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November 25th, 2018
CMS.300

The Search for Humanity

An analysis of the use of messaging and procedural rhetoric in Square Enix's Nier:Automata

In the future, humans will be extinct. We don't know when this inevitability will strike, or why, or how it will happen. All we know is that our destruction is inescapable. What, then, will be left of us, when our monuments have crumbled and our advanced societies have long since faded into dust?

Nier: Automata provides a possible answer to this question, and it doesn't portray humanity in the brightest light. In a world populated by androids, machines, and - unbeknownst to all - devoid of humans, the player is constantly asked the question: what is it that makes us human? Is it our capacity to form societies, or our worship of a higher power? Is it our ability to love and to hate, or our propensity to wage wars? Is it our mortality? Through messaging and procedural rhetoric, the creators of *Nier* present players with scenarios that allow them to evaluate each of these factors, and how they contribute to - and reveal flaws in - the nature of humanity.

Humans have long been fascinated with the concept of robots that can interact with us as equals and "can be friendly or fearsome, man's best friend or worst enemy".[6] Isaac Asimov, the father of the idea of sentient robots, stated in his prescient novel *I, Robot*: "There was a time when humanity faced the universe alone and without a friend. Now he has creatures to help him; stronger creatures than himself, more faithful, more useful, and absolutely devoted to him. Mankind is no longer alone".[3] However, the robots of today are still limited by actions that are the product of relatively simple code; they are not sentient, and we still don't know enough about

consciousness to recreate it. This is not to say that it isn't possible; as Dennett stated offhandedly in his 1997 paper, "The best reason for believing that robots might someday become conscious is that we human beings are conscious, and we are a *sort* of robot ourselves...we are extraordinarily complex self-controlling, self-sustaining physical mechanisms...operating according to the same well-understood principles that govern all the other physical processes in living things". Furthermore, there exists "the notion that computer programming is the best model for the workings of the brain. Most neurons give and receive signals in short blasts. They operate under an all or nothing principle - either they're firing or they're not. This is similar to the 1/0 duality of binary code".[5] We are, in other words, fleshy finite state machines coded by our DNA - and while we have not figured out how many states we have, or how our code affects our actions, it is very possible that we will in a relatively near future.

Assuming that we do succeed in recreating sentience in machines, future researchers and scientists will be confronted with another dilemma: how do we make these machines more like humans? What *is* it that makes us human? Is it ethical to impose components of human sentience upon a non-human consciousness? Can sentient machines feel in the same ways we can? *Nier: Automata*'s response to these questions comes in the form of messaging and procedural rhetoric. The messaging in the game is very direct and primarily comes in the form of dialogue straight from the characters themselves. In terms of making players feel a certain way, however, the procedural rhetoric - which, according to Bogost (2007) "entails persuasion...to change opinion or action" - is undoubtedly the strongest device in the game, simply because growing invested in the characters and watching their story unfold is indeed very likely to change the player's actions.

A prime example of messaging in *Nier* is the open condemnation of discriminatory practices. "Machines don't have feelings." One of *Nier*'s protagonists, 9S, states this outright near the beginning of the game, perhaps echoing a human sentiment. This may seem hypocritical at first, since all our main characters are androids themselves. But the machines that 9S refers to are the machine lifeforms, who were created by aliens to destroy humans, and are the mortal enemy of the androids. The machine lifeforms are *Nier*'s version of the "other". The term 'othering' "describes the reductive action of labeling a person as someone who belongs to a subordinate social category defined as the Other", and the practice of 'othering' is "the exclusion of persons who do not fit the norm of the social group".[1] Humans engage in this practice both consciously and subconsciously when they discriminate by gender, race, or social class - and the androids, the human presenting species in the game, discriminate against the alien looking machines because of propaganda and, presumably, their programming. But as we find out later in the game, androids and machine consciousnesses share the same structure; in other words, they are the same. Similarly, humans are all essentially the same genetically, but small differences in race, physical appearance, and gender can incite bias and acts of bigotry. Through messaging, *Nier* shows us the error of our ways by giving some of the machines more human characteristics than all of the androids in the game, proving that 'othering' is a hypocritical practice and calls attention to the fallacy of our prejudices.

In addition to messaging, *Nier* utilizes procedural rhetoric to its full power, using our in-game experiences to meld our real life opinions. While exploring the ruins on Earth, players come across many instances of machines attempting to adopt human characteristics and practices. The machines in the game that aren't simply mindless drones have long since realized

that their alien creators are extinct, and try desperately to find something that will give them meaning. We see a colony of machines adopt religion in order to find meaning, and eventually end up believing that they must die in order to become gods. We see a machine try to find meaning in love and fall in love with another machine, and when he does not return her advances, she starts cannibalizing other machines and stealing their parts in order to make herself more beautiful, because according to humans, beauty attracted love and attention. We see a group of machines trying futilely to recreate human sex acts, and a lone machine rocking an empty cradle. We listen to the antagonist's tirade about trying to find meaning by "adopt[ing] all facets of humanity", and his conclusion that the "core of humanity...is conflict". And as we watch these scenes play out, we are confronted with the discomfort of the humanity that is reflected back at us in the machines' actions. We see that despite thinking that we are different from the machines, we too desperately search for meaning through the same means. It is somewhat hypocritical to be horrified at the grotesquerie of machines committing suicide in the name of religion, or machines being driven mad over love - humans do these things too. This is something that is difficult to realize without witnessing these absurdist, non-humanoid machines engage in such human actions, and this is one of *Nier*'s strongest examples of procedural rhetoric. By playing through these experiences that were carefully constructed to evoke emotion, it is very likely that players will come away with changed opinions of not only the machines, but perhaps themselves as well.

　　Nier's strongest example of procedural rhetoric, and their most apparent device for revealing the hypocrisy of the androids and humans - and to some extent, the players themselves - is a character named Pascal. Pascal is a machine that is physically no different from the

machines that we have been mindlessly slaughtering up until meeting him in the game, but is certainly not mindless himself. In his quest to find meaning after he realized his creators were dead, he decided to start a pacifist machine village where machines could live in peace - and he is clearly very passionate about ensuring that it remains that way. He forms a truce with the android protagonists, and becomes an invaluable resource to them as the game progresses. And every time he comes to their aid, and shows how genuinely he cares about peace for the residents of his little village, we see the androids start to doubt their preconceptions of machines - and in turn, we as players start to as well. After meeting Pascal, we become more aware of the fact that most of the machines we encounter are not attacking us and pose no threat, and we are the ones at fault for murdering innocents. We, the human players, are in the end merely analogous to the in-game humans: we have been using the android protagonists as machine-killing puppets in order to do what we thought was right, and in doing so, "reveal[ed] our yearning to play god [and] to exert domination over our human experience".[7] We realize that in attempting to seek meaning in their world, these machines may actually be more human than our protagonists, whose only apparent goal is to wipe out what they see as a machine infestation. I personally found this storyline the strongest example of procedural rhetoric within the game, and felt guilty enough to stop killing machines unless I was directly provoked. The procedural rhetoric directly affected my in-game actions, and halted the subconscious discrimination that I was engaging in. While I cannot speak for every other player, I can imagine that a significant proportion were affected in the same way.

The conclusion that I personally drew from the messaging and procedural rhetoric in the game is that to be human is to search for meaning in the world around us. Merely surviving is not

sufficient; to put it succinctly, we have to "live, not just survive".[8] In fact, as Pod 042 - android protagonist 2B's auxiliary robot - muses on the nature of being alive during the true ending of the game, it states, "A future is not given to you. It is something you must take for yourself".[2] Just as the machines in *Nier* sought to find meaning in their post-apocalyptic world, it is also up to us as humans to make something out of the sentience we are mysteriously gifted with. After all, in the end, we are all machines created by Nature, and we have chosen to differentiate ourselves from other species through our curiosity to unravel the mysteries of the world around us. *Nier* shows us that certain aspects of our humanity, such as discrimination and prejudice, are hypocritical, but that others, like the search for meaning, are very human and we should not judge others by their means of attempting to do so.

After fully completing the game and viewing the true ending, players are given a difficult choice: to sacrifice their save file in order to help another player fully complete the game, a task which the creators have made impossible without the data of other players. It seems that most players decide to make this sacrifice. Perhaps the creators' intention was to allow the players to draw meaning from their experience in *Nier: Automata*'s world, and in allowing them to sacrifice the many hours of work that they put into their playthrough, gives the players a chance to feel a little more human.

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