a child who is easily harmed by the in-game enemies and surroundings.

In a traditional sense, vulnerability as a rhetorical concept does not exist. However, probability is one aspect of rhetoric emphasized by Aristotle pertaining especially to logical argumentation which seems related to *logos*, in which one seeks out signs as a way to determine a person's state of being. Breathing fast or being ill may be a sign that one has a fever, and such signs are a subgenre of logical argumentation called indications (Aristotle, 2015, p. 34, Trans. Eide).

This is evidently a kind of logical argumentation dealing in *logos*, yet it also has implications for *ethos*. Rhetoric does not traditionally concern itself with the vulnerability of the ill person and it should perhaps expand to doing so not only in terms of *logos* and its argumentation, but also with regards to how such argumentation impacts a person's *ethos*, as vulnerability seems to be a relevant aspect of how *ethos* is presented to the audience.

This heavy reliance on rhetorical vulnerability is evident in *NieR*. In fact, a vulnerable *ethos* seems to adhere to a modern rhetoric which aims to make the audience feel as if they relate to the plight of the communicator while also gaining a greater understanding of their situation, which they have no reason to conceal. A good example of this is described by Johansen (2014, p.91). who refers to the time when Norwegian politician Kjell Magne Bondevik openly talked about a depressive episode, a confession which helped him appear more sympathetic to his audience.

In a similar *ethos*, androids are depicted as having small frames and youthful appearances. Although the gameplay points to their physical superiority to humans, their rhetorical appearances were clearly designed to invoke empathy within players. In gameplay, both Nier himself and androids like 2B are shown to have superior combat skills to other enemies. Yet the cutscenes rarely show the superiority of the protagonists, as 2B is nearly crushed by a giant robotic arm in the first cutscene in *NieR: Automata*, and the boy protagonist in *NieR: Replicant* is repeatedly hurt or injured during cutscenes, such as when he is stabbed by the antagonist and shown to be bleeding on the floor in the ending of the second act of the game.

During cutscenes, the characters often appear smaller than their opposing counterparts. This type of vulnerable *ethos* can be useful when critiquing violence, since the entire game ends up feeling threatening as a whole, which emphasizes the negative consequences to the player character as a result of the conflict the player ushers them into. An extremely opposite scenario

here would be an omnipotent player character who empowers players and mows down hordes of enemies, never really being questioned or defeated in the context of the game.

This vulnerable ethos is supported by the aesthetic of the characters as well. One of the two main characters in *NieR: Automata*, 9S, takes the form of a young child. Rather than being a young adult, by designing 9S in a way as to make him resemble a very young child in appearance, the developers of the game give the character a stronger sense of perceived vulnerability. Audiences usually are more affected by watching children in peril or children who are otherwise ill and incapable of fending for themselves.

The same effect can be observed in the prequel to the game, *NieR: Replicant*, where the entirety of the game objective is to help and save the protagonist's sister Yonah, who up until the ending of the game remains feeble and sick even in her grown-up version. The player character is also a child for much of the game. Yonah and her brother are depicted as children aesthetically, but in reality, they function as grown adults who are entirely self-sufficient. This is clearly done to invoke a pathos of empathy towards the characters, not only for the characters the player controls in the game but also the ones the player is supposed to save in the end. This vulnerability seems to depend on a cultural context.

Children are often off-limits in media depictions with regards to violence, which is why this particular ethos has the potential to cause a strong visceral reaction in the audience whenever bad things happen to characters with childlike appearances. This is one way in which pathos as the emotional engagement of the audience can be invoked through the vulnerable ethos of the characters in a game.

5.1.1 Japanese cuteness culture through vulnerability

Vulnerability and frailty are also an important part of ethos in the way it can be observed in the context of Japan. The emergence of “cute culture” in the 70s has vastly shaped the Japanese public sphere, as an unapproved method of spelling was popularized by school children and later gained traction in Japan, where, smiles and hearts were incorporated into the handwriting of pupils as a type of “slang”, but this is not the only example of the phenomenon, since Japan has long since had an obsession with things which are “cute” or “kawaii”, along with notable characters such as *Hello Kitty* coming to mind, with the inability to take care of oneself, presenting oneself as vulnerable, childlike or unable to communicate, being some of the characteristics perceived as being cute in Japan (Kinsella, 2013, p.222, 236-237).

Cuteness culture in Japan seems to find itself in a space which opposes traditional fashion and ways of being, by embracing somewhat negative connotations such as being “shy” or even “pathetic”, to the point where these become pleasing (Kinsella, 2013, p.252). These ideas seem connected with ethos, given how they describe how a person may choose to present themselves. Whenever the androids are fighting enemies much larger than themselves, tripping over rocks on the ground during gameplay, or unable to communicate amongst themselves, these elements come forward in their depictions in a very pronounced sort of way.

Within the modernization of Japan, cuteness is an appeal to traditionalism from a stylistic point of view. There are many genres of *kawaii* style clothing, though the clothing of 2B and 9S is typically seems derived from the “cuteness obsession” of Japan in that it is eccentric whilst also being puritanical and strict in a sense. Other defining characteristics of Japanese cuteness include doll-like faces, leg high socks or stockings or other accessories typically worn on the head or in a person’s hair (Kinsella, 2013, p.229).

Psychologically speaking, these cultural elements may also reflect a design decision for the characters which can be explained by a Japanese sense of longing and nostalgia for the past, for the childhood that used to be but no longer is. As such, cuteness does not seem to always oppose traditionalism, as it is also quite traditional in a sense, especially pertaining to things like fashion, as argued by Kinsella (2013, p. 252). The aesthetic design of the weapons in *NieR: Automata* especially display a kind of traditional appearance which is natural, given how swords in general can be seen as mostly historical weapons.

Virtuous Contract for 2B and Cruel Oath for 9S, both of which have what appear to be horse tail whisks on the end of their handle. The military conformity in the characters as a form of critique on violence in the protagonists once the smaller details of their clothing is observed more closely. The android army logo of YoRHa is seen etched into the back area of 2B’s dress below the neck and on the lower sides of her skirt. The same can be said about 9S’s jacket which also depicts the logo.

The blindfolds androids wear are one common element shared by both 2B and 9S. The operators who aid androids and are not allowed to partake in combat, wear mouth covers. The effect achieved here is one of a perceived naivety of the characters. This is also a reference of the *three wise monkeys* representing the Japanese proverb *see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil* (Smith, 1993, p.145). The androids can see through blindfolds and speak in spite of their mouth coverings, but these accessories also indicate that they are hiding their true feelings, since they

mostly come off during pivotal moments in the game when the characters reveal what they are feeling in terms of the violence they are forced to endure. The three wise monkeys may be interpreted as individuals shifting responsibility or otherwise refusing to acknowledge some kind of apparent truth.

In *NieR: Replicant*, similarly, the protagonists are adorned in old fashioned clothing, yet this is easier to understand due to the general Medieval setting of the game. Boy Nier wears grey gloves and boots, in two outfits throughout the game which seem suited for hunting, while his sister Yonah wears a grey hat and a white dress. Once again, the characters seem characterized not only by their vulnerability to violence, because they are children, but also a sense of longing for the past.

Furusato, in particular, is the word for a nostalgic longing for a place far away which seems common in Japan, though the term has been expanded to imply a sense of longing for an “atmosphere”, or a general feeling rather than a concrete location in a person’s life, with *enka*, on the other hand, referring to a general sense longing and its suffering as a consequence in literature, poems or manga (Yano, 2002, p.148, 170). Some of these cultural ideas may explain why the characters in each game have a traditional look despite existing in a far off futuristic war setting. Regardless of the ways in which they are characterized, anti-violence seems to be mediated through the ethos of the characters by the game, in ways which seem to place importance on how they are depicted.

In the case of *NieR: Automata* in particular, the appearance of the characters is presented as being rather traditional and old fashioned, with androids wearing white or black dresses, black boots or gloves, albeit the ethos through clothing is also being partly related to ideas of cuteness. When their eye-patches are removed, the androids appear naïve and childlike, appearances which may also have been influenced by “cute culture” and the desire to portray the characters as vulnerable in the face of war and violence.

Both the protagonist in *NieR: Replicant* and 9S resemble children, with identical statures, hairstyle, color, eye colors and even movement animations, even though they function as adults in actuality. In the world of manga and anime, *Kimetsu no Yaiba* (2019) comes to mind in this regard, which is an anime series in which the protagonist is a very young child slicing up demons mostly in a forest setting, as he hopes to turn back his sister into a human since she transformed into a demon.

Similarly to 9S and the protagonist in *NieR: Replicant*, the main character Tanjiro wears seemingly unnecessary and difficult to explain accessories which aim to make him feel more authentic by giving the character a more detailed appearance, thus separating him from other characters, such as a large scar on his forehead and large, rectangular earrings. This seems to be a widespread trend in Japanese media, with *Attack on Titan* (2013) and *Naruto* (2002) featuring children fighting villains, putting themselves in danger and often dying or getting badly hurt as a consequence. The anti-violent rhetoric in Japanese media seems to therefore be expressed through the fact that characters are depicted as vulnerable. Not only that, they are usually children who are made to partake in violence against their will. When they suffer, it becomes clear to the audience that some kind of major injustice has occurred.

In the case of depicting children in perilous situations, one can make the argument that these depictions exist in order to appeal to a younger violence, yet in Japanese manga and anime, many of these depictions center around violent depictions of monsters and villains, indicating that, much like *NieR*, they are not aimed at a younger audience.

Thus, these examples highlight how an ethos of vulnerability can be viewed predominantly as a potential form of social critique through their depiction as actual, defenseless children which further emphasizes the unfairness of whichever conflict they find themselves in.

When it comes to depicting consequence from violence and war through clothing, the altered appearance of the androids during later parts of *NieR: Automata* display an ethos which is no longer fully rooted in cuteness, or how special and distinct the characters are. Rather, their ethos herein displays a conformity in authoritarianism, an ethos which is rooted in the logos of the argument that these soldiers are suffering from the war.



Figure 5.1.1 *NieR: Automata* military uniform.

These ideas are communicated through the clothing which removes any independent features from the ethos of the characters and dehumanizes them in a way which shows the uglier sides of war and how the subjects of a conflict are treated as faceless objects lacking in free will and agency. There is an idea of erasure of identity being signaled in this example. In *NieR*:

Replicant, violence does not change the clothing of the characters the same way seen in the sequel, where the cuteness of androids is suddenly removed and their features which represent humanity and empathy are obscured. It is no coincidence that the androids suffer the biggest casualties in the game while wearing these outfits, particularly in Chapter 11-03, as the ethos here, or removal of it, serves the function of pathos in terms of negative feelings intended to arise from watching seemingly cute and vulnerable characters having their identity removed while also losing their lives.

This is one way of critiquing violence in terms of war simply by changing the outfits of the characters in the span of a game. Their faces are obscured by what seem to be masks with goggles specifically designed for night vision with helmets which fully hide both their heads and hair, and the rest of their bodies are fully hidden in a kind of protective outfit.

One notes here that the androids are no longer simply eccentric characters forced to commit war crimes they may not necessarily agree with. They have become faceless weapons with barely any will of their own. *NieR: Replicant* does not use the same kind of technique to show consequences of war through the ethos of characters via their clothing, as young Nier grows up and continues to wear a different kind of hunting outfit while his sister Yonah also wears another just another ordinary white dress. In this way, the characters are not particularly shown to be affected by the violence of war through their clothing in the same way the sequel portrays them in a situational kind of ethos rhetoric which can occur in any given game.

At the same time, the ethos of the characters of *NieR: Automata* seems to be defined by Japanese views on vulnerability, but also on robotics and artificial intelligence. One of the main implications of this, is the fact that characters are presented in a way which seems to stem from a Japanese context, one which initially frames robots as friendly, helpful saviors, so that them committing unethical actions is supposed to come across as surprising to the audience. These characterizations also serve to distinguish the characters and motivate players to engage with the game, even when this involves committing unethical acts which the player is later judged for by the game itself.

5.2 Ethos and communicating characterization through artificial intelligence

Similarly to its predecessor, *NieR: Automata* features main characters who are essentially the perfect, well behaved hero archetype who exists only to be of service to others, at least initially.

It is likely important not to have characters who are outright evil or immoral at the start of a fictitious work which criticizes violence. After all, in this case, the audience would already know they are dealing with an immoral protagonist, thus not really relating to the characters or feeling themselves partaking in the combat of the game in actuality, since they would not identify with the plight of their character to begin with.

The ethos of the protagonists the player inhabits in *NieR: Automata* is connected with themes of A.I., or *artificial intelligence*. The characters of *NieR* as rhetorical elements communicating meaning seem to stem from a cultural Japanese perspective. In this case, the characters of *NieR: Automata* seem to closely resemble views on robotics and A.I., in Japan. Robertson (2010, p.11-12) argues that no other country values the view of robots as efficient and capable of agency, as Japan. *Astro Boy* is a classical depiction of a feminine, friendly, helpful and heroic robot, an amalgamation of previous depictions of similar robotic characters, argues Robertson (2010, p.1-2). Robotics are a highly relevant topic to the Japanese context.

A Japanese depiction of robotics places emphasis on the helpfulness and usefulness of robots, likening them to humanity's offspring. Robotic depictions can therefore be viewed as a way to create hope for the future of a country during turbulent times. The ethos of robotic beings seems to be rooted in perceptions of heroism and valor. During times of uncertainty, robots represent a hope in the legacy of humanity, rather than fear of conquest. After all, robots do not age, they are compliant and agreeable, and can survive even in a post-apocalyptic scenario. Robots represent an existential need for humanity to leave a legacy after one leaves this world.

In the Western world, similar films like *Blade Runner: 2049* (2017) feature artificial yet organic humanoids who struggle to suppress their emotions in a dystopian society. More specifically in the Japanese context, some scholars have argued that *kokoro*, or a heart, is necessary for robots, as they can never truly be beneficial without an intimate relationship with humans, as word itself, although impossible to be fully translated into English, is used to define the most intimate parts of a person, in Western societies this is the self-contained identity or personality, in Japan the term more subjectively refers to the spirit, will or mind, which is a more multilayered idea of a form of selfhood, and here Katsuno (2011, p.95-97) further argues that framing robots as emotional, autonomous beings has therefore been not only a challenge, but also an active task for the Japanese academic and scientific institutions.

It can be noted that practically all characters in the sequel, not only the protagonists of 2B and 9S, rather accurately exemplify these contextual ideas. They have a “black box” which is their

essence, or their “robotic heart” within the context of the game. Androids in the game were specifically designed to imitate and look up to humans. Although they have their own needs, emotions and desires, they are always more than willing to set these aside for the benefit of humanity. Thus, one can see how the robotic heart of the characters is used to distinguish them through an ethos rooted in contextual ideas of artificial intelligence.

5.3 Military values representation, fiction and critique

In *NieR*, authoritarian militaries are also depicted as entities having a certain ethos of characterization, which serve as a social commentary on their real-life counterparts. It is possible to trace war tropes in games from a time when the military was heavily involved in game development. In the time period between the 60s and 70s, early videogames were more akin to simulators, and as Dyer-Witthford and Peuter point out (2010, p. 4), the idea of the independent game inventor of that time is more or less a myth, as many of the early game creators were either involved with or employed by the military, one example being William Higinbotham, the creator of a simple tennis simulator, who among other early game inventors was appointed by the US military complex. The authors here discuss how large funding was poured into creating realistic war simulations during the *War on Terror*, as the military saw a potential in using the medium as a training ground to combat what they perceive as terrorism.

As such, some of these tropes are still visible in games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* where being a soldier is empowering, and this concept remains largely unquestioned by the game itself, according to Dyer-Witthford and Peuter (2010, p.5). In some Japanese games, on the other hand, many of these values are laid bare and questioned. In a sense, Japanese games seem to often critique larger institutional entities. In *Resident Evil*, for instance, the pharmaceutical company named the *Umbrella Corporation* unleashes a deadly virus on humanity (Hutchinson, 2019, p. 164-167). Such a representation is rooted in a critique of real-world authority, bioengineering and gene testing. In *NieR: Automata*, that same governing body is referred to as YoRHa, as the entity is used as a form of social critique in several ways.

In the first cinematic scene of *NieR: Automata*, the androids are seen standing side by side in rows, in an orderly fashion in the center of a large white room with a screen behind them. They place their palms on their hearts simultaneously in an army looking salute. This type of depiction is similar to that of many American military movies and how actual military conduct occurs.

In *NieR: Automata*, the gestures androids give each other are a formally recognized communication amongst themselves as an ideological expression of military affiliation. Yet, to players, these are visual representations of authority which are usually seen in media content criticizing such gestures, such as the popular anime *Attack on Titan* (2013) featuring a group of child soldiers named the *Survey Corps* who, in later seasons, go on to commit various acts of genocide against their enemies in ways which are depicted as particularly cruel, leveling an entire city with the ground in one instance. Such depictions are evidently comprised of ideological representations of ideology in a visual rhetoric which critiques the content of what is being portrayed.

Similar depictions of ideology can be seen in other films such as *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) which is a film which goes into depth in its depictions of the rituals of US marines, as well as their role in the Vietnam War. These depictions are inherently rhetorical, one may argue, because they aim to show the ugly side of military conduct through a communicated persuasion which relies on the outcomes of these depictions or, in other words, what those same soldiers end up doing later on in the movie, anime or game.



Figure 5.3 Androids in *NieR: Automata* (left) juxtaposed with *Survey Corps* in *Attack on Titan* (right).

Rhetorical elements which are presented in media content as being recognizable to soldiers, but not to the audience, in an ideological form of critique, can be both visual and verbal. For instance, the characters also say things like “Glory to mankind!” for what seems to be a daily ritual, but they are also using this as a formal greeting between each other, such as in the scene of 2B and 9S’s first out of combat social interaction. Such expressions are recognized by the characters, but audiences are unfamiliar with them before seeing the expression for the first time. In this way such interactions are intended to present themselves as abnormal to the audience, in a kind of visual critique and satire of strict military attitudes.

Gestures are one way to signal the influence of the military regime on its subjects, and so are words. Towards the end of the epilogue of the game, the first Goliath boss hits 9S with a buzzsaw arm, causing damage to his body. As he lays dying, he proclaims the following to 2B: “We’re soldiers. We take pride in our service.” This is another statement, much like “Glory to mankind!” which is instilled in the androids as they repeat it to each other to illicit feelings of comradeship in a nearly automatic manner. In this example, one sees how this is a verbal way of satirizing ideology. This is the game’s way of expressing that the androids commonly recognize this form of speech amongst themselves and are ideologically influenced in this way.

Recognizable visual gestures seem to be a form of social commentary on military regimes in a persuasive way to the audience. However, it is important to clarify that depictions both in cinema and games where certain military rituals are used as a form of critique, can be a useful way to depict characters who are misguided and engaging in a kind of false discipline where they are obeying an authority which simply does not care for them. One can use both visual and verbal cues which are established in an authoritarian regime in order to portray a system warranting critique.

A rhetorical expression of a similarly recognizable nature among the soldiers, albeit one which is verbal rather than visual, can be found in the beginning of Route A, on a bridge on the outer part of the Abandoned Factory, as 9S proclaims that he usually does not work together with a partner, referring to 2B. She then exclaims, in a monotonous tone, that “...Emotions are prohibited.” Once again, such phrases indicate an excessive adherence to a military authority, and when the characters commit violence, that same excessive allegiance can appear as a kind of military critique. This is also another way of portraying artificial intelligence as being prevented from operating freely in a dystopian and violent world.

This military regime is also depicted as constantly reaffirming itself to its subjects. In Ch.07-01, an email from *The Council of Humanity*, supposedly residing on the Moon, mentions that “... the war remains deadlocked”, further praising androids for their “valiant efforts on the ground.” The goal of the war, according to the emails, is “recapturing Earth from the scourge of the machines.” So, the enemy in this case is communicated as being a “scourge”. In actuality, the goal of such a rhetoric is to prevent the development of empathy towards the other side of the conflict.

Such interactions may very well be interpreted as a critique of real-life war time speeches as they are eerily reminiscent of, for example, former President Bush’s infamous *Mission*

Accomplished speech which contains similar sentences such as: “*We have difficult work to do in Iraq. We are bringing order to parts of that country that remain dangerous.*» and «*The War on Terror continues, yet it is not endless. We do not know the day of final victory, but we have seen the turning of the tide*» (CBS News, 2003).

The word “terror” in this case resembles “scourge” as the speaker affirms to the audience the supposed necessity of the conflict in the first place, in *an ends justify the means* logic where the opponents of the conflict are represented in a way which aims to dehumanize them. In both cases, there is no attempt to hide the exhaustive, costly nature of the war effort but the emphasis is on the detrimental nature of the opposing force which must be defeated at all costs.

Thus, one of the final and most noteworthy in-game emails, after defeating the two bosses Adam and Eve, appraise the androids as being “humanity’s greatest army” and, at the same time, during this section of the game, emails will further warn of a new strategy by the machines who are now carrying “banners of peace”, urging androids not to be fooled by this tactic. These are some of the ways in which the regime is shown to influence its subjects. The unfairness of war, both in *NieR: Replicant* and *NieR: Automata*, is further shown through how the characters talk about themselves in an ethos which herein seems not very subtle, but rather overt and outwardly expressed.

5.4 Self-referential dialogue

The very first example of characters describing themselves to the audience in the *NieR* series, is Nier himself in the opening monologue to the game, as his village is shown in a panoptic view while he talks. He says “People say the world is dying. Populations continue to fall, while plague and disease run rampant.” He also says “monsters called Shades” threaten their lives. He says his sister is sick, therefore none of these factors can distract him. He concludes by saying “It’s not easy for a pair of kids to live on their own.” This is evidently a dialogue constructed to get players to care about the characters very early on in the game.

This monologue clearly verbalizes that the protagonists are defenseless and vulnerable children living in a harsh world. *NieR: Automata* begins with a similar starting dialogue, only the focus here is on the vulnerability of the characters living under a militaristic dictatorship which treats them as mere subjects of the regime. The monologue is as follows: “*Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped in a never ending spiral of life and death. ... I often*

think about the god who blessed us with this cryptic puzzle... and wonder if we'll ever get the chance to kill him.» This is another way to spell out who the characters are from the very start.

In addition, 9S references himself and 2B as “us grunts” during Chapter 01-05, when presented with their new and expensive flying machines. The way the characters describe themselves says a lot about their mental state during war times. One may draw some comparisons between classical rhetorical speeches where a speaker expresses a seemingly harsh judgement on the personal attitudes of the audience, and *NieR*, where similar self-referential monologues express harsh realities in an accusatory way.

Especially whenever the messenger of a rhetorical meaning desires to accomplish a change in the state of mind of their audience, starting the speech off in a strong, affective manner is one possible approach. In many ways the beginning monologue of the sequel starts off in a similar way to how Demosthenes begins his *First Philippic* speech. There is an accusatory element present in the beginning of both monologues concerning the inaction and lack of responsibility on the part of the audience. An excerpt from the second paragraph of Demosthenes presents itself in this way: “*First I say, you must not despair, Athenians, under your present circumstances, wretched as they are; for that which is worst in them as regards the past, is best for the future. What do I mean? That our affairs are a shambles, men of Athens, because you do nothing that you ought; but if you had done your duty and things were still the same, there would be no hope of improvement.*» (Demosthenes, 351/n.d., Trans. Rodgers).

The Athenians are the apparent subject of this paragraph, not because Demosthenes wants to necessarily critique their character, but because he wishes to motivate them to be more prepared to respond to a military attack from Philip. Demosthenes plans to win the audience on his side by catching their attention in a way which makes them doubt their own actions. Similar to *NieR*, the speaker uses words like “we” and “our state of affairs”, with the goal of persuading on the unfairness of reality as seen from the perspective of the speaker. In a similar way, the monologue at the start of *NieR: Automata* includes personal pronouns and an emphasis on the wrongness of the current situation, though whether the player is directly criticized remains unknown.

The ways in which speakers refer to themselves can highlight an unfairness in their circumstances. In particular, this kind of rhetoric seems to stem from the sender of the rhetorical communication depicting themselves as an individual who has undergone some type of suffering which is unfair in nature. Such rhetorical expressions can be useful in communicating anti-violence.

5.5 Rhetorical ethos archetypes and character development

How the characters are portrayed, and the things they say and do, adhere to different categories of ethos. Aristotle prioritized *age* as a main factor in the judgement of person's character. Young people tend to be somewhat careless, caring mostly for the fulfillment of their desires, with victory or superiority being their primary goal, prone to anger and driven by emotions and a short temper. Young people are characterized by action more so than by words (Aristotle, 2015, p.147-151, Trans. Eide).

Elderly people tend to have more experiences with life characterized by trauma and disappointment, neither their ambitions, love nor hatred are particularly strong, since their conditioned biases lead them to one dominant emotion, which is doubt, with the shunning of personal desires being a predominant quality of old age, since elderly people care more about what is beneficial to them, while true adulthood is reaching a balance of these elements (Aristotle, 2015, p.147-151, Trans. Eide). This kind of depiction of the weaknesses of the characters of *NieR* shows how most of the protagonists are on the extreme sides of this rhetorical character spectrum, in a way seemingly related to ethos and the different characteristics adhering to it.

There is a character development in ethos seen in some of the supporting playable characters. For instance, Kainè in *NieR: Replicant* is a Replicant who, due to a mutation during her creation process, ended up with both male and female bodily characteristics. In a text-based segment of the game titled "Kainè: Discrimination", it is revealed she was often bullied as a child by the other kids in her hometown. She is therefore portrayed as generally jaded and quick to anger.

In *NieR: Automata*, an older model under the name A2, who was cast out from the military regime, has an identical demeanor. As the game progresses, she becomes more and more accepting of machines, in the end valuing their lives because of 2B's memories being imprinted into her sword, changing her character. Kainè, on the other hand, has a shade living inside her who urges her to kill other shades, reveling in the violence of it all. As the game progresses, she objects to the violence



Figure 5.5 Kainè (left) in *NieR: Replicant* and A2 in *NieR: Automata* (right).

more and more. The experience intended, however, is one in which the player does not spend too much time playing as characters who develop more positively, as this would perhaps not communicate consequences of violence in the same way as they would through unethical characters. Both of these characters mirror each other in such ways. The exception to this kind of positive characterization is the protagonist Nier, who largely never really faces the consequences of his own violent actions. Even though he destroys the world, he is never fully shown to realize this. In the second part of *NieR: Replicant*, when asked what he intends to do about a shade hidden in a factory, who the game later reveals is a child, he simply states, matter-of-factly, “We’re gonna kill it!”, something which he does through the player.

The characters whom the player spends most time playing as, are the ones going from a meeker personality of old age, to devolving into being more impulsive and extreme, often perpetuating the same violence they suffer from. Characters such as Kainè and A2 become playable only by the end of each respective game, and they also have a more positive character development, which does not really absolve the player of their unethical actions, since both characters are playable for such a limited amount of time and players are purposefully forced to spend a majority of each game with characters who perpetrate the most severe crimes.

5.5.1 Tragic outcomes for protagonists

One can see how a pathos of invoking surprise or a specific feeling of tragedy befalling a young person, can be useful in a game which aims to criticize military violence, where characters are depicted as suffering from their involvement in the authoritarian regime. In fact, there is a very particular pathos to be seen in what happens to the characters in both games, a pathos different from the traditional sense, as there is no speaker, nor a motivation to get the audience to do something specific other than to feel emotions of empathy. In this context, the speaker is the game itself.

Yet the pathos found in the tragedy of Japanese characters is very similar to the description of pathos by Yakutina, et al. (2020, p.118) in judicial speeches. There is a dramatization and expressivity found in the way meaning is communicated, and the introduction of novelty. The tragedy of the Japanese character is characterized through various elements, such as vulnerability, with characters who are depicted in a very expressively dramatic way in terms of their ethos characterization, and the new element, or element of novelty, is the tragic way in which they suddenly perish.

On the outside, a game like *NieR: Automata* is clearly a kind of love story. There are also different feelings communicated through this love story. The two android protagonists explore the world and build a connection throughout the game, only for 2B to be mercy killed by another android. One relevant part in creating surprise in this context, is that the player is steering the main protagonist towards an area where she can be saved or receive a vaccine for her illness, as evidenced by the dialogue of the Pod 042. There is an expectation that the player character will be saved, but this expectation purposefully ends in failure. After her death, players can find 2B's Flight Unit where she crashed after being contaminated in an area called Flooded City.

Inside it, there is a message which plays back her voice, stating: “9S... *The time I was able to spend with you...It was like memories of pure light. Thank you...Nine...s*” Essentially this situation shows a character development in which she goes from referring to him simply as another machine by his codename, to acknowledging their experiences and him as a person. This kind of depiction is often seen in Japanese portrayals, and is especially relevant in characterizing A.I.

This pathos seems to rely on the establishment of the ethos of the characters and how they feel, such as when 9S offers to buy 2B a T-shirt after the war is over, a dialogue which happens when they enter the Shopping Mall area. In such depictions, pathos is created through the sudden, unexpected occurrence which befalls a character who has previously been defined in some way in terms of their ethos, with the goal of making the care for the character. As described previously, such an ethos can revolve around characters who are vulnerable, young, naïve or in need of help. This way of highlighting the tragic outcomes of characters, is commonly seen in broader contextual occurrences such as the 2007 cell phone novel in Japan, which are also equally heavy in pathos from tragedy.

One of the big topics in said novels, among themes like incurable disease or social justice, is unrequited love (Lukacs, 2013, p.44-45). The author here argues that such novels, primarily written by young people who were not solely working in professional authorship of literature as their main occupation, used this form of expression to tackle the harsher realities of life. Many of the characters suffering in these novels, are young people. Such is the case of the teenage character Yoshi who contracts AIDS after her involvement in sex work. This story was then depicted in television series titled *Deep Love* (Lukacs, 2013, p.48). There is evidently also a kind of vulnerable ethos in this case. This is an example of how such common media portrayals can influence video games. What is typical for such works of fiction, is that they usually end on a more tragic note than they initially start off with.

Similar elements exist in *NieR: Replicant*, where players are made to delete their save file and progress the story, making everyone in the game forget they ever existed. Such depictions extend far beyond games and books, into general Japanese media. An animated movie made in Japan by the name of *Kimi no Suizō wo Tabetai* (2018) features a girl suffering from pancreatic cancer who befriends an outcasted classmate. They eventually fall in love, until she is inexplicably stabbed and killed on the street. The movie ends with the girl confessing her love for him in a notebook. To this extent, *NieR: Replicant* also depicts the suffering of the very young protagonists in a similar way, especially when the young protagonist is stabbed and bleeding on the floor of the library, and his sister is taken from him before the five-year time skip in the game, which then defines the entire gameplay goal which revolves around saving her.

The parallels between this depiction and that of *NieR: Automata* are apparent. Each story is characterized by a goal to persuade the audience into feeling something. Both stories feature two characters falling in love with one another, experiencing different things, and one of them suddenly being killed in an unexpected way or tragic circumstances happening suddenly.

5.5.2 Specific style of violence from a contextual perspective

Usually, the *hack'n' slash* genre includes violence in a way which is supposed to be flashy and indicative of enjoyment. By looking at the artistic visual genre used to depict violent consequence in *NieR*, the opposite effect of glorification and a rhetoric which hypes up the player into committing war, can be seen. Both games feature a distinct art style with a heavy focus on graphic violence befalling the characters. This can be seen as a visual rhetoric specific to the context of Japan, used whenever an artist wishes to illicit a negative reaction in the



Figure 5.5.2 Junji Ito's rendition of Snow White.

audience. Japanese artist Junji Ito is well known for this type of horror drawing aesthetic when it comes to creating manga of such a genre. His works feature similar bodily modifications and people turning into monsters which are comparable to those seen in *NieR*.

These depictions almost come across as too over the top. Similar depictions exist in the Western media sphere as well. However, it can be argued that Japanese depictions aim to shock with what the audience is unprepared for, by focusing on themes and depictions one has not thought

of before, while Western depictions rely more heavily on established visual cues which are more or less familiar to the audience.

The goal is obviously to achieve surprise. In the sequel, 9S is stabbed by A2 towards the end of the second game, shrieking in horror as he bleeds out in an identical way to Nier in the first game. These depictions seem to be a part of the *ero-guro* genre, or the Japanese *grotesque eroticism* which is present in a various form of literature and media content throughout the history of Japan.

Although violent and grotesque, depictions of torture, illnesses or dismemberment, can include various sexual undertones such as nudity or physical attraction, *ero-guro* largely revolves around change in the body of a person being victimized, and can shape itself into many obscure forms, such as the hair of the killer being white or the cut off head of the victim turning into a watermelon (Fredriksson, 2019, p. 8). Gore is a large part of *ero-guro*, but it does not have to be visual, it can be implied through dialogue or written in a novel. In the visual genre, there is an insistence on the mental corruption of the individual through what is forcefully being done to their physical body by a third party. Usually this is violence in the form of an assault, an illness, magical influence, a virus, as is the case in *NieR*, or another criminal act.

Ero-guro as a genre might be related to eroticism in its heavy focus on the physical aspect of what is happening to the body of an individual, along with the feelings arising from the process. As can be evident in *NieR: Automata*, androids die in painful ways, yet it is initially difficult and confusing to discern exactly what they are feeling, as they will sometimes express gratitude or romantic feelings for the player's character, as is the case of Chapter 16-03 in which, while dying, Operator 21O professes that she only ever wanted to have a family with 9S.

Perhaps this is part of the shocking aspect of the genre, since these portrayals depict individuals who are suffering while also experiencing thoughts and feelings other than the suffering itself. Therefore, the fact that the subject experiences other feelings other than pain helps to add onto the shocking nature of the genre. As Lackney (2020, p.8) underlines, such depictions have historically been used in Japan for social critique by emphasizing the extremes of a given situation. This argument seems to fall in line with *NieR: Automata*, as this same genre of depicting the unfairness of war and violence is used for identical means of social critique. In this way, one can see why the genre may be well suited to communicating social injustices to the audience.

Ero-guro depictions have historically been present in Japan for a significant amount of time. *Hanzai Kagaku* (Criminal Science) published an article by Ōto Tokihiko detailing global cannibal customs, explains Lackney (2020, p.10,210,216). Here the author also describes how themes of piracy, starvation and headhunting were also discussed in the works.

Furthermore, the author also details the ways in which detective stories with graphic depictions of murder, executions and populations are written within the boundaries of this genre, where the goal is to create an uneasiness in the reader which they can overcome (Lackney, 2020, p.9-10). Today many of these elements have been fictionalized and incorporated into various genres of Japanese media so as to induce a shock response from the audience for the sake of either dramatic effect or introspection.

5.5.3 Creating reactions of shock through ero-guro

In both games, humans simply do not exist in their physical forms. There are either only Replicants or androids. Yet both are made of organic matter. They bleed out normal, red blood. Over the top depictions of organs falling out, bodily modification and injury with especially the color red, are typical in terms of such depictions. Depictions of violence can be a part of how games can create negative experiences which serve as introspection through the idea that violence is both undesired, yet also somewhat unavoidable.

Such is the case the game *September 12th*, where players shoot terrorists, while the game makes it impossible to miss the civilians surrounding them (Mariani, 2016, p.305). The moral lesson here is that violence causes more violence. At the same time, delivering such a moral message about the topic without a depiction of violence would be difficult. Death as a consequence needs to be indicated on the screen in some way.



Figure 5.5.3 Ero-guro in NieR: Automata.

Although it may be a miniaturized depiction violence, this is another way in which violence as an issue is highlighted through player actions via a depiction which is designed by the developers. The more pronounced a scene with violent imagery is, the clearer its messaging might become, especially when it is the player who has

driven the story or gameplay to that outcome. When androids become infected with the Logic

Virus, their eyes turn a bright red almost like headlights. Important to note is that guro can also be non-physical, dealing with themes such as the loss of self, identity and memories. Particularly in this case the depiction is more heavily implied through the voices of infected characters, showing that their bodies are being destroyed from the inside as they turn violent towards their friends. This is a standard body horror depiction.

These are some of the ways in which the ero-guro art style is employed in *NieR* with the goal of creating a shock reaction which the audience can grapple with. The bizarre bodily harm depictions can be found throughout the series, one of them being the way in which the Simone boss enemy adorns herself with the bodies of other machines. In other words, body horror depictions may either be overt or subtle, they can be verbalized by a character expressing their pain, or they may be simply the way in which a violent scene is designed to look visually.

5.6 Characterizing enemies through alternative means

Individuality when it comes to the player character is indicative of persuasion, generally speaking. What, then, can be said about identical enemies due to budgeting issues? Is this indicative of a rhetorical propaganda which suggests that it is okay to kill the enemy, because they possess no individuality of their own? To what extent a character is depicted as unique or identical to other individuals is, indeed, a relevant aspect in game rhetoric from a visual standpoint.

Løvlie (2007, p.77) argues that the game *America's Army* presents enemies who appear to be identical in nature, by making players choose opposing sides, for instance adopting the roles of terrorists. He argues that this helps further a rhetoric of propaganda which aims to support the US army by downgrading the point of view of the other side while simultaneously legitimizing the player in their role against the enemy. In this regard, one may ask whether games with identical enemies, perhaps due to challenges such as budgeting issues, may also criticize violence despite such an apparent setback.

NieR: Replicant seems to initially fall under this trap. Most of the enemies are Shades of various statures and sizes, yet their overall appearances are identical. Even worse, their speech is inaudible, making it even harder to distinguish from one another. This view on the rhetoric of video game enemies would exclude most older and indie games from being regarded as self-aware on the suffering of the opposing side. Is this a reasonable argument? This is perhaps not

such a clear-cut case, since there are different ways to characterize enemies in a game beyond their purely visual appearances.

In the weapon Virtuous Dignity, found in both games, ideas of kokoro are presented. In *NieR: Automata*, the weapon story states that Nier was the fourth owner, referencing a person who cared for his sister. Yet in *NieR: Replicant*, that same weapon states that it was passed onto “an automaton that possessed no soul” which died many times and was reborn again and again. The games initially seem to verbally state that anyone who is not human does not possess a heart or a soul. The question which the games fundamentally ask, is whether this even matters at all. This is done through several means.

In *NieR: Automata* there are various enemy robots of different sizes and shapes, although they all have the same identical spherical shapes and round eyes regardless of their overall height. In game records, the smallest machines at the start of the game are referred to as “Small Stubby”. At least in this somewhat newer game, their voices are clearly audible. In *NieR: Replicant*, enemies also have their differing sized being the sole distinguishable feature of the different “shade” enemies. On top of that, their speech is not audible, amounting to muffled sounds which remind one of radio static. There is a limited number of enemies in each game, most of which appear identical likely due to budgeting issues. The ethos of individuality is therefore clearly a relevant concern developers grapple with. In both games, at least visually, the enemies present themselves in a very identical manner.



Figure 5.6 Shades (left) and machine unit "Small Stubby" (right).

Yet the games display how visuality and even clear speech can be circumvented through other means. Workarounds using alternative gameplay can ease the constraints of having to design hordes of different enemies, while still giving them an individuality which would express that

they are not clear-cut baddies who do not have the right to live and should be eliminated by the player at any cost. It also seems that enemy actions and characterizations depend on which point in the game they take place in.

As such, enemy ethos seems to depend on the situational appropriateness of when enemies need to be revealed as being something more than just antagonistic squads of baddies whom it is encouraged to eliminate in the game. In this way, the ethos of enemies in games seems to somehow correlate with the rhetorical concept of *kairos*. Kairos has been defined as the “situational context” or the correct situational circumstances befitting of a rhetorical communication (Kjeldsen, 2014, p.251).

For example, the enemy Shades in *NieR: Replicant* are increasingly humanized throughout the game, yet the main revelation that they are, humans who act the way they do because they are ill, implying the player has been killing both humans and human children all along, does not occur until the very end of Route A. To enter the main boss hub in the ending of the route, the player has to answer 3 questions asked by what appear to be two birds in a garden area. The first question asks why humans disappeared from the world, with the correct answer being “Because of a black disease.” To the question “How can humans extend their lives?”, the correct answer is “By separating body from soul.” Shades are simply the souls of humans who are left without bodies. This is one way in which dialogue is incorporated into a kind of multiple-choice riddle which serves to frame the enemies as victims of their circumstances and the actions of the player. This is one way of characterizing enemies through the usage of riddles. The only way for Shades to live normally is to be “placed in their corresponding shells” or new bodies, according to the final correct answer. Therefore, the implication here is that the enemies of the game act the way they do towards the player, because they are sick.

The rhetorical situation in *NieR: Automata* is framed a bit differently. The first introduction to the machine units occurs at the very start of the game in City Ruins, where they do not attack the player in the same way Shades do at the start of *NieR: Replicant*. This is explained through dialogue by 9S, who says the following about the enemies: “According to our intel, none of the machines in this area are hostile.” The same situation occurs with a partying Tank enemy in the Amusement Park area, which is adorned with what look like Christmas lights as it shoots balloons up in the air. It does not attack the player. Should the player also choose not to attack it, a dialogue occurs in which 2B clarifies to 9S that they simply have no reason to attack this enemy which is just peacefully roaming about.

In this way, the rhetorical situations in each game are the opposite of one another. In the first game, enemies are aggressive, which is later explained through their illness. In the second game, enemies start off as docile, with the player being further framed as an unethical force in the role of a soldier who increasingly imposes on the lives of the machine units through violence, who eventually rebel and become aggressive, not because they were aggressive to begin with, but because they are reacting to a kind of violence which the game wishes to critique.

Even if the outcomes of player choices are somewhat identical, both versions of enemy characterization seem viable, although the sequel gives a wider degree of player choice whether to spare some of the enemies, which can also give further introspection for players to understand their actions and why they may or may not choose to attack a passive enemy.

At one point in the game, however, the machine units always turn aggressive regardless of what the player does, given how they are partaking in a story which states that the android soldiers are infringing upon the machine units. In this way, the rhetorical situation regarding when enemies attack and do not attack the player, seems to indicate that the player character is framed as being unethical to a wider extent, in the sequel as opposed to the first game where enemies start off attacking the player character right away.

Enemies in video games can be characterized by means other than dialogue alone, as well. The rhetoric used to emphasize meaning in games seems to differentiate itself from other rhetorical genres. For instance, one way to achieve emphasis in rhetoric is by repeating the same phrase three times. This falls in line with the point by Atkinson (2004, p.342) that rhetoric is mostly a verbal form of communication, which is also comprised of some visual elements. Generally speaking, the dialogue of games can be underlined through the usage of a retro style arcade shooter. *Alternative gameplay*, or using the element of surprise by suddenly changing how the structures, rules and appearance of a game look in an inexplicable way, can be one way to create a characterization of the enemies which can be used as a critique of violence.

Enemies are therefore not represented through purely visual means but through gameplay segments which are in some ways separate from the rest of the game. The dialogue is emphasized in these segments, purely because they are so different from the rest of the game. These segments usually present themselves through tropes from classical gaming, or through shifting the camera focus so that the player character is looked at from the ceiling point of view, making the entire segment appear as a 2D rendition of itself.

This then appears as a kind of mixture between modern and older, more classical gameplay, since the player is made to feel somewhat more limited. Classical games are, as defined by Mäyrä (2008, p.53) as bound by the technological specifics of older hardware which was required to run such games. At the same time, the author argues, in this case, that running classical games on newer hardware changes the experience.

However, it is fair to point out that classical games have a distinct visual aesthetic of simplicity, where technological advancements being the advertised aspect of gaming which creates complex graphics and combat, become obsolete, with *Pong* from 1972 recognized as a classical game due to its simplistic layout and the goal of batting a small square with a white line each of the two players takes control of (Mäyrä, 2008, p.58). Newer technological capabilities have rendered such games obsolete from a gameplay perspective, yet this does not necessarily mean that they cannot be useful when creating persuasion through emphasis on meaning.



Figure 5.6.1 One of the many retro gameplay segments found in the game.

One can perhaps see how the hacking minigames in the sequel are a homage to this genre of retro gameplay. Much of what is learned about who the player is fighting against, is communicated through this kind of gameplay. For example, when in Chapter 08-01_3 9S learns that machines cannot form new rule.

He, along with the player, are essentially locked out of the realities of the rest of the game, in a minigame with a simple overlay. By being plugged into the network of the machines, he expresses the fact that he has gained access into the politics category of their records. “They’d tried all sorts of things.”, he says. “Absolute monarchies. Republics. Democracies.”, continuing with the fact that they had “engaged in other scholarly pursuits such as philosophy, mathematics, science and social criticism.” By the end of this monologue, he asks why they “insist” on always failing by simply copying humans without creating new values, concluding that failure must be the goal in itself. These ideas are mediated by the experience of being caught off guard with this kind of differing gameplay. The rhetorical persuasion in this sense occurs through the actions of the player and the experiences of those same actions which become distinguished in this kind of isolated space which limits what the player can do and

interact with as a whole. Pathos can arise through this experience, but it can also occur through the experience of the sequence as being differentiated from the rest of the game.

Player actions are *voluntary*, since players want to engage with a game (Jørgensen, 2007, p.42). Players want to play a game, regardless of what the in-game outcome will be. Whether an action is ethical or unethical is revealed only once the action has already been performed. Such gameplay segments therefore not only express the unethical implication of killing autonomous, reflecting beings as a soldier, but also the fact that these are representations of humanity in the same way in which the City Ruins loosely resemble Tokyo. In other words, it becomes evident through gameplay and dialogue that the player is ending humanity in a form which is recognizable in the real world, as opposed to preserving it, through their voluntary actions and curiosity of what will happen next, given that the robots are themselves represent humanity in many ways.

These are some of the ways in which dialogue is used together with the experience of the limited space of older looking gameplay which isolates the player from the surroundings of the rest of the game. At the same time, these experiences are mediated mostly through the gameplay itself, in a sequence of events where the player is made to gradually uncover certain self-aware statements on humanity and the nature of politics, for instance.

5.6.1 Gameplay as a means of communicating different perspectives

NieR:Automata uses various other means of persuading the player of the opposing point of view. Route B itself starts with the player, playing as 9S, taking control of a regular small machine carrying a bucket of oil to his unresponsive larger brother machine. The machine the player is in control of, is rusty looking and falls over easily if the player tasks it with stepping on an uneven surface or jumping while the bucket is full. While this is not a retro minigame, it still presents itself in a similar way through the limitation on player actions imposed by the game, as well as the simplistic spacial area players are made to operate in, it is still a way in which the vulnerability of the opposing side can be shown through alternative gameplay separate from the rest of the game. This kind of gameplay experience can be used to show how difficult it can be to live as the enemy of the player, and how limited they really are.

Other parts of characterizing dialogue are present outside of the main story events. There is another set of hacking minigames in Route B, which is neither a quest nor an activity, given how completing it gives no substantial rewards to the player. These minigames involve hacking

into three enemy machines across the map titled simply *Wise Machine* and reading their thoughts. The order in which the events unfold is the same regardless of which machine the player hacks into first. Usually, the first machine will ponder its existence and the implication of being born. The second machine reflects on the idea that strength is what brings approval, not killing. It is in pain because it cannot find value in existing. The third machine asks why it was born and why life is so painful. Finally, he proclaims that he does not need this world. Outside of the minigame, he proclaims machines are not loved, and there is thus no need for them to exist in this world only to continue an everlasting, pointless conflict. Finally, it jumps off the building. Each machine is standing on top of a heightened building so that the situation can occur the way it does regardless of which machine the player chooses first.

In *NieR: Replicant* there are similar gameplay segments to those found in *NieR: Automata*, albeit not related to a hacking mechanic. In an area in The Desert called The Barren Temple, there is a row of rooms where the player is tasked with completing each with some kind of artificial limitation, such as the inability to roll forward, jump or attack. The gameplay is loosely justified as being a characterization of The Masked People, since they have complicated rules.

Gameplay as a whole does not seem to be used for rhetorical persuasion of the other side of the conflict here, as opposed to experimentation of alternative gameplay in itself. There is indeed a text-based gameplay segment in The Forest of Myth in the middle part of the game, but this segment mostly emphasizes the friendship between the three protagonists, which differs from the goal of the text-based gameplay in *NieR: Automata*, which is to further illuminate the military conflict and the suffering of the machines.

In *NieR: Replicant*, similarly, an enemy called “Young Shade” is revealed to be a child who befriends a robot named P-33 who gains sentience likely leading to the evolution of the machines. In Route B, the Shade, now named Kalil, says “I’m crying because I don’t want to die”. The actions by the player in killing him are therefore framed as unethical.

Overall, it seems that *NieR: Automata* uses the technological advancements in gameplay after the first game to its advantage, using them to create authenticity in the enemy characters through their dialogue which occurs in slightly more surprising gameplay situations. *NieR: Automata* characterizes the thoughts of the enemy characters in a more overt way through various gameplay segments by placing the player more directly into the shoes of the enemies being killed, which is a way to create a feeling of empathy, whereas *NieR: Replicant* tries to achieve

similar goals mostly through the usage of text-based sequences or sequences which are cinematic and show what enemy characters are doing and thinking in cutscenes.

5.6.2 Enemy characterization through dialogue and game items

There are different ways to characterize enemies through dialogue and other, more subtle elements such as game items. For instance, in *NieR: Replicant*, when it comes to the rhetorical situation of Kalil, the player is tasked with killing both him and his robot friend. When fighting Kalil for the second time, he says things like “I don’t wanna be alone again!” in response to the attacks from the player, at that point confirming that the player is actually killing a child character. Yet in the first part of the playthrough, during the first fight, the robot only exclaims his goal of exterminating the player as a threat without the Shade child being heard by the player, framing the situation as unethical only after the game is replayed later on.

This is one way in which the game affirms that what are initially perceived as menacing enemies are actually children and perhaps their parents who used to be human, whom the player is killing. Outside of dialogue, items such as *Used Coloring Book* found just outside the village in the field reaffirm this fact even though the enemies do not speak during combat. These smaller enemies are children whom the player is essentially killing, yet the same is true for *NieR: Automata* to an extent, since machines often copy humans with little understanding of the reasoning behind such actions. They simply want to find a purpose without always understanding the context for why humans do the things they do. In *NieR: Automata*, in particular, the in-game currency androids use on Earth are comprised of elements such as Gold Ore and Silver Ore, which are parts of other machine units which they drop upon death. This further illuminates this kind of dynamic of unfairness against the enemies which is portrayed in both games.

The differences between enemies such as Kalil and the ones present in the sequel, is the implication that machines have evolved in the timespan between the two games. P-33 was the first self-aware robot, so it is apparent that the machines in *NieR: Automata* evolved because of the interaction between the boy and the robot in the first game. The context therefore goes from having “enemies”, who are not really enemies through a story point of view since they simply are victims, such as Kalil who has a generic, human name, to machines in the second game who identify themselves through their societal roles rather than human sounding names, such as *Big Sister* or *Vengeful Brother*. The ethos of such adversaries seems more clearly defined in the

sequel. Essentially, the name tags of the characters in the game help define their ethos, and the extent to which player actions are ethical or unethical.

In conclusion to the topic on smaller and identical enemies in *NieR*, it is evident that there are a multitude of ways to reuse identical character models without sacrificing pathos or feelings for the characters. The notion that identical copies of enemies necessarily give off the impression that it is morally acceptable to kill them, may be an oversimplification. Dialogue is what can further characterize enemy models rather than visual aesthetic alone. When attempting to understand enemies in relation to the player in the game, it is therefore relevant to seek an understanding of how those enemies are characterized and how they help shape the overall themes of the meaning in the game.

5.6.3 The humanity, or lack thereof, of the antagonists

In gaming, bosses usually are enemies which differ from other groups of enemies, in that they possess at least somewhat unique attacks and appearances. Usually, bosses are obstacles with specific requirements set to the player, safeguarding a new level or area which the player wishes to gain access to. As such, it does not always make sense to characterize bosses as people, given that they firstly serve their purpose as a barrier of entry to someplace else other than the one the player is in during the fight. Boss fights may be used as more than a way to check whether the player has learned the game mechanics in the form of a barrier. They may create meaning through the ethos of the antagonist.

Villains in any form of media can have varying degrees of humanity. A case specific to Japan is that of the classical horror movie *Kairo* or *Pulse*, in English, from 2001. In one of the first scenes introducing the ghosts whose goal is to drain the energy of humans, a non-verbal, slithering female figure is shown approaching the character with



Figure 5.6.3 Kairo (2001).

slow and deliberate movements, yet her eyes are obscured. Much of Japanese media employs similar depictions of antagonistic figures. The fact that she is humanoid, yet not fully human, creates terror and not empathy. Similar dynamics are seen in games. However, as in the case of *NieR*, some of these dynamics are challenged through a game rhetoric which humanizes the enemies.

5.7 Continuity of violence against enemies through playing the game

Adam and Eve are initially introduced in a similar manner as the typical Japanese horror villain. Adam, who appears as a naked humanoid, does not speak. He is born in an almost bizarre manner from machines gathering together in one spot. Yet despite his depiction devoid of a pathos of empathy, he does not attack the player. His dialogue questions the player, why he is being attacked by androids, and why he is forced to endure suffering. The more he is attacked, the more his health bar level rise, and the more he fights back. The idea expressed here, is that he is reacting to the violence from the player, who is simply following military orders. This is relevant due to how Adam and Eve are shown in various stages of the game. It is unusual to have a character model who is not a playable character change appearance in the span of a game. Even more unusual is the passive demeanor this boss enemy has during his introduction.

In his own ludoethical research paper on *NieR: Automata*, Jaćević (2017, p.3-4) argues that the multiple endings of the game provide an implied continuity, where engaging with the game further undoes many of the previously achieved happy endings, framing cycles of violence as being an inevitable part of existence. Even though many of the alternatives to violence are “joke endings” and not viewed as serious representations of how the story goes, something which includes the previously obtained happy endings [A] and [B], there is an idea that there could exist alternative solutions, and combat is not the only way forward, even if the game does not provide any direct alternatives. The continuity of violence extends therefore not only to the 26 endings of the game as described by Jaćević (2017, p.3-4), herein both those considered not part of the original story as well as the more tragic ones, but also to combat segments such as the first introduction of Adam. That same game philosophy can be seen in the way the game frames violence against the enemies as a continuous, inevitable chain of events.

The fact that the player is made to perpetuate violence against a passive subject with the implication of an alternative behavior, can be seen within the lenses of a *procedural rhetoric*. What characterizes this kind of rhetoric, is the idea that computer systems generate fantastical rules which players are placed in, simulating real life through smaller depictions which are reflected in the structure of the game and rhetoric, meaning to communicate persuasively, procedural, meaning to generate computer elements through algorithms (Bogost, 2008, p. 122-123).

Yet in this case, every element in the scene is already present. It does not need to be further generated. Adam is already at a standstill, waiting to be struck. The rules dictated by the game

are that he will not move, and the game will not progress, until he is hit and until he is hit enough times and communicated his suffering to the player.

In this case, combat, or the lack thereof from the enemy, can be seen as a way to create an ethical dilemma in a way which only a communication in games can achieve, since players are made to do something before being judged for it through dialogue. Although on a second playthrough, the player may notice that the game halts to a standstill if 2B is not made to attack Adam, during one's first playthrough, it is normal to question oneself and wonder whether attacking Adam was far too quick a decision, or unwarranted. This is especially the case, since attacking Adam has wider implications on how his storyline and outward appearance develops further into the game.

5.8 Visual aesthetic and enemy dialogue

In games, dialogue and visual imagery can connect with each other through the different stages a character goes through. They can be hidden for a while, before emerging with another appearance. In the second fight below the City Ruins, Adam expresses that he is a machine capable of evolution, as both he and his brother are shown shirtless. The third battle occurs in an area called Copied City. Here the player fights Adam as the character 2B and his appearance is entirely different from before. He is shown in a kind of costume with leather gloves, a tie and a white shirt with glasses. During the fight, he proclaims things such as “The core of humanity is conflict. They fight. Steal. Kill. THIS is humanity in its purest form!”



Figure 5.8 The evolving appearance of Adam.

The evolving character design is therefore more closely connected to the idea that he has been learning more about the violence of humans while they were alive, and that the first gameplay segment where he was attacked by the player is what pointed his curiosity towards a direction of violence. This instance can be shown through a field of study closely related to visual rhetoric

known as semiotics. Herein the concept of violence is a kind of *signified* meaning expressed through several *signifiers* where the former is meaning while the latter is form, both comprising the sign (Barthes, Sontag, Ed., 1993, p. 102).

In this way, the visual aesthetic of the boss enemy changing in appearance throughout the game, serves as a signifier of the signified, which is the violence of humans in a game which critically questions violence, posing the question regarding the kind of legacy humanity will leave in its aftermath. As such, it becomes evident how semiotics may be connected with visual rhetoric.

5.8.1 Framing violence as a meaningless struggle

The outcome of this battle is that Adam allows himself to be killed by the player in a final cutscene, so that the war can become more furious, and the machines can rebel harder. The story implication is that the game takes a darker turn because Eve has some bearing on the machine network in his declining mental state. Shortly after Adam is killed, a battle commences in City Ruins where the player, either as 2B or 9S in Route A and B respectively, kills his mourning brother Eve. Here there is much dialogue from Eve berating the player for their actions, yet it is the final appearance of these two bosses, which is relevant to observe in its expression of the meaninglessness of violence.

Although many of these depictions have tones of Nihilism, they are not atheistic by default. Before the final Ending [E], a text-based minigame occurs in which 9S, now dead, without a body and voiceless, reflects on his situation as his memories leave him. In actuality, the player only steers the sequence forward by pressing one button. Here 9S laments his life and memories as he gradually loses them. The text on a white background screen, reads: “” *Will you come with us?*” asks Adam. *The question was completely free of malice. It seemed I no longer had a reason to hate machines. Maybe I never had a reason in the first place. What have I been fighting for? Who have I been living for? I don't know anymore.*”: This rhetoric is very clearly verbal, yet it is also contextually rooted in the Shinto belief system. Goals of achieving purity while avoiding karmic debt, are usually what one recognizes as part of the Shinto belief system (Toshio, 1991, p. 1-2). The previously violent actions of both the player and their character are therefore communicated as being superficial and a meaningless struggle, albeit ultimately forgiven in line with elements of the Shinto belief system.

This kind of rhetorical dialogue seems connected with ideas of purity of karma or bad choices in the afterlife, as the characters are free of the malice they learned from humanity back on Earth. The dialogue in this instance also implies ideas of forgiveness and the accrual of karmic

debt which the player, through the actions of 9S, has accrued, and is thus forgiven, perhaps because he is cleansed through suffering or simply because the game wants to express some sort of catharsis for the characters.

Similarly, in spirituality, through this alternative text-based gameplay segment, androids and their former enemies are shown to be on the same side, as divisions do not exist in the afterlife. They have also become pure and devoid of their past suffering and mistakes. In *NieR: Replicant* one finds the same rhetorical logos of Shinto expressed not through text nor gameplay in particular, but in which the Shadowlord, upon being killed by the player, is shown in a final cutscene in a white background sitting with his sister Yonah. Both are shown to be children, rather than grown up Shades. This situation is another depiction of seeing the bigger picture and renouncing violence in the afterlife.

It is also visible that *NieR: Replicant* relies more on cinematic visual cues to depict negative outcomes, where there is less player agency involved and more focus on observing the consequences as they play out rather than participating as actively in their situations. For instance, Hansel and Gretel, P-33 and other enemies with a specific characterization are each shown in the final cutscene of Ending [B], once again exemplifying the idea of togetherness in the afterlife, as the persuasion in this case relies more heavily on visual imagery as opposed to text like in the Adam and Eve example. Another main difference is that the player is kept outside of this circle of friendship and forgiveness in *NieR: Replicant*.

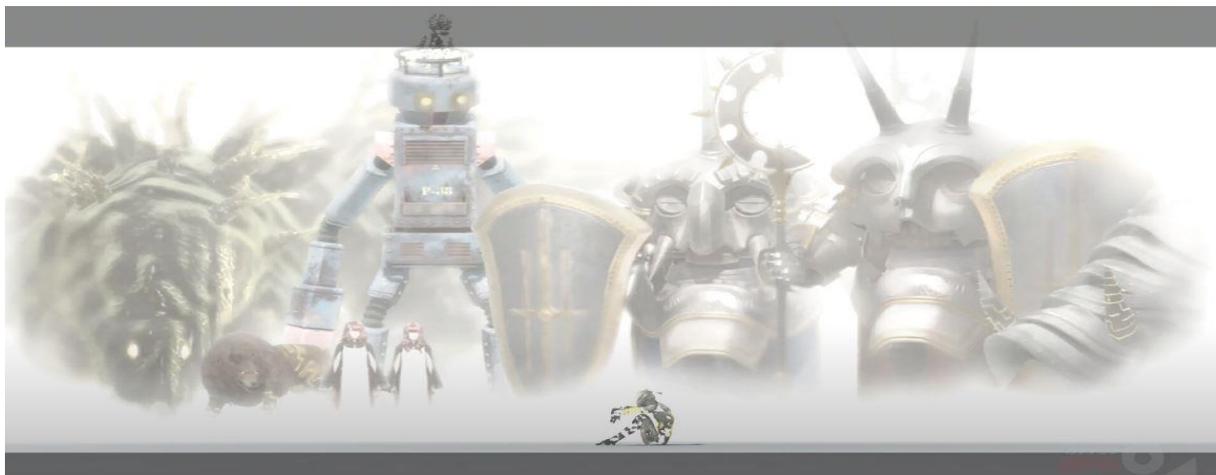


Figure 5.8.1 Character unification in NieR: Replicant.

In similar rhetorical situations, games can create humane and empathetic depictions of characters and their points of view, even those initially depicted as scary or threatening. Dialogue, both written and verbal, can be used to achieve this effect, as well as cinematic scenes the player has no influence over, which also has its limitations relating to lack of player agency.

Yet these can also be used to portray forgiveness, or the perspectives of enemies who are suffering as a consequence of the violence inflicted upon them.

5.9.1 Boss battles as rhetorical means of social critique

The two games deliver their meanings by different ways, and so too does the meaning delivered in each game vary in context as well. In *NieR: Automata*, one of the more apparent boss fights concerns an enemy boss known simply as “Simone”. The differences in persuasion between this battle and the battle against the Gretel and Hansel bosses, concern mainly what kind of meaning is delivered. Logos as a rhetorical tool seemingly dependent on logical premises, such as an idea of cause and effect, whereby an effect cannot possibly exist without a cause (Aristotle, 2015, p.34,186, Trans. Eide). The Simone boss battle seems structured around such a premise, since Simone is shown through various cutscenes to be locked in a position where she struggles to find meaning, leading to become this kind of boss entity. There seems to be an argumentation from the game in this gameplay sequence postulating that the player is simply ending the life of Simone without taking into account the cause of why she became the way she is.

The logos of Simone is based on her dialogue which communicates an argumentation implying she has hopes and dreams of attaining beauty, making the process of killing her questionable and uncomfortable. Yet this idea does not only depend on the logos of the dialogue. A persuasive logos depends on



Figure 5.9.1 Simone, boss enemy.

the ethos of the speaker, or the way they appear and the level of legitimacy they are able to convey to the audience (Wróbel, 2015, p.409).

In both games, these enemies present themselves not through an initial display of legitimacy nor do they invoke a pathos of empathy from the player. Simone is presented as a giant robotic figure in a kind of reddish makeshift dress wearing some kind of head adornment. Her eyes are not visible. Hansel and Gretel are big statue-like figures with round heads, closely resembling the robots in the sequel for some reason, with bright red eyes, a trait often being a symbol in Japanese anime of a mischievous or evil person.

In later parts of the game, as 9S hacks into her mind during the fight, Simone is now simply referred to as “Beauvoir” in her dialogue, a reference to the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. She is shown in various cutscenes next to Jean-Paul, who is a machine found in Pascal’s Village, as she explains to him she desires to attain beauty, while he never responds verbally. As the player fights her and proceeds with the hacking minigames, she changes form, something which she says, through her dialogue, occurs through eating other machines.

A white text on a black screen then occurs, in which Simone laments her suffering in achieving beauty. Once again, this is a type of logos, a message aiming to question the player. Her text-based monologue describes that she had tried changing her appearance and learning songs in the hopes of gaining Jean-Paul’s fancy, something which never happened. In the end of this monologue, she begs anyone to look her way, but the camera often pans away from her on purpose during the fight. This seems to be one way in which enemies are depicted as menacing initially before being humanized in later parts of the game, in a visual and verbal rhetoric which implies that it is unethical to kill them. Dialogue is used to achieve this effect, with pathos used to create feelings of sympathy for the boss entity through visual means such as cutscenes or camera movement.

The fact that there are references to her learning the behavior from human records shows the same kind of critique towards humanity found in the Adam and Eve boss battle. A feminist critique becomes apparent herein, on societal roles, and the struggle to accept oneself as a consequence of this. Yet this logos is done subtly and not in an overt way, as Simone the antagonist and Jean-Paul are not really the actual Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, the philosophers. They are machines and purposefully abstract representations in the same way that the City Ruins are not Tokyo, Japan.

This loose critique occurs through the hacking mechanic during the fight, but also by means of cinematography. Even though she wants to be seen, as expressed in dialogue, the camera pans away from her as if on purpose, facing the androids from above while not allowing Simone to be seen while the player tries to defeat her. The message may be that the more she wants to be seen, the less she is granted this by the outside world, causing her suffering. This is an example of how the game raises awareness around modern-day issues such as societal roles. The meaning is delivered both through gameplay and cinematography. It is also a reference to striving to become a woman more and more to fit in with what a man would want, as Beauvoir’s infamous quote reads: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” (Beauvoir, 2014, p.14).

The Gretel and Hansel boss battle is similar, given how it criticizes the player for blindly killing other creatures due to a lack of understanding for them. When the fight is played through for a second time, after Hansel has been killed by the player, the dialogue by Gretel is finally revealed. Gretel, asks the player to stop hurting his friends. As he is dying, he explains that friendship is what keeps him and other going before the player is tasked with delivering a final blow and once again there is an idea hinted, that the player could somehow spare him, even if this is not the case.

Many of these boss outcomes do not involve a pacifist solution from the player, which can be a challenging rhetorical issue. How does one create understanding for the player if they have no alternative to the violence they are presented with? The potential for games to offer such alternatives, can perhaps be seen in Chapter 10-02 in *NieR: Automata*, where the player can choose to run away from the boss battle, resulting in Ending [L]one wolf, which, although an unserious “joke” ending, still provides one of the few happier outcomes in the game, as the text reads that 2B is now hunted by other soldiers, but is fishing and otherwise happily living her life.

In this case, there is a more positive rhetorical connotation implying that the character is living happily. This is opposite to the judgement of player actions in an ending such as the ending of *NieR: Replicant*, since The Shadowlord, or the original protagonist, is allied with most of the very humane enemies, and the player is kept outside of their circle of friendship but even the *NieR: Automata* has an ending which judges the player less harshly, as 9S directly states that he is together with Adam and Eve on an arc and they hold no ill will or intent towards one another, so the intention of the dialogue is for feelings of guilt from previous unethical actions to subside in the player.

6.1 Section 3: Video game environments as rhetorical expressions of anti-violence

In the case of the *NieR* universe, the environments are not self-isolated and independent from our own world, a trait which is common for games attempting to say something meaningful about life in general. Other Japanese games like *Katamary Damacy* specifically reference food in the form of Japanese rice cakes, nail polish or architecture (Hutchinson, 2019, p. 22). Perhaps an even more applicable example to that of *NieR*, is *Dark Souls*, bearing similarities both in terms of its RPG genre and the ways in which the series as a whole portrays various forms of

European architecture. Environments in games can thus express cultural meaning. They can be culturally connected with modern-day society. They serve as extensions and reflections of the current state of the modern world through items a player can pick up along the way, or buildings and vehicles which resemble our current way of life. Such elements are both inherent parts of gameplay as they are of story.

The idea that the game takes place mainly in Japan can be further seen through other factors. A Japanese newspaper titled “The Nagoya Daily” can be found close to the City Ruins, through the sewers and on the other side, in the Flooded City. In the City Ruins themselves under the broken bridge one can find a “Paper Attached to Vehicle” item which really is just a speeding ticket from *Maihama Police Station*, from Police Constable Kenichi Sato, who is actually the President of *Platinum Games*, to Yosuke Saito, the designer of the game. The “Ragged DVD” item found a bit further from the parking ticket is a pornographic DVD, with the item description stating that it costs 3,800 yen before tax. On the right side of the mall area after the bridge wooden bridge in the *City Ruins*, a “Department Store Flyer” announcing a *Tokyo Department Going-Out-of-Business Sale*, can be found.

As the is the case of the parking ticket item, many of these in-game representations are free to interpretation, even displaying developers joking among themselves. Although the game’s commentary has roots in our own reality, these are not set in stone and the world is not entirely identical to our own. As is the case with many other videogames, there are connected elements which make the game in particular a valid form of introspection regarding real world issues, even if the game includes magic and simultaneously wants to free itself from the need to be geographically or historically accurate. These attempts to be seen as an abstract, rather than an accurate representation, become apparent in the “Pearl Harbor Descent Summary” describing a deployment to Mt. Ka’la on Oahu Island.

In *NieR: Automata*, it therefore seems unclear whether soldiers were deployed all over the world, or whether tectonic plates have shifted after approximately 10,000 years and now Pearl Harbor, or the Hawaiian Oahu Island are suddenly closer to Tokyo than they used to be. Yet, both the concrete usage of Pearl Harbor in the Intel Records, and the fact the game takes place in 11945, a nod to the World War II conflict which subsided in 1945, shows how the game attempts to comment on real life events while also building up its own version of reality. In this way, a fictionalized Universe does not need to be strictly connected to events outside of the

game in order to have important social commentary. On the contrary, these examples make it apparent how abstract commentary can also be persuasive.

In the prologue to *NieR: Replicant*, the opening cutscene shows what appears to be snow falling down on a city. As the camera pans between the various buildings, a shot of the Tokyo Tower can be seen, if the game is played with the language set to Japanese, or The Eiffer Tower in French, Big Ben in English and the Berlin TV Tower in German. This is a way for the game to state that it does not matter where the game really takes place, since the ideas it tries to express are intended to be applicable to any location. The game wants people to feel as though the events within it could occur anywhere whilst referencing isolated real-world locations without being constricted by depicting them accurately. This can be seen as a purposeful intent to free oneself from having to depict locations and events in a constricted manner, through the usage of fictional liberties such as combining different real-life locations to create one slightly similar but altogether different area, or incorporating otherworldly sci-fi elements such as spaceships, robots or aliens.



Figure 6.0 Big Ben with English language settings (left) and Tokyo Tower with Japanese language settings (right).

Even though *NieR: Replicant* similarly takes place close to Japan in the first fight scene only if the language settings are set to Japanese, the story is then time skipped to 1,412 years into the future. Therefore, the implications of the game and the character decisions being connected to societal issues outside of the game, are mostly implied rather than overt. The idea is that the locations can be anywhere in the world. Both games seem connected to Tokyo, Japan. Real life locations being used may serve as a kind of warning rhetoric on the dangers of violence and war conflicts on our own world.

More cultural and religion contexts which can be recognized through architecture or customs can further be seen in *NieR: Automata*, in the “Deranged Religion” Chapter 09-01_3 in the robots wearing what seems to be Roman Catholic attire and fiery sticks, waving them in the air while proclaiming their wish to become gods. It can be difficult to differentiate between Buddha in Buddhism and Vishnu in Hinduism from a historical context. This fact might explain why Buddhism allows the view that an adventurer or commoner may ascend to becoming a superior being (Almond, 1988, p-17). It is more typical of the Buddhist doctrine rather than Catholicism, to allow the possibility of a person achieving a god-like state and becoming similar to Buddha. In this chapter, this is what the robots are depicted as desiring by throwing themselves into a lake of fire. Similarly to the City Ruins’ representation of Tokyo, the religious environments seem to be an amalgamation of various belief systems and contexts not entirely rooted in one specific tangible doctrine.

Areas in *NieR: Replicant* seem connected with ideas of other cultures in Japan, such as the Ainu. Ainu people, who are a subgroup of the Japanese populace, lived close to rivers and saw themselves as ordinary people since “Ainu” is another word for “human being” while at the same time being hunter-gatherers, historically (Morris-Suzuki, 2015, p.11). The Masked People in *NieR: Replicant’s Kingdom of Facade*, which is a city consisting of sand rivers, speak what seems to be a reconstructed version of Japanese, especially when the characters express phrases such as “Thank you!” Such depictions may stem from groups of people native to Japan whose ways of living are fictionalized and partly included in the game without mentioning anything concrete or specific.

This is a concept pertaining to video games, which I would refer to as *location relativism*, implying a difficulty to pinpoint exactly where in the real world many of the elements of an area take place from within a game. In *NieR: Replicant*, Nier’s village seems to be some type of rural location, perhaps in Northern Europe. Seafront could be anywhere from Portugal to Italy, simply due to the warm weather and concrete constructions, which differ from those of Nier’s village where bricks and wood make up a majority of buildings.

The idea in both games is that the protagonists are fighting for the survival of humans, at least initially they and the player believe this to be the case. Players are initially placed into a hero archetype role. The later decisions to enact violence by the characters seems therefore to always have an implied impact on our own world. Consequences involve real life humans, rather than

an isolated in-game representation of human characters who are disconnected from the current modern world.

6.1 Can video game environments have a rhetorical significance?

Rhetoricians often make references to actual geographical locations, even in traditional rhetorical speeches. “*But before I praise the dead, I should like to point out by what principles of action we rose ~ to power, and under what institutions and through what manner of life our empire became great.*” said Thucydides (H.R. Library, n.d., para.2). In this case he is making an appeal to the audience through referencing the physical place which is now their homeland while hinting at the achievements of his people and ancestors. This is a way to use argumentation, or *logos* making the argument that the empire is only great because of “principles”, with an effect of *pathos* appealing to the physical space the “empire” occupies.

The argumentation aims to invoke feelings of resolve from the audience. This is by no means an isolated expression. Rhetoricians have often made references to the locations they lived in as a way of riling up the public opinion and getting them to act in one way or another. Even in accusatory speeches, such as the *Against Philon* (Vestrheim & Østmoe, Eds. 2009, p.71), the speaker accuses Philon of not doing enough “to save the city”. Perhaps not the focus of rhetorical discourse, geography seems to be a central point of rhetorical persuasion.

In the same way, there is a *pathos*, an inevitable emotional connection between the audience and the game, which has the potential to occur in games because of their environments and what one is allowed to do in such areas. While not possible to destroy the area itself, it is possible to kill every single machine in Pascal’s Village and The Amusement Park in *NieR: Automata*.

The Amusement Park presents no alternative ending to the game, while every single machine being killed by the player in Pascal’s Village yields *Ending [N]o man's village* which states “*A village of peaceful machines was wiped out through the actions of one deranged android. Thus did the peaceful machines go extinct. Their village is now a haunted, forbidden place. Those who wander too close can hear the mad sounds of an android’s laughter.*»

While attempting to get the ending itself the machines will scream words like “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” and “Stop! Do not kill!” So, in this case, even though players are doing something which the military authority of YoRHa would encourage, as this is the other side of the perceived conflict, the game itself seems to frown upon the act, further indicating that the military value

system of the androids is not justifiable. The character of the player is even negatively portrayed, through words, as a “deranged android” which frames the “actions” described in the word prompt as unethical and unjustified.

Dissuasion through the tediousness of morally wrong actions is a persuasion technique in itself, for instance through punishing the player for engaging in unethical game mechanic such as slaughtering diseased cows, which reduces their total number, thereby reducing profits (Bogost, 2007, p.30). Being allowed to kill innocent civilians can help shed light on the problematic power relations between soldiers and civilians who depend on them in a war conflict. On the other hand, not being allowed to do certain things can also communicate something to the player, for instance through the ways in which the player character is forced to navigate through the safety hub areas. One sees the same kind of rhetoric in in the safety hub areas, where involvement in violence never really results in a positive outcome for the areas themselves.

In *NieR: Replicant*, opposing constraints are enforced on the player, not through what one is allowed to do but by what they are disallowed from doing. For example, sprinting in Nier’s house is impossible. Aesthetically, the visual representation is almost the same as in *NieR: Automata*. There is a character of significance sitting to the right, on the bed. Yet, in the first game, it is impossible to sprint or jump very high while around them or in the house. The player is locked into a slow and quiet jog, which expresses respect and care in that situation similar to taking one’s shoes off at someone’s doorstep in a limitation of actions which seems purposeful in defining an area as a place of safety.

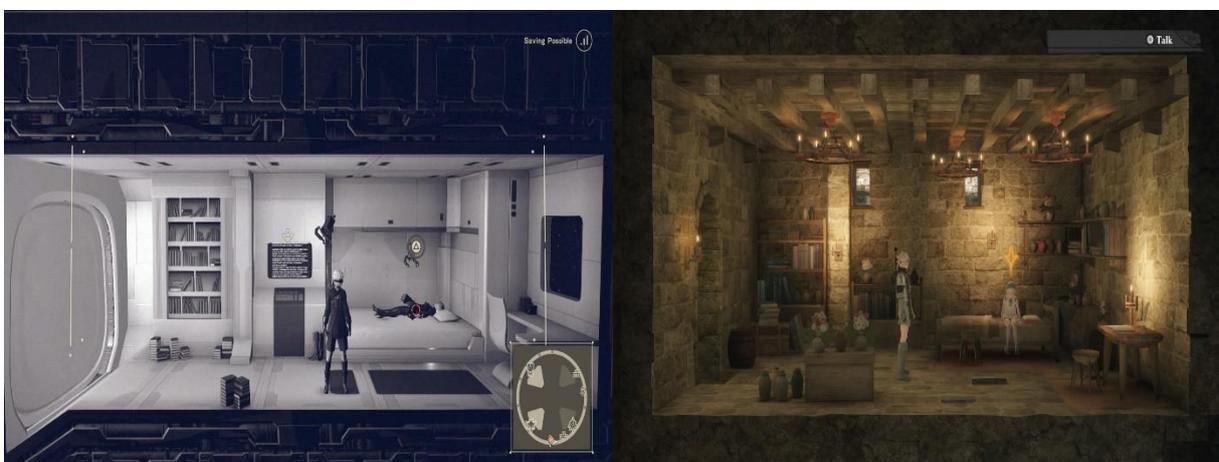


Figure 6.1 The primary safety hub in *NieR: Automata* (left) and the primary safety hub in *NieR: Replicant* (right).

6.2 Destroyed areas

The Bunker is the first safety hub introduced in *NieR: Automata*. This is a place where harm to the player simply does not exist for most of the game. Towards the end of the game, however, the place is blown up completely. The destruction of safety hubs in a game can act as a representation of war consequence. The Bunker's destruction in particular is represented aesthetically by various shades of dark and bright red colors with parts of the ship breaking off into the distance, seen from the windows in the hallway.

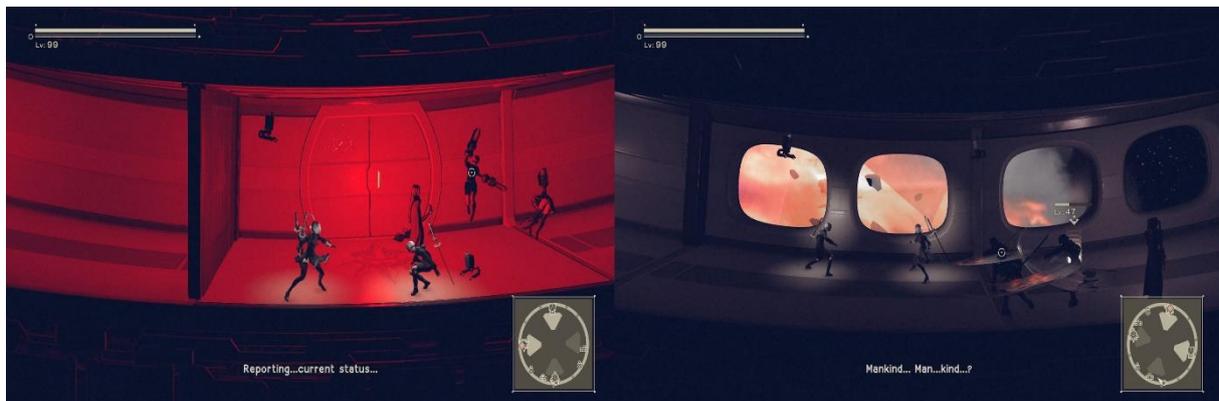


Figure 6.2 Destruction of *NieR: Automata*'s main safety hub, *The Bunker*.

The Resistance Camp similarly relies on androids defending the area from enemy machines. If there are enemies, they usually stop right outside The Resistance Camp. In a somewhat typical fashion for *NieR*, this area is also destroyed. Before the game's 3rd act, 2B finds the camp attacked by infected enemy machines with bodies of camp members on the ground. Some survive, including the camp leader Anemone, but it is clear that the player was intentionally made to fail at helping anyone in the area.

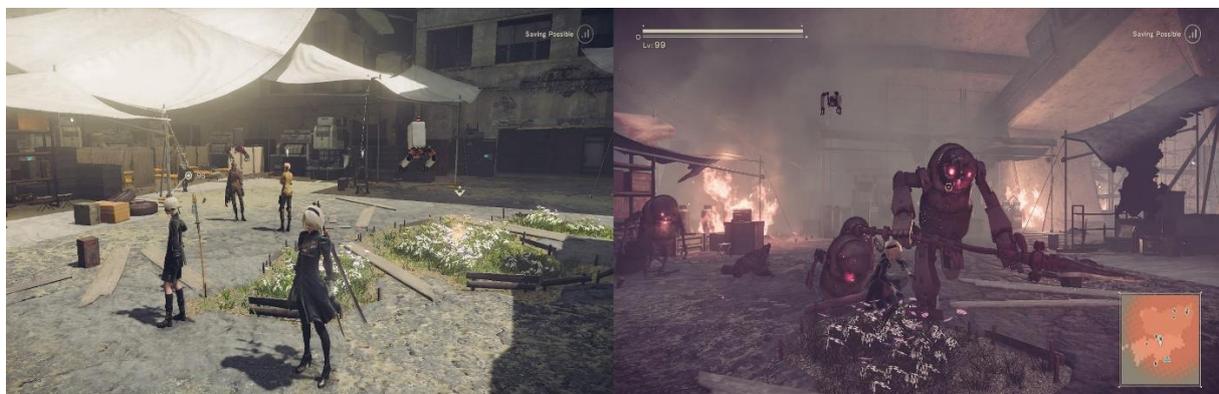


Figure 6.2.1 Shows how *The Resistance Camp* starts out (left), and how it is seen in its destroyed state (right).

In *NieR: Replicant*, on the other hand, most of the areas are not shown to be destroyed outwardly. It is apparent that this is the case without the visual depiction that would accompany

this. There are therefore other ways to display consequence, such as through the usage of dialogue and lore. The *Virtuous Dignity* weapon in *NieR: Automata* story reads “*The fourth owner was a meek young boy who wanted to aid his sickly younger sister. He gave all to this cause-including his very existence and that of all else in the world.*”, referencing the protagonist in the first game. As such, the destruction of the levels is mostly relayed through verbalized means such as lore. The outfit of Nier awarded to the player for completing the sequel is also similarly titled *Destroyer Outfit*.

The destruction of areas in a game may thus also be implied through non-visual means. The *Destroyer Outfit* which can be obtained by the end of the game reads “*An outfit for A2 that may or may not have belonged to the man who destroyed the world.*” The challenge with this kind of rhetoric arises from the fact that such weapon descriptions or game items are not particularly outstanding during the average first playthrough of the game.

Visually many of the safety hubs from *NieR: Replicant* can be observed in the sequel as destroyed remnants of their former selves. Seafront is one such area, as enemies are not allowed to enter inside until the last parts of the game. In *NieR: Automata*, the Flooded City is very identical and likely the same area. Standing at a certain point in the map bears aesthetic similarities. It can therefore be concluded that this area is also doomed because of the player’s engagement with the game to begin with, more specifically because of the player going along with the playthrough and doing what the game instructs one to do in *NieR:Replicant*, which is to engage in violence.

So doomed is this area, in fact, that 9S comments that it has begun to sink into the ocean after being bombed during the war, which is a case of the sequel depicting consequences of violence by visual means where the first game may have been unable to do so because of things like budgeting issues. This is a kind of pathos which seems to depend on the first game.



Figure 6.2.2 Seafront (left) is similar to The Flooded City (right).

The feeling of being complicit in violent outcomes in this sense likely depends on the player finishing the first game. Regardless, here is major a difference in whether the player is treated as a hero through the dynamics of the game, as is often the case in gaming, or as someone who fails to protect the environments or, more specifically, the areas in which people dependent on the hero happen to reside. Areas of safety carry a different set of rules and rhetorical meaning than other areas. They also carry a pathos, an emotionality in that the player is made to want to accomplish the goal of being the savior the game frames them as.

Other depictions do not carry over between the two games, such as the Amusement Park in *NieR: Automata*. The effects on the residents are also very overt, with one NPC initially being titled as “Father Machine”, to being renamed as “Zombie Machine” in the final parts of the game. Here there is not as much of a destruction on the area itself, but on the residents. The dialogue of the NPC even changes from being “Let’s be happy together!” to “...M-Machines...where...whe...re...” indicating that he had a family which he has now lost, losing his cognitive abilities while still being aware of having lost *something* of importance.

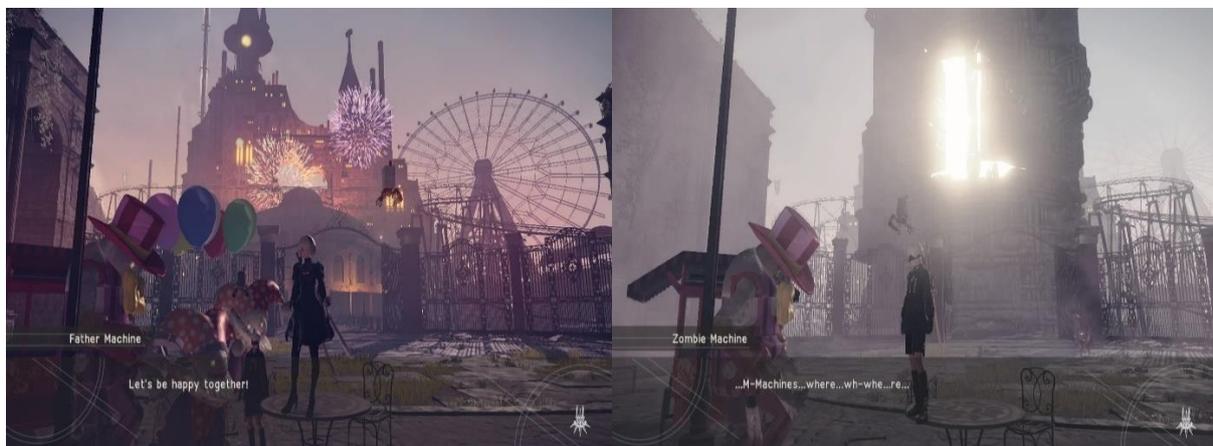


Figure 6.2.3 Shows how *The Amusement Park* starts out (left) and how it is seen in its destroyed state (right).

In this sense, it seems that entire areas do not necessarily need to be destroyed in a very dramatic and flashy way in order to communicate sadness and tragedy from violence, as it seems that simply removing an NPC or depicting them as suffering, is enough to portray the area itself as already having been destroyed.

This can have wider implications on games working on a budget or indie games where one might not have the means to portray destruction in an overly realistic way. As such, there are not many changes made to the area itself or the details of its environment, since most of its

structures remain in place and are not demolished, but the way the NPCs present themselves become the defining aspect of whether that area appears intact or destroyed.

Bogost (2008, p.122-124) finds that video games can simulate larger topics, such as repaying off debt and the profitability of banks, in a simplified and interactive way. Similarly, the Amusement Park shows how games can simulate larger topics like consequences of war, war brutality and crimes which split families apart and destroy the identities of civilians who have suffered violent mental and physical consequences. In this case, it is the dialogue of NPCs which defines what the level as a whole resembles in terms of consequences of war and violence.

Traditional rhetorical speeches may place value on the defense of one's homeland or country. This is an aspect of rhetoric which may carry over onto gaming as well. Environments may in this way be employed as an ethical statement on the consequences of violence and war. By appealing to a location by placing emphasis on its importance in the safety it provides, and the ensured safety that it needs, a rhetorician in traditional speeches, as well as game developers, can create persuasion through the location in speeches and the environment of the safety hubs in the game itself.

In games specifically, the player character can be expressed as the sole reason for either saving these environments or destroying them. In communicating anti-violence, the latter idea may be more useful, where the consequences of violence are shown through the inability of the player to prevent it. This is a kind of rhetoric which seems to rely on environments or levels acting as safety hubs, before that safety is destroyed in a purposeful manner, which creates a pathos against violence and war conflicts.

6.3 Are the areas destroyed just for the sake of Nihilism?

Nietzsche was not really a practical nihilist, though, for he did not seem to live in a way which suggests he rejected all meaning, as Huddleston (2019, p.5) points out. Furthermore, nihilists find that there is little value or no value to be found in things which give meaning to others, nearly glorifying despair (Huddleston, 2019, p.2-3). This begs the question of whether the communication in *NieR* is nihilistic by default. These are some of the ways in which Nihilism seems to predate the rhetorical communication in *NieR*, particularly in the ways in which games question topics of existence, violence, or meaning in general. The games seem not to be purely nihilistic, as evidenced by their usage of rhetorical questions in the bullet hell sequence. Are

there any other examples of violence being actively replaced with other ideas, as opposed to simply negated through tragic outcomes in the form of Nihilism?

Oddly enough, there are NPCs in *NieR: Automata* who fare quite well. In terms of *NieR: Replicant*, it is quite difficult to observe the outcomes for the NPCs in their respective areas, since, after completing the game, the player is reset to a save point before the final outcome. In *NieR: Automata*, on the other hand, there is the Desert: Oil Field area which seems to be localized just behind Facade in *NieR: Replicant*, where there are androids who have given up violence just so they can get high off an item called E-Drug. Taking the E-Drug item distorts the music and visual representation of the game, and one can consume the item. There is also a slight combat boost. The game is not affected in any other way by this item. There are two characters here.

Both are lying on the ground in some kind of blissful state. The one on the right says: “*Drugs? Yeah, they’re pretty crazy. I can’t stop fighting! Mission? Leave me alone. *huff, huff... **”, confirming that they are, in fact, deserters, who would be executed by Command if caught. Close to the area is also a pond surrounded by palm trees with another NPC who gives fishing instructions to the player. This NPC also survives throughout the entirety of the. In fact, the dialogue does not change for any of the NPCs. The only thing that changes for these characters, is their E-Drug costing more, from 210G in Chapter 06-04 to 455G in Chapter 15-01, with no other changes to the NPCs.

There is perhaps an indication here through a game focused, visual rhetoric centered on the environments, that the characters who have renounced violence, have been spared. It is unlikely these characters were simply oversights from the game developers, given how purposeful the rhetoric in *NieR* appears to be. Indeed, there are non-violent NPCs who also suffer, such as Pascal, but his village area is always in the center of the battle near the City Ruins and he never runs away, perhaps for the sake of the villagers.

This also illustrates how an in-game rhetoric of consequences to violence need not necessarily depend purely on the visuality of environments being exploded and destroyed. Simply having an NPC in an area, or removing them, can create a pathos for the player, where there is an impression that something very negative, or something positive, has occurred in connection with the environment as a whole. This can further be boosted by visual elements like palms or lakes, as opposed to removing elements from the area, such as NPCs, or other elements which suggest that the area is inhabited by someone.

6.4 Main findings and analysis summary

Some of the ways by which anti-violence can be mediated in games, include the combat in relation to what the characters, both player characters and other NPCs exclaim, the animations themselves expressing how the characters feel in terms of violence, which then becomes a form of critique, albeit one which is hidden during fast paced combat, or rhetorical questions in combat which have the potential to deliver meaning to the player.

The gameplay drmd created to make the player feel enjoyment through game mechanics like hit stop, but the dialogue of the enemies is intended to show the suffering caused by the enjoyment of the player. *NieR: Automata* as a whole seems very accommodating to the player, with hit stun being minimized so as to not frustrate the player beyond some isolated instances in the game. By dividing a combative action into three stages into the pre-combative, combative and post-combative stage, one can pinpoint where exactly hit stop and hit stun occur, as well as the implications of violence on enemy units and what exactly those combative situations look like, specifically pertaining to what enemy dialogue expresses, and when it occurs in combat.

In the case of rhetorical questions, when it is not enough to negate violence, games can incorporate social play which revolves around ideas of friendship, personal sacrifice or teamwork. This can be done by combining verbal communication in the form of rhetorical questions with gameplay where the goal is to unite the player with other players through some kind of social activity which engages teamwork.

Much like the gameplay itself, the quests in both *NieR: Replicant* and *NieR: Automata* seem to most often end on a tragic or unhappy note. Even in cases where the player manages to complete the objective without anything negative happening along the way, they may come home to find that the NPC who originally handed them the task has died, for instance because of a heart issue. In this way both games avoid rewarding players through dialogue by hailing them as a hero who is outside the bounds of immoral actions.

Quite the opposite, both games have questline structures which drag the player into performing tasks, before being framed as an unethical entity, for example by aiding a criminal or personally committing some sort of crime or injustice while being unaware of doing so along the way. The character of the player is thereby framed as a violent, unethical being by the game, even without one knowing the extent of the unethical nature of the actions whilst performing them.

This kind of rhetorical communication seems to rely heavily on the player not knowing where a questline structure is going, and what sort of implications their actions might have on the in-game world. As a whole, the questline structures of *NieR* largely keep the player unaware of the extent of their actions until their conclusions, where the outcomes are revealed more openly. To communicate anti-violence, it seems that some games like *NieR* may also rely on their characters who will often express their feelings through dialogue in the face of the violence which is being critiqued by the game. That same ethos is communicated to players by showing the characters both pertaining to “cuteness” and vulnerability, which seem to stem from what is viewed as being cute in Japan. In a similar vein, the characters in *NieR: Automata* seem to be characterized from a Japanese perspective on robotics which frames artificial intelligence as the legacy of humanity, whereby the creations of humanity are seen as possessing a heart and an individuality which suffers as a result of human errors and violent ways.

Tragic outcomes for the characters are portrayed in ways which stem from Japanese depictions aimed at invoking shock in the audience, and which seem to rely on portrayals of the game characters as being vulnerable to being killed. The player then participates in their negative outcomes. The enemies are also not portrayed as typical monsters who must be killed at any cost, as it seems that there is an intended pathos effect of the player stepping down at one point and questioning their own actions against boss enemies who gradually become less threatening as the game progresses. In the case of more formal game elements like gameplay, there are also opportunities to incorporate dialogue which actively judges the player and their enjoyment of the combat, which is purposefully designed to be enjoyable, as opposed to the *serious games* genre, for instance, where both the gameplay and its rhetoric are meant to be in line in terms of ethics and violence critique. When it comes to the enemies, their feelings as a response to the unethical actions of the player are depicted through various alternative gameplay sequences which look differently from the rest of the game.

They may also be used to refer to real life individuals, or locations which exist in different parts of the globe. Fiction can be used as a way to create distance between what the game presents and how things are in actuality. References can be made to Tokyo, Japan, for instance, yet not in a way which depends upon a portrayal of the actual location, but rather on the game portrayal rooted in the game itself. From the examination of some of these rhetorical elements, it also seems that anti-violence rhetoric in a game can span across several dimensions, not limited to one particular area only, such as characters or gameplay.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Before discussing some of the useful elements of a possible rhetoric of anti-violence, the chapter firstly clarifies how the formal structures of the game such as the gameplay, combat and quests present themselves in terms of a game anti-violence rhetoric. The chapter thereafter discusses anti-violence in terms of what an anti-violent character portrayal might look like in a game which wants to make players care about the characters who are to be depicted as suffering from war and violence. Here the chapter also discusses how organizations may be portrayed and even critiqued in video games, as well as what violent portrayals typically look like in Japanese media. The chapter then discusses how the enemies may be characterized in ways which adhere to a rhetoric of anti-violence. Finally, the chapter discusses the different characterizations of the environments in games where the goal is to communicate anti-violence, as well as some of the different alternatives to achieving such a communication through the adhering NPC inhabited areas.

7.0 Gameplay and inherently unhappy quests

While looking at the moment combat occurs between the pre-combative and combative stances, one notices in *NieR: Automata* a tendency to express certain emotions or characteristics regarding what the character is going through, more so than in *NieR: Replicant*. The characters fight and destroy other beings, yet their movements show that they have an understanding of themselves and are suffering emotionally from their actions. This example shows how video games can use performance and choreography in combat to express how a character feels, which can then become a form of social critique, expressing that they do not really enjoy killing others.

Furthermore, it is useful to divide a combative action into different stances, the pre-combative, combative, and post-combative stance, with the combative stance especially highlighting the moment in which an attack lands, marking the final animation of intent and moving into the post-combative stance where the player receives feedback and judgement on their actions. This can help clarify exactly when a certain kind of rhetorical meaning takes place during combat.

The hit stop mechanic, which is a subtle, unnoticeable animation built into games, as the player character freezes upon a successful attack, with the intent of creating a feeling of satisfaction in the player from succeeding in their attack, seems to play a part in how anti-violence is

communicated, particularly when a game wants to judge players for their enjoyment from combat.

On the other hand, hit stun is an important way to punish the player, which can be another rhetorical mediator of consequence from their actions, or just not being attuned enough to the game in general. Lengthening the hit stun animation would also lengthen the post-combative stage, albeit from the player's perspective, ultimately serving to punish them more severely. This can be an intended hit stun lengthening which aims to enhance a rhetoric of anti-violence, as opposed to a kind of unintentional game mechanic such as a far too long hit stop, as described by Ban and Ujitoko (2021, p.5).

Sicart (2009, 156-157) argues that games can deliver meaning questioning the role of the player as a hero. As such, quests and the larger category of gameplay they adhere to, both aim to critique the player directly, mainly by means of dialogue, but also by preventing them to achieve a happy conclusion. The quests in the game end quite unhappily. This can further serve an anti-violence rhetoric by framing the player as an unethical entity, as opposed to a hero who battles an antagonist in a situation in which the player never really questions the results of their own actions from a questline structure.

Unlike many other games in which the player usually succeeds in helping NPCs and fulfilling their motivations, often result in the NPCs being quite unhappy towards the end of each of their respective quests, and the player is often unknowingly led down a path in which they become accomplices to some kind of crime or moral injustice, as opposed to bettering the in-game world by simply helping others as one could imagine would be the normal questline game progression.

7.1 The usage of rhetorical questions in gameplay

Video games usually offer choices, since player freedom seems to be a goal for most games. Usually, the questions posed in many adventure games are typically not particularly heavy or ethically challenging, since they do not serve the goal of delivering philosophical meaning. There is a trend in modern Japanese games in which questions asked of the player are proceedingly more ethically difficult. The fact that the questions in *NieR* are rhetorical questions, becomes apparent when examining the fact that the developers already have a point they wish to convey, one which is also more or less obvious to the player. The questions become rhetorical, because they are designed to express a point, rather than to simply further the storyline.

For instance, when asking “Do you accept defeat? Is it all pointless? Give up here?” the idea is that existence is not pointless, and that one should not give up on what they want to achieve. This shows how rhetorical questions can be used in games to teach players about philosophical themes, or to deliver a positive message in a simple manner through combining the rhetorical questions with a simplistic gameplay which underlines the hidden message the developers wish to convey. Here the usage of rhetorical questions seems to mend some of the main problems with this tool of persuasion, which is the apparent obviousness of the rhetorical situation.

These instances occur through some type of alternative gameplay which wants to be surprising and capture the attention of the audience. Perhaps in this way gameplay may also mitigate the redundant nature of rhetorical questions through gameplay, since they are criticized by Rohde (2006, p. 134-135) as simply reaffirming the audience’s stance on a particular issue.

In the case of the gameplay in *NieR*, the philosophy conveyed might be one of Epicureanism, of going through positive experiences and doing everything one can to preserve these (Bergsma, et al., 2008, p. 398) This can particularly be seen in the many instances in which the games place priority on preserving one’s memories, or the significance of deleting a save file. In this way, memories are framed as highly important by the game.

In general, it seems, that if one is to create a self-aware game which aims to teach players about something meaningful, it is not simply enough to question every single trope in a nihilistic manner, as *NieR* often does until the end of each game, as the underlying philosophy should be one which is at least partly constructive towards the end by showing that there is value in things such as friendship, mutual support and world peace, and here it might be useful to include some kind of gameplay sequence featuring a form of affective social play where players collaborate with each other to fight against something the game wishes to criticize or question.

7.2 Vulnerable ethos, avoidance of identical characters, and self-referential dialogue

In the context of Japan, communicating anti-violence seems to rely on an ethos of the characters as small, naïve and defenseless. This ethos of vulnerability can be seen as a mostly visual form of rhetorical communication, whereby a character is depicted as being a child, or connected to childhood or innocence in some way, before going through situations through which children should not go through, such as extreme violence, combat, military war efforts, illness or death.

Simply relying on the fact that the protagonist resembles a child and speaks like a child, while also not really behaving like a typical child, is what sets up the character as being heroic and fighting against the world, which is what *NieR* does to its characters before gradually depicting them as more ethically dubious as the game goes on. This kind of ethos vulnerability is not a realistic depiction of children per say, as they often have superhuman powers, magic, or are able to withstand massive amounts of damage. Nevertheless, they also do get hurt and are vulnerable to damage. When this occurs, the potential for a pathos of empathy is stronger in the audience, since children are viewed as off-limits when it comes to depictions of violence.

Cuteness within the Japanese context seems to play a big part in what a vulnerable ethos looks like. Clothing accessories, as well as the behavior of the person are part of the cuteness image which can overlap with ideas of tradition, longing and nostalgia. Such instances show the ways in which a vulnerable ethos can be highly overt and exaggerated through the visual depictions of the characters, or it may be more subtle, instead involving the dialogue of characters, and smaller details of their facial and bodily features like clothing and accessories whose reasons for being present are not always easily explained through logic and are of a somewhat more abstract rhetorical nature, such as facial scarring or blindfolds.

Self-referential dialogue can be another way of strengthening the ethos of game characters. By comparing *NieR* with some traditional rhetorical speeches, it is evident that they each consist of an overtly state of affairs which is causing the communicator some kind of suffering, which creates a kind of vulnerable ethos for the speaker. Such subtle or overt ways of characterizing game characters and making them appear unique in the idea they are vulnerable and suffering as a consequence, seems to serve as a way of critiquing military efforts and war in general, in an ethos which in this case serves the logos centered around military regimes as both highly authoritarian and unfair to the people who are forced to serve under them.

7.3 Critiquing authoritarian regimes from several angles

Szatmari (2021, p.4) looks at how Japanese society and anime explore organizations such as the UN. Video games can explore similar institutions and entities in a rhetoric which seems slightly different. *NieR: Automata* is an example of this, in how the game depicts YoRHa as a kind of military entity. The game depicts the militaristic authoritarian regimes in a critical way. In games there is thus the possibility to interact with background elements, making them unblurred, as the creators can use smaller details to criticize historical events or social issues by

focusing on seemingly unimportant details and making them larger and more easily accessible. This I view as the potential for multidimensionality of games, implying that several elements of a larger object are made accessible and interactable, without the sequence of events moving forward without the participation of the audience.

There are different ways to gather an understanding of the authoritarian regime of *NieR: Automata*, through looking at the emails the characters are being sent, the voice comms briefing them on their mission from what are supposedly humans on the moon, and the white, monotonous white rooms of The Bunker, as well as the slogans the soldiers use. In this way, one can see how critique can be communicated through both a visual and verbal rhetoric. Games can give a wider degree of interaction with such background elements, which in turn makes the larger entity critiqued or satirized from different angles. It is the player experience in terms of the interaction with isolated elements of a wider institution or entity, which make this kind of rhetoric present itself as several smaller parts comprising something larger.

The speeches from what are supposedly humans, in particular, are eerily similar to speeches by renowned politicians, which hints at the game being a way of critiquing actual events by using fiction as a way of freeing itself from having to depict events accurately, while retaining the ability to criticize very specific societal elements.

7.4 Japanese contextual depictions of violence

When hyper-violence occurs either in cutscene or during combat, where blood and gore are abundant, there is also a potential for persuasion through a pathos of surprise and shock, which is what has largely characterized the ero-guro genre, which is not a purely visual but also a verbal form of communication. In this way, the opposite effect of violence glorification is achieved, since the depictions appear undesirable, unappealing and physically painful.

In this way, the *hack'n'slash* genre elements seem to present themselves in a typical way, with the combat generally involving killing enemies in a flashy and over the top way. On the other hand, the violence itself where scripted events are concerned, is visually presented as surprising, unappealing and undesired by the characters who are suffering in the game. In this instance, it once again seems that the combat of the game comes across as different from the range of meanings delivered through many of the events the player has little control over.

The ero-guro genre seems to be prevalent in Japanese historical and media depictions as a way to communicate social critique by emphasizing extreme unfairness in a set of circumstances

(Lackney, 2020, p.8). Such depictions can occur in cinematic scenes, dialogue and they can even be written in a detective story, according to the author (Lackney, 2020, p.9-10). The emotions of the person suffering also seem to be a relevant part of the genre.

7.5 Humanizing the enemy

Løvlie (2007, p.77) discusses how identical enemies can be an instrument for the legitimization of player actions against the opposing side. Yet this argument also illustrates a broader discussion on the possibilities of enemy characterization, perhaps during times when developers simply do not have the means to distinguish enemies from one another in a visual sense.

In *NieR: Replicant*, identical enemies are humanized mostly via dialogue as a rhetorical tool. In *NieR: Automata*, many of the changes which occur to the enemy characters, occur also by means of dialogue, but here it seems as though more uniquely pronounced enemies known as bosses are characterized, in addition, by means such as clothing and accessories which seem to change as the game progresses. References to real life individuals or social issues can be made, through the way a character behaves, as well as their dialogue, with the intent of bringing attention to a certain topic.

In both games, there seems to be a unifying factor, some kind of cutscene or text-based sequence with limited control movements in which the enemies are either shown as being unified in the afterlife, or unified with the player character in a depiction which seems connected to religious motives and characteristics from within the Shinto belief system. This unifying sequence may take the form of an affective gameplay sequence, either through some kind of alternative retro minigame, or a text-based segment the player has limited control over. In this way, violence is framed as meaningless by means of either visual cues or dialogue which can only be read on screen.

7.6 The environments of the games and freeing oneself from historical accuracy through fiction

The safety hubs of each game help shield the player from harm, until the safety hubs themselves are destroyed from the war which the game can critique by visual rhetorical means. In order to create a pathos of negative feelings and break that sense of safety, it is often enough to simply remove the NPCs in that area or change their character design so as to show that they are struggling in some way or have undergone some other type of heavy loss. There is therefore a

potential to understand how game environments can be portrayed more effectively, simply by changing the appearance, dialogue, or name tags of the NPCs in a game area, or by removing them altogether.

In situations where the player has direct control over an area, given that they are a soldier, such as Pascal's Village, engaging with an unethical action thereby ends the game, with a dialogue prompt which characterized the player as a "deranged android" in a highly overt manner, suggestive of the idea that the game itself does not really agree with the actions of the player.

This is another example of the *hack'n'slash* game mechanics of NieR, which make no particular value judgement through the combat itself, instead using dialogue as a way to directly criticize the player. As such, wiping an entire area of NPCs by killing them, can bring on a value judgement from the game, in which the player learns why that action is ugly or unjustified, as framed by the dialogue in the game. Such penalties, although not really having any lasting impact on the game itself, can bring about a feeling of actually wanting to preserve the environment, which in this case also becomes further relevant through the idea that the game takes place in and around Tokyo.

Each game starts with a city resembling Tokyo and usually ends in it, in a kind of social commentary which includes real life locations, showing how violence can affect our own world. *NieR: Automata* mentions events and places such as Pearl Harbor and the year 1945, yet these events and locations are briefly mentioned between the fictitious elements of aliens, Shades, spaceships, and machines. This fictionalization gives the advantage of the game being somewhat independent of having to fully bear the responsibility of historical and real-life accuracy.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The thesis has aimed to answer the following research question: *How does the anti-violence rhetoric in NieR present itself, and what are some of the ways in which it seems connected to a broader range of Japanese contextual elements?*

A methodological approach of textual analysis from a Game Studies perspective with a focus on game rhetoric and Japanese Studies, has been employed in an effort to answer the research question. The two main games analyzed were *NieR: Replicant* and *NieR: Automata*, where the goal was to see what an anti-violence game rhetoric might look like, and how its several elements can be explained through a Japanese context. The analysis is comprised of the three sections of gameplay, characters, and environments, in which the first analytical category is analyzed mostly in terms of similarities and differences with other Japanese games, while the latter two analytical categories were discussed in the thesis in terms of how they may relate to Japanese contexts.

One of the first findings in the thesis implies a noticeable usage of hit stop in the combat system of *NieR*, pointing to a possible idea of both games having been created to give enjoyment to players. Other Japanese games seem to employ frustrating gameplay with a more noticeable hit stun, which can also be an alternative way of communicating violence, as well as the vulnerability of the characters. The approach seen in *NieR* seems to be one of attempting to critique players through their enjoyment of the combat, mainly by means of dialogue.

Characters are depicted as vulnerable, in ways which seem to relate to Japanese ideas of cuteness. Here one could also see the potential for games to discuss socially relevant topics through more uniquely identified boss enemy characters such as Simone. The depictions seem to relate to visual Japanese horror depictions whenever a character is presented as mysterious or threatening. Player actions are framed as unethical through bosses becoming less threatening.

The environments are framed as places of safety for the player, before being destroyed. Each location also seems connected with Tokyo in different ways. Here it also becomes apparent how games can depict destruction through alternative means, by not depicting the area itself as destroyed, but rather the NPCs which were formerly shown to the player as being fully intact. These are some of the brief outlines of what a possible anti-violence game rhetoric might look like, also in terms of some Japanese contextual elements.

7.7 Suggestions for further studies

NieR as a series is very much worth researching and talking about due to what the games belonging to it attempt to achieve. This thesis can therefore be a useful future framework for what is a logical step in researching how players are influenced by video game anti-violence, which would be effects studies measures whether players actually find the rhetoric of *NieR* to be persuasive and whether they feel as if they have gained a wider understanding of violence and its negative affects by playing the game. One can also approach such a research question from a quantitative perspective through measuring what kinds of ethical behaviors or choices players actually engage with on their first playthrough.

Alternatively, a researcher may find a way to measure how many players deleted their save file in a sacrifice for others, which would highlight whether game mechanics which seek to promote personal sacrifice and putting others before oneself, actually function as intended. Such quantitative research could also help shed light on the gaming community in general. Another point of research could include exploring the video game industry through a qualitative analysis of what different games do and compare the ways in which they deal with violence.

One could here examine what percentage of video games are self-aware currently, as well as the number of video games incorporating elements from the genre of serious games into their otherwise entertainment focused content. One could also research schools, and what teachers and students find to be a persuasive beneficial rhetoric in terms of gameplay structures, ethical game situations and character portrayals.

As video games develop as a medium, methods of creating discussions surrounding anti-violence and a peaceful stance on war, will likely develop in a similar vein. This is why it is so imperative to research video game audiences in effort to find out how video games are beneficial to things like learning and introspection regarding societal issues. In this context, it is also important to understand how games can create retrospection through a rhetoric which aims to systematically question the themes, topics and gameplay elements presented to players.

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