How 2B[?]: The Narrative Mechanics of Posthumanism in *NieR: Automata*

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Abstract

This article examines how posthumanism operates through the player-avatar relationship in *NieR: Automata* (Platinum Games, 2017). *NieR: Automata* takes place on a 120th century Earth and sees the player control three android soldiers who fight to retake the planet from an enigmatic force of alien machines on behalf of humanity. However, no humans appear in the game itself. As the war drags on in their absence, androids and machines alike struggle to construct new subjectivities from the fragments of human existence, with each attempt to mimic humanity or deify it ending in violent catastrophes. Through narrative mechanics that build affinity between the player and their avatars, *NieR: Automata* encourages the player to enact a posthuman subjectivity that allows the androids to face the full—and ultimately hopeful—truth of a post-anthropocentric world.

Keywords

Posthumanism; narrative mechanics; Donna Haraway; Rosi Braidotti; cyborg subjectivity; user interface; affinity; *NieR: Automata*.

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> Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death. Is this a curse? Or some kind of punishment? 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.
>
> —Opening monologue of *NieR Automata*, Platinum Games, 2017

Introduction

The above monologue from the android soldier 2B is the first thing the player hears upon starting *NieR: Automata* (*Automata* hereafter; Platinum Games, 2017). *Automata* is a hack-and-slash game that takes place on a 120th century planet Earth, in the middle of a multi-millennia conflict between androids and machines. The androids fight on behalf of their human creators, in whose image they are made, while rust-bucket machine lifeforms fight on behalf of an elusive group of extraterrestrial invaders. Both species of creators are conspicuously absent from the game's early events, which revolve around a strange new development in this endless proxy war as many machines abandon the fight to live in mimicry of the planet's former inhabitants. As 2B (see Figure 1), the player must investigate why.

Figure 1. 2B and Pod 042. Screenshot by the author.

Each character in *Automata* seeks to carve out their own personal source of meaning amidst the cycle of life and death that is the android-machine war. Some, like 2B, pursue meaning by participating in the conflict and situating themselves in relation to its "gods." Others, like the rogue machines, look for transcendent sources of meaning in human behaviours and philosophies. Yet the cycle always repeats; *Automata* has five sequential endings, where the credits roll after a climactic moment, only for the carnage to continue. Part one of this article summarizes these endings in greater detail. The player can eventually break this cycle through a close, fourth wall-breaking relationship with

2B and other androids. The game gradually builds this relationship through gameplay mechanics that blur the lines between the human player and their nonhuman avatars. In this article, I examine this relationship and its role in *Automata* through two theoretical frameworks: critical posthumanism and narrative mechanics.

Critical posthumanism refers to the study of what arises from the deconstruction of human subjectivities rather than the study of what follows the extinction or biological evolution of *Homo sapiens* (Herbrechter, 2018, p. 94). This is a useful lens in analyzing *Automata* for two reasons. Firstly, though *Automata* depicts an earthly future without humans, it is a future where androids and machines struggle with the constant unraveling of the fragmented philosophies and ways of being left behind by the planet's former inhabitants. In other words, the characters of *Automata* perform the process that critical posthumanism studies. Secondly, by decentring the human, critical posthumanism sheds light on how interdependence between the player and their android avatars may lead the former to act with greater empathy in their relationships with nonhumans. In part two of this article, I describe a posthuman subject capable of such relationship-driven actions by drawing from Donna Haraway's (1991) concepts of cyborg subjectivity and affinity and Rosi Braidotti's (2013) exploration of post-anthropocentrism.

In parts three, four, and five, I illustrate how *Automata* embeds various principles of critical posthumanism into its narrative mechanics. As articulated by Suter et al. (2021), narrative mechanics are the structures through which a player interacts with a video game to create and experience a narrative (p. 10). In part three, I explain the general theory of narrative mechanics in greater detail and show how *Automata* embeds narrative mechanics in its user interface to generate affinity between the player and their avatars. In part four, I look at some of the failed machine experiments with human philosophies to explain why simply modifying humanism cannot lead to more satisfactory ways of being, with an additional focus on the androids' deification of their human creators. In the fifth and final part, I show how the game turns the management of save data into a narrative mechanic that, through the player's surrender of their power, gives androids across gameworlds the chance to remove themselves from cycles of conflict. The goal of my analysis is to show how *Automata* uses narrative mechanics to build affinity between the player and their nonhuman avatars in a way that encourages the former to enact a posthuman subjectivity.

Ending[s] Explained

Automata is split into five different routes—A, B, C, D, and E—each with its own story arc, protagonist, and ending. In this route structure, the player experiences a series of events as one android, goes through a climactic event, then plays a new series of events as another android. Some routes take place simultaneously, yet they all advance the same

overall narrative that leads to ending E, which is the game's final conclusion. For example, the events between 2B's opening monologue and the first roll of the credits make up route A. Then, the player replays that section of the game from the perspective of 9S. I provide a diagram below (see Figure 2) that shows how the routes lead into one another and which android the player controls in each.

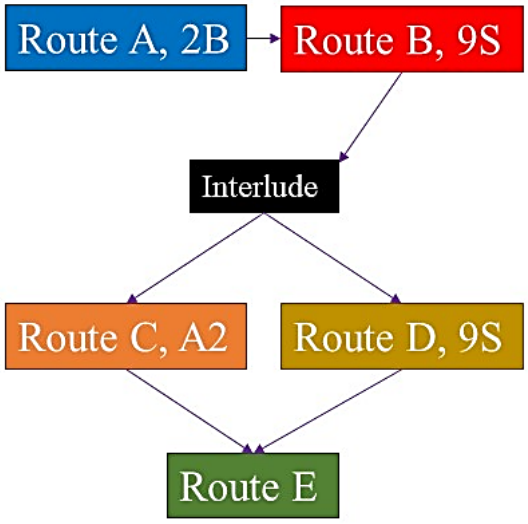

Figure 2. Route diagram for *NieR: Automata*. Created by the author.

In route A, 2B investigates rogue machines alongside her companion, 9S. Both androids serve in project YoRHa; while all androids fight on humanity's behalf, only elite YoRHa androids like 2B and 9S receive their orders directly from a distant "Council of Humanity." Pods 042 and 153—monotone, robotic drones provided by YoRHa—support the investigation, which sees 2B and 9S eventually discover that the machines have exterminated their alien creators. The route ends after 2B and 9S defeat a pair of machines who usurped control of the main machine army in the alien's absence.

In route B, the player repeats the events of route A from the perspective of 9S, whose hacking expertise gives him insight into previously hidden information. This route concludes shortly after 9S discovers that humanity went extinct thousands of years before the game's events and that a few androids have been continually lying about human survival to give the others a reason to fight on.

There is a brief interlude between routes A/B and C/D, where a strange virus that specifically targets YoRHa androids wipes out most of their forces, including 2B. The player then swaps between 9S and A2, a YoRHa deserter whom 9S blames for 2B's death, as they play a cat-and-mouse game amidst a resurgent machine army. Which android the player chooses to control in their final duel determines which ending they get—C or D—though both die regardless.

The second time the player completes the duel between 9S and A2, the Pods rebel against pre-programmed orders to delete YoRHa unit data. They reflect on the game's events and ask the player if they want the androids to survive. Saying "yes" begins route E, which turns the credits into a bullet hell sequence where the player uses a cursor to navigate a maze of projectiles while shooting and destroying the names of each significant contributor to *Automata*. Succeeding here revives the avatars and gives them a chance to find new sources of meaning removed from cyclical conflict. Yet this sequence is nearly impossible; after the player's fourth failure, the Pods allow them to spend save data offered up by other players to easily beat the sequence. There are no more credits after this, only a brief cutscene that shows the Pods reconstructing 2B, 9S, and A2, and a choice: The player can delete and disperse their save data to aid future players who attempt to complete route E.

The continuity between the routes is often confusing. However, understanding the significance of these events depends less on knowing exactly what happens and when, and far more on realizing how the player comes to experience *Automata* as a cyborg subject.

Cyborg Affinities

Where flesh and metal meet, the cyborg is born. Cyborgs are well-known figures in science fiction, yet in "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway (1991) claims that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (p. 149). Grounding her argument in the growing second-wave awareness of fragmentation among feminists along the lines of race and class, Haraway argues that a person's social subjectivity is akin to a cyborg body; each is constructed from countless disparate and sometimes conflicting parts that emerge out of specific historical contexts (p. 155). This leads Haraway to conclude, in a signal contribution to feminist theory, that there is "nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women" (1991, p. 155). Haraway does not fall back on or create new categories to find essential unity among women and explicitly disavows universal, totalizing theories of identity (p. 181). In her words, a cyborg "would not recognize the Garden of Eden [a place of unity before original sin]; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (Haraway, 1991, p. 151). Though Haraway's articulation of cyborg subjectivity comes from "women and other present tense, illegitimate cyborgs" who do not neatly fit the masculine mould of European humanism (1991, p. 177), she does not claim that women alone are cyborgs. Instead, she states that "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism. In short, we are cyborgs" (Haraway, 1991, p. 150). Here I build on Haraway's statements against essentialism to argue that there is nothing about being *Homo sapiens* that naturally binds humanity.

Haraway's (1991) embrace of chimeric identity and her abandonment of essential unity are what make cyborg subjectivity posthuman, instead of a continuation or modification of humanism. It may not seem this way

at first; in Jean-Paul Sartre's (1946/1975) explanation of existentialism as an atheistic humanism, he states that the human subject is a being whose existence precedes its essence (p. 349). This means that unlike a book or other created item, the human subject is not designed for a specific purpose. The human "encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards" (Sarte, 1946/1975, p. 349). The idea that humans do not necessarily share a common essence appears similar to Haraway's abandonment of essential unity. However, Sartre emphasizes that the capacity to construct oneself in such a way that surpasses, reinforces, or accommodates the circumstances of one's birth is a universal quality among humans (p. 362). From here, Sartre draws two crucial conclusions that separate his existential human subject from Haraway's posthuman cyborg. The first claim is that "we may say there is a human universality, but it is not something given; it is perpetually made" (Sartre, 1946/1975, p. 362). The second claim is that, since the human subject recognizes objects only in relation to its self-definition and self-surpassing, there is "no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity" (Sartre, 1946/1975, p. 368).

Automata satirizes Sartre's existentialist humanism and his related conclusions about the universe through the character of Jean-Paul (see Figure 3). This top-hat-wearing machine avoids war with the androids to seek higher truth and a sense of meaning through introspection. While he finds some level of peace in this pursuit, Jean-Paul makes no impact on the other characters or the narrative; when the avatars interact with him, Jean-Paul only ever recites and ponders over quotes from his namesake, with no acknowledgement of any object or being around him. Refusing to look outside the universe of human subjectivity does little to construct positive relationships and social ways of being in a world exclusively populated by nonhumans. In contrast to Sartre (1946/1975), Haraway (1991) does not situate individual self-determination as a potential ground for universal understanding or mutual identification, meaning that cyborgs must find ways to relate to others that do not rely on shared identity. She thus situates cyborgs in a universe of subjectivity that is not restricted to what may be recognized through the mirror-like recognition of self-defining humans, leading to a more fruitful way of looking at the relationships between characters in *Automata* and the player's relationship to their avatars. This new way centres on the concept of affinity.

Figure 3. The robot Jean-Paul. Screenshot by the author.

Haraway (1991) defines affinity as the state of being related to others by choice, in contrast to the state of genealogical or essential relation (p. 155). Though relations grounded in identity may appear permanent, coalitions based on affinity are more reliable for cyborgs and their ever-changing selves. Imagine posthuman affinity and identity in terms of the plug-in chips that govern an android's operations in *Automata*: Certain chips are always necessary for an android's continued survival, such as the operating system chip, while others may be swapped in and out depending on the challenge at hand (see Figure 4). For example, I might equip 2B with a chip that makes her faster so I can win races in the side quest "Speed Star." Then, I might equip her with a different chip to strengthen her attacks for a boss battle. While changing chips does not in itself substantially alter 2B's character or personality, different chip configurations create opportunities for novel exchange with others. At the end of the "Speed Star" races, the defeated machine racer crowns the racing android "the greatest speedster the world has ever known" and shares a reflection on obsession and competition; the androids are only able to hear and internalize this reflection with a speedy enough chipset. As with these androids, the parts that help make up who we are—cells, beliefs, hobbies, identities—shift based on context and can lead to affinity-building interactions that in turn affect each party's subjectivity. The cyborg model of shifting identity and its consequent emphasis on relation through affinity opens new ways for the player to understand their role in post-anthropocentric worlds.

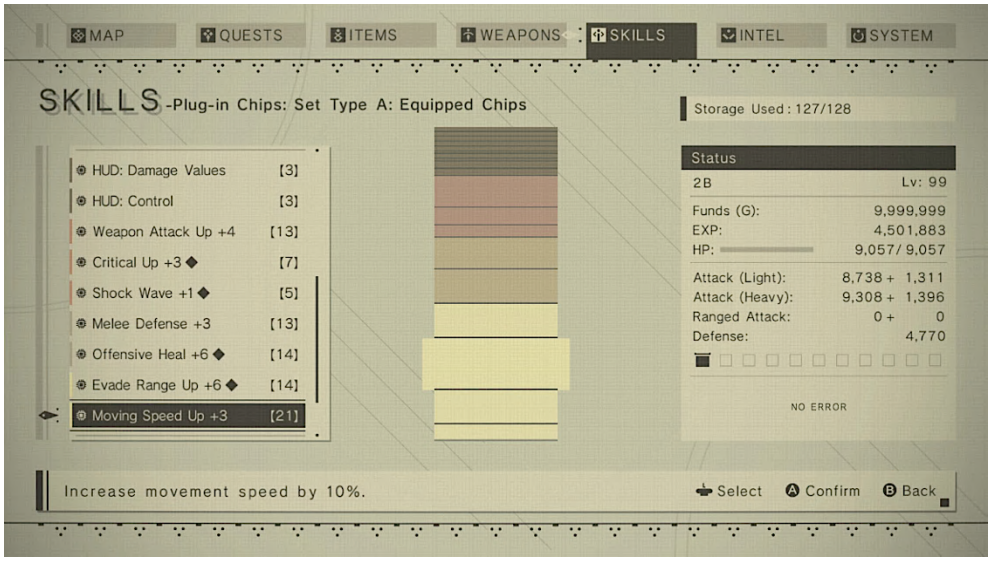

Figure 4. Chipset menu. Screenshot by the author.

The world of *Automata* is at once post-anthropocentric and anthropocentric. It is post-anthropocentric in that humanity as a species is gone from the world, while it is anthropocentric in that the spectre of humanity haunts the game's characters at every turn. For example, YoRHa ends every communication with a worshipful refrain of "Glory to Mankind," evoking the image of absent gods to justify earthly carnage. In *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti (2013) describes a similarly grim type of post-anthropocentrism on 21st century Earth, arguing that the idea of human subjectivity is locked in a feedback loop with violent schemes of commodification. An example she gives in this regard is how, in 2002, parts of the agricultural sector in the United Kingdom began feeding their cows meat-based fodder, which led to the outbreak of mad cow disease; at the same time, many Afghans bearing the fallout of the American invasion of their country were forced to eat grass to survive (p. 7). Braidotti characterizes this situation as post-anthropocentric because it demonstrates how the extent to which a being enjoys humane treatment—in this case, the access to food—has far more to do with their place in hierarchies of commodification than their physical humanity (p. 8). Like in *Automata*, humanity here is an ideal that sits atop a pyramid of domination, where those who situate themselves closest to the ideal enact violence on those below. At the top of this real hierarchy sits the property-owning rights holders of industrialized capitalist countries, in whose image the human subject was constructed (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 14–16) and whose lack of concern for nonhuman and dehumanized others suggests little regard for any universe but that of the human.

Yet there are fictional and very real universes that exist beyond human subjectivity, as evidenced by the fact that environmental changes have called into question the continued existence of humanity as a species (Braidotti, 2013, p. 63). A widespread response among animal and environmental activists to this crisis is what Braidotti dubs

"compensatory humanism." Compensatory humanism would see the extension of certain aspects of human subjectivity, such as self-reflexive consciousness, to at least some nonhumans (Braidotti, 2013, p. 76). Rather than moving beyond the human that sits atop pyramids of commodification and can only recognize subjectivity in a reflection of the self, compensatory humanism would tie this subject to life itself. Braidotti regards this approach as dangerous and contradictory, given it comes during a time when the category of "human" is becoming unsustainable (p. 79). Much like attempts to find violent meaning through the figure of humanity in the human-less world of *Automata*, compensatory humanism seeks to save the human subject by forcing it upon a world in which it either has no place or is losing its place. Braidotti instead calls for new networks of kinship between humans and nonhumans that do not require the mirror recognition of sameness (p. 80). Video games such as *Automata* can help create such networks through mechanics that encourage the player to build affinity with nonhuman others through action.

Mechanics of Affinity in the User Interface

A grasp of narrative mechanics is crucial to understand how games like *Automata* operate as storytelling media. Suter et al. (2021) begin their description of narrative mechanics by paraphrasing Marie-Laure Ryan (2004), who argues that a work "does not have to be narrative, but it can have a certain narrativity that is awakened in the viewer or listener or user" (Suter et al., 2021, p. 10). While it may be true that games—with their branching paths, multiple endings, and fail states—may not give all players the same consistent narrative, they contain mechanics through which players create and experience narratives. These "narrative mechanics" respond to player inputs by giving feedback as narrative content. A narrative mechanic may be simple, like when the player is shown a cutscene after defeating the final boss of a linear story. Narrative mechanics can also be exceedingly complex, such as when the player faces a dilemma borne out of prior choices going back dozens of hours, or when the player's action affects procedural story generation. Yet regardless of complexity, narrative mechanics are what make games meaningful.

Not all games make equal use of their narrative mechanics, however; Teun Dubbelman (2021) argues that maximizing the effectiveness of a narrative mechanic requires that the developer use it in harmony with gameplay mechanics (pp. 79–80). Dubbelman suggests that a series of narrative events does not need to be explicit or linear if "the causal connections between events can be made cognitively by the user" (2021, p. 81). Dubbelman further suggests that the best way for video games to ensure the player can draw such connections is by changing how the system responds to player input at key points in the narrative (p. 86). An example that Dubbelman cites in this regard is *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (2013) by Starbreeze Studios and how, in the absence of dialogue, the way the player can control the younger brother changes

to show how he emotionally processes his older brother's death (pp. 87–88). Similarly, creative uses of narrative mechanics are required in a game like *Automata* so that the player can realize more subtle aspects of the narrative that might otherwise get lost in its confusing shuffle between routes and perspectives. What is especially interesting here is that, beyond using gameplay to help tell its story, *Automata* also puts narrative mechanics into what are normally extradiegetic spaces, including its user interface (UI).

Automata presents the settings configuration UI as an intra-diegetic part of the android body, establishing affinity by making the player aware of the mutual dependence they share with their avatars. After 2B's first body is destroyed during the prologue, her saved memories are uploaded into a new body in the YoRHa bunker. At this point, the player sees a black screen and an inaudible text prompt from 9S that states 2B must adjust the brightness of her new body (see Figure 5). Configuration here becomes a kind of minigame wherein the player must choose certain options to succeed and advance the story. For example, should the player set the self-destruct permission to "off," 9S will inform them that YoRHa requires androids to always have self-destruct available. He will continue to insist as much until the player turns self-destruct "on," showing how YoRHa and its war for mankind robs 2B of control over her own body and deaths. There is an irony inherent in this configuration game insofar as the player is ultimately in control of the UI, not 2B. Still, this sequence reminds the player that they must look after 2B's interests and safety if they are to continue playing in this world. It also ensures the player feels the same constraints as 2B if they try to turn self-destruct off. A further irony is that these joint constraints may lead the player to share some of 2B's quiet resentment against those who created the androids: humans.

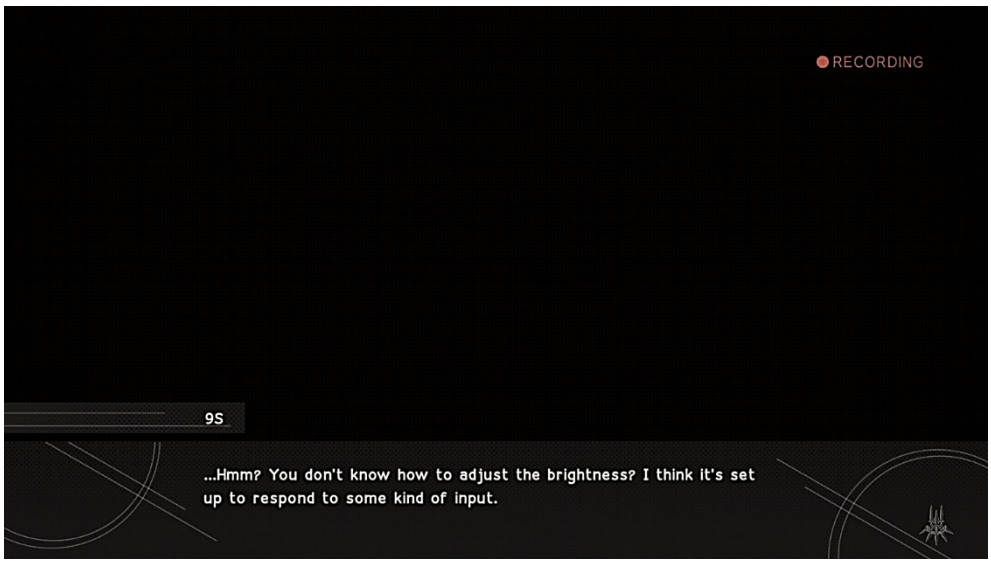

Figure 5. Settings configuration. Screenshot by the author.

While the third-person camera angle is a constant reminder that there remains a degree of separation between the player and 2B, it is not always clear where one ends and the other begins, especially in the shared space of the UI. This relationship defies clean categorization on the social typology of player-avatar relationships (PARs) that Jaime Banks (2015) establishes in "Object, Me, Symbiote, Other." Banks looks at qualities of self-differentiation, emotional intimacy, and perceived agency to determine the extent to which different kinds of PARs may be considered "social" (2015, para. 42), with influence and affect flowing between the two parties (para. 6–7). At first glance, the PAR in *Automata* seems to fall squarely into the avatar-as-other category, which Banks identifies as the most social; it is a relationship where the avatar is "experienced as a distinct moral agent with its own governing systems, life history, and trajectory" (2015, para. 53). However, the player's relationship to 2B and the other android avatars also exhibits elements of the avatar-as-symbiote category, which Banks describes as less social. There is an "emphasis on negotiating identities and sense-making" with the androids—something the blurring of boundaries in the UI makes clear—though this does not necessarily lead the two to become more alike, which Banks identifies as the end result of a symbiotic PAR (2015, para. 52). The positively messy relationship between the player and the androids may be best described as an affinity coalition where the player must "respect the bond of mutual dependence between bodies and technological others [who remain as others]" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 90). By supporting the android protagonists from a degree of distance, the player acts as a cyborg who cares for the others that contribute to their posthuman subjectivity.

Lest the player forget their dependence on their technological others, *Automata* reminds them through every death. Outside of a few moments, each time the player gets an android avatar killed, they respawn from an access point with their avatar having lost all their equipped chips. To retrieve the chipset they had before dying, the player must return to the place of their defeat and get their chips from a beat-up android corpse, with the risk of having to fight the same enemies that had bested them using a weaker chipset. This arduous recovery process changes gameplay deaths from a routine mechanic of trial-and-error into a narrative enactment of the cycle that 2B speaks of in the prologue. Given that game mechanics carry messages through how they reward or punish player action (Pfister, 2021), *Automata* encourages the player to remember the separate and digitally embodied nature of the android avatars by linking deaths to chipsets; this incentivizes the player to take extra care to keep the androids alive in combat, as each failure and loss of chips makes the game harder. The most powerful reminder of the interdependence in this affinity coalition is the final death of 2B herself.

The player can only watch as the UI slowly breaks down after 2B contracts the logic virus: The health bar takes on strange proportions;

the screen is enveloped in visual glitches and turns to greyscale; audio becomes choppy and then cuts out altogether (see Figure 6). The player's careful configurations are rendered meaningless as mechanics break down and 2B—their window into the game—dies. Fighting alongside and then losing this first companion helps propel the player through the rest of the story in the hopes that the surviving characters can find a way to live outside the cyclical conflicts that claim 2B.

Figure 6. 2B's death. Screenshot by the author.

Deconstructing the Human

The conflict that leads to 2B's death is driven by the imaginary human subject. YoRHa and other android forces claim to fight on humanity's behalf as the machine army fights to destroy it. Meanwhile, breakaway factions of rogue machines mimic human existence amidst the ruins of their civilizations, with leaders named after influential European philosophers. In his analysis of *Automata* as "the ultimate humanist fable," Michael Saba (2018) claims that the game uses this referential system to take various "schools of thought and then takes them to their logical conclusion and deconstructs them through the game's far-future sci-fi setting" (3:47). In this section, I support and build on a few examples of Saba's analysis of this deconstruction. However, bearing in mind the way narrative mechanics operate in *Automata* to foster affinity between the player and nonhuman androids, I disagree with Saba's assertion that the goal of this deconstruction is to make the player participate in a dialectical "reconstruction of the pillars of humanist philosophy" (2018, 43:20). Humanism is not the solution to suffering in *Automata*; rather, it is the problem.

Given the influence of Haraway's feminism (1991) on posthuman identity, I will analyze an enemy machine that takes its name from one of the most integral figures of modern feminism: Simone. Saba (2018) explains how the character design of this boss was influenced by *The Second Sex* (1949/1989) and the argument of its author, Simone de

Beauvoir, that "women's status as a separate sex is socially constructed and reinforced by changing societal norms that are not rooted in biology or hard science" (2018, 17:30). Equally important to this argument is the notion that ideals of femininity are influenced by "the gaze of society—specifically men" (Saba, 2018, 17:50). De Beauvoir's robotic counterpart in *Automata* is a gruesome embodiment of her theory. Simone falls in love with the male presenting Jean-Paul, who does not return her affection. Taking a cue from some of Earth's former inhabitants, she adorns herself with the traditional trappings of Western femininity to attract his eye. Simone does this by butchering machines and androids and using their bodies to enhance her beauty (see Figure 7). Jean-Paul still does not return her affections and remains absorbed in his self-centred search for truth, leading Simone to inflict more carnage. 2B and 9S investigate the disappearance of their comrades around Simone's lair and engage her in battle. Saba points out how, late in this battle, the game wrests control of the camera and directs it away from Simone. He concludes by noting how the camera mechanics resist player input: "You cannot look at her, no matter what. Simone is performing her gender, but no one is watching" (Saba, 2018, 19:22).

Figure 7. Simone with android earrings. Screenshot by the author.

The implication of Saba's (2018) analysis here is that it can be pointless and even destructive to cling to socially based identities as if they were immutable facts of life, especially where the contexts and peoples behind those identities have fallen away. That is sensible enough, yet Saba uses Simone's story to support his argument that the overriding message of *Automata* is that one should show compassion to other people based on something that is supposedly immutable: our shared humanity. In contrast, I see Simone's battle as a hint that, like femininity, the human subject itself is socially constructed and can be destructive, especially where it has outlived its usefulness. In "Can Existentialism be a Posthumanism?" Christine Daigle (2020) looks to De Beauvoir as a precursor to posthuman materialist feminism. She claims

that de Beauvoir's works on ambiguity reveal how a subject is "always an embodied and situated consciousness that is also always in relation with others, treated at times as an object and at other times like a subject" (2020, p. 767). This statement suggests that a subject is never at all times human, in the sense of someone whose very being contains an inherent ability to self-define. Simone therefore complicates the initial questions of *Automata* about meaning within cycles of life and death. If there is no essential meaning within one's body, and if there are no gods to prescribe meaning—as I will discuss shortly—then beings must create meaning *in relation* with subjects and objects outside the human, as a cyborg might. New questions arise here: What tools do the player and the androids have? And together, what should they create?

Before turning to these questions, I must address the lack of an embodied human presence in *Automata* through another machine case study: Kierkegaard. This machine, named after the 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard, leads a short-lived machine cult in the ruins of an abandoned factory. Again, in Saba's (2018) words, "[Kierkegaard] argued that human individuality was a real and concrete thing thanks to our ability to reason and choose between right and wrong" (25:50), an argument the philosopher used to critique organized religious institutions that claimed to hand down truth from on-high (26:28). The machine version of Kierkegaard promptly self-destructs upon meeting 2B, leading his followers to initiate a mass suicide and massacre in an attempt to follow his lead and, according to their mantra, "become as gods." In route A, Kierkegaard appears to be an ironic and straightforward expression of his real-life counterpart's skepticism toward Christian sects that undervalue the capacity for reasoned individual choice. That is how Saba interprets the machine Kierkegaard in his search for humanist themes, discussing him solely in how he appears in route A. Through the game's narrative mechanic of rewarding the player with new context for replaying content, I find a different interpretation of Kierkegaard in route B.

2B's encounter with Kierkegaard occurs during a brief separation between her and 9S as the latter recovers from hacking damage. In route B, the player leaves 2B in the factory to help 9S reboot his systems on the YoRHa server, where he discovers the truth about human extinction. When 9S confronts YoRHa's commander about the deception behind their founding mythology, she tells him that "no one fights without a reason. And we need a god worth dying for." In sum, Project YoRHa and the lie of humanity's survival give androids a reason to defend themselves against the machines and, more broadly, a reason for life and death. The androids practice humanism in *Automata* as a kind of religion, where the idea of the human is an object of worship and servitude. According to Claire Colebrook (2014), this kind of humanism is not unlike atheistic humanisms of the modern day. She states that "the retreat to a world in which there is *only man*, not God, remains theological—for God has been subtracted but the world as God-less

(abandoned to man) remains" (Colebrook, 2014, p. 160, emphasis in original). In a theological world minus God, the role of God defaults to humanity, a notion that Sartre (1946/1975) embraces in his explanation of existentialist humanism when he says that "if [he] ha[s] excluded God the Father, there must be someone to invent values" (p. 367). It is unsurprising then that if humanism only recognizes the universe of the human subject, it will come to affirm all value and purpose in the ideal of that subject. The brutal world of *Automata* thus stands as a demonstration of what it may be like to exist as a nonhuman in a humanist social order.

Of course, not all nonhumans are the same, and in *Automata*, they differentiate themselves based on their degree of resemblance to the human subject. Where many contemporary societies situate all moral value within human subjectivity to mine profit from nonhumans, as Braidotti (2013) argues, the androids of *Automata* use their religious humanism to mine meaning from their never-ending crusade against the machines, finding self-worth serving the gods they resemble. Yet the machines are not immune to the consequences of human worship either. As 9S discovers the truth, 2B runs to escape priestly robots who urge her to die and become a god (see Figure 8), or perhaps a human, because in *Automata* they are the same thing. Here the player discovers the answer to 2B's question of whether she would ever get the chance to kill God: No. God is already dead. The characters of *Automata* suffer because they cannot face this truth for fear of the resulting uncertainties and potential lack of meaning. Their salvation lies in player action that allows the characters to construct new meanings that are more compatible with the post-anthropocentric and post-theological nature of their world. As to what this posthuman action might be, one can look again to Haraway (1991), who suggests that cyborgs should take pleasure in the confusion of boundaries *and* responsibility for their construction where necessary (p. 150). Therefore, when the player is finished taking their android avatars through this deconstruction of humanism in routes A to D, they are encouraged to remove themselves from the gameworld in route E.

Figure 8. Cultists ambush 2B. Screenshot by the author.

Good Without God

By the end of routes C and D, it appears Project YoRHa has been successful. Shortly before his duel with A2, 9S learns that the strange virus which destroyed the rest of YoRHa seized on an intentional weakness built into their bunker. The goal was that there would be nobody from YoRHa left to question why humanity's vanguard never received their orders in person. In the absence of survivors, other androids may over time come to believe that the YoRHa martyrs really were graced with visits from their gods. As the credits roll, the androids' erstwhile Pod helpers begin deleting all data related to the Project. Yet one wrinkle remains.

Haraway (1991) wonders whether 20th century cyborgs can "subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the enemy," born as they were from a strange amalgam of militarism, patriarchal capitalism, and state socialism (p. 293). The absence of a stable union between these ideologies makes their children, in Haraway's eyes, illegitimate. The cyborgs are bastards born out of wedlock. It is here that Haraway finds her hope that cyborgs might subvert the apocalyptic trajectory of their forebears. In her words, "illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (Haraway, 1991, p. 293). In the case of the androids, their fathers are dead. These are illegitimate, not-quite-human children whose subjectivities spring from a strange coupling between a synthetic body, human ideologies, and player input. The human subject alone cannot fulfill these 120th century beings, yet they are ruined by their attempts to remain faithful to its spirit of exclusion and dominance. The player is not the only one who may realize this by the end of routes C and D. Pod 042 stops purging YoRHa data when it comes across the personal records of 2B, 9S, and A2. Here the Pods discuss the risks of salvaging the data, and pose a question directly to the player: "[D]o you still wish for them to survive?"

Selecting "Yes" begins the bullet hell credit sequence, where the player must blast away the names of each contributor to *Automata* (see Figure 9).

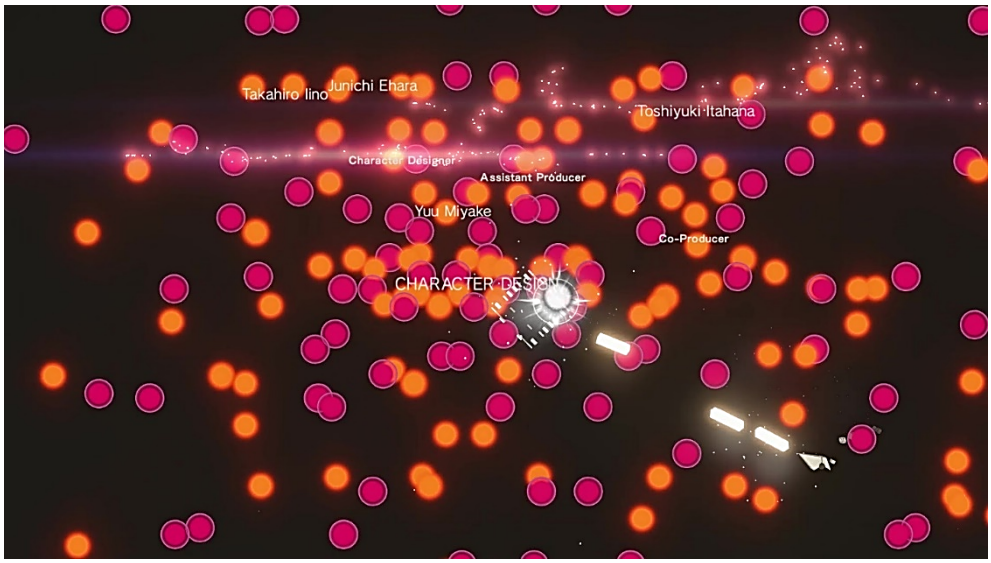

Figure 9. Bullet hell. Screenshot by the author.

As Saba (2018) notes, the bullet hell credits are a twist on 2B's initial desire to kill God (35:45). Here, God is not a physical being but rather the authors of the fiction that is *Automata.* This fiction imprisons the androids and contains no happy ending, so the player must join with their characters to tear it down. Explaining its resistance, Pod 042 says:

> We [the Pods] were created to execute the androids' Project YoRHa plan. We had no capacity for emotion. But when we six were connected and exchanged information, something . . . happened. I cannot deny the feeling of something resembling consciousness and emotion being born.

While the game never names these six actors, it seems likely that they are 2B, 9S, A2, Pods 042 and 153, and the player.

These six actors do not emerge from the cycle of violence as individual soldiers or tools in a humanist war. Instead, they become cyborgs within something that N. Katherine Hayles (2016) calls a cognitive assemblage. Hayles defines cognition as a "process of interpreting information and connecting it with meaning" (2016, p. 32). Much as Haraway (1991) emphasizes the power of relationships in formations of subjectivity, Hayles asserts that human-to-human and human-to-technology connections shape and enhance cognition. Drawing on examples that range from automated traffic controls (pp. 38–41) to nonverbal group social cues (pp. 41–45), Hayles explains that an assemblage of cognitive agents can "scale up," adding and refining connections to make progressively more advanced decisions (pp. 32–33). Where Haraway claims that connectivity makes humans into "chimeras" (p. 150), the concept of cognitive assemblage suggests that connectivity plays a role

in enabling beings to think of themselves as humans or chimeras in the first place. As Hayles says: "When we design, implement, and extend technical cognitive systems, we are partially designing ourselves" (2016, p. 55). It seems that by playing *Automata*—learning systems, personalizing settings, tinkering with chipsets—the player integrates themselves into a cognitive assemblage that elevates the cognition of the Pods. They are no longer servile support drones: They are beings who exchange information, connect it with subjective, emotional meaning, and act accordingly. However, even with the Pods' help, the assemblage of six alone is not enough to overcome the authors of *Automata*.

If the player fails four times without giving up, a message appears that reads "RESCUE OFFER RECEIVED FROM [random player name]." If the player accepts this rescue offer, their cursor is joined by six additional cursors that fire alongside it, while the backing track swells from a single voice to a chorus. Suddenly, the difficulty of route E melts away. The player can blast their way to the final cutscene where the Pods re-create 2B, 9S, and A2 to live one last time in a world without Project YoRHa and its crusade. Exactly what kind of meaning they will find in this new world is unclear, but that is the point. The meaning is theirs to create post-anthropos—and therefore post-player. After this scene, the player must choose whether to delete their save data and send it off to provide an additional cursor for another player attempting to complete route E (see Figure 10).

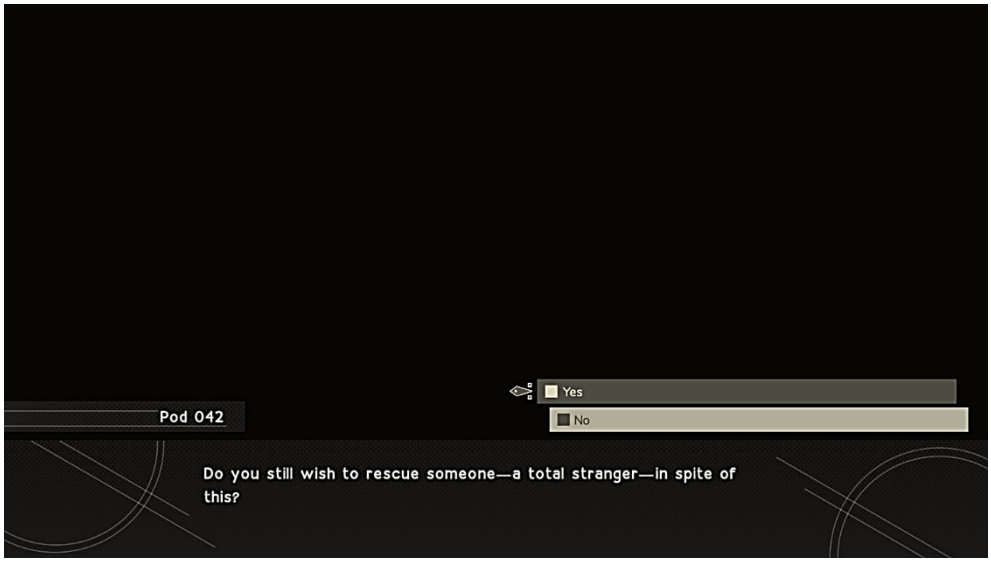

Figure 10. Final query. Screenshot by the author.

This is undoubtedly a difficult choice for many players. The mechanic of game-saving may exist to preserve player progress, but in open-world games like *Automata*, it also serves a pseudo-narrative function of guaranteeing the player's place inside the gameworld and their control over it. Ulrich Götz (2021) points out how this arrangement limits the power and potential of narratives within open-world games:

> When all the options of the events that can be triggered are exhausted, these virtual counterparts shift into a meaningless, idle state that signals the end of this section of the plot . . . Thus, it becomes apparent that, although open-world games are characterized by an immense abundance of sequential or parallel narrative strands, a strange absence of time prevails within these game worlds. (pp. 171–172)

The absence of time that Götz speaks of here is contained within completed save files so the player can re-experience content at their leisure. However, as everything from the UI to the chipsets to this final choice shows, the player is not an android. They do not have a permanent place in the world of *Automata*, but they do have this choice. The mechanic of save creation and save deletion now pushes the story in one of two directions. If the player refuses to delete their save data, they preserve a world state in which the androids remain trapped in their violent cycle of life and death. If the player gives up their data, they give up their human godhood over this virtual world and let multiple versions of 2B, 9S, and A2 go on a better path.

Saba (2018) finds meaning in the sacrifice of save data in the fact that "you're not sacrificing yourself for a fictional NPC. You're doing it for a real-life, flesh and blood human" (39:30). This is the truth, but only a part of it. When Saba claims that *Automata* shows its player how "the only way to escape the death spiral of modernity is to commit a senseless and selfless act of compassion" (2018, 43:55) through save deletion, he rationalizes compassion through a Sartrean recognition of the self in other humans. Because other players are fellow humans who also struggle to define what that means, so this line of thinking goes, the player should show compassion and help these self-like others escape *Automata* and its depressing philosophical quagmires. Much like the caricature of existentialism provided in the robot Jean-Paul, this anthropocentric reliance on sameness cannot adequately explain the actions of a player who self-deletes; their choice does not come in the absence of everything else that occurs in the narrative. The player is not asked to make this sacrifice as a display of their shared humanity with another person, but instead as the culmination of their lengthy struggle to help the androids find a better way to be post-anthropos. *Automata* makes this appeal based on the experiences that players share, including an affinity for the game's nonhuman characters.

Relationships are the cornerstones of shifting identity and action in the posthuman arrangement that emerges if the player deletes their save data in route E, truly doing away with the anthropocentric privileging of the human that causes so much suffering in fiction and reality. This relational arrangement is the key to understanding the "paradoxical posthuman future of a human present," which Ranghild Solberg (2021, para. 8) finds within her posthumanist analysis of *Automata*. It may seem that humanity is centred time and time again and that an

ostensibly human actor decides the outcome of the narrative. This paradox begins to make sense through the realization that posthumanism is a subjectivity that is enacted. Rather than deriving its meaning from an essential capacity for self-realization, a posthuman subject along the lines of the cyborg realizes itself through its role in active relationships. These relationships of affect are not only what constitutes the cyborgs of social reality, they are also the cognitive links that help cyborgs to think of themselves as subjects in the first place. In as much as we all exist in relation, we are always and already cyborgs who inhabit a post-anthropocentric world, as Haraway (1991, p. 150) and Braidotti (2013, p. 65) suggest.

Through its affinity-building narrative mechanics, *Automata* encourages the player to show care in their meaning-making relationships with the androids. In route E, the player has the opportunity to be a good cyborg beyond their own gameworld, extending an offer of assistance to other gameworlds while removing themselves from diegetic space to stop the "perpetual cycle of war, dying, and rebirth that the videogame represents" (Solberg, 2021, para. 8). This self-removal indicates how the posthuman subject most powerfully differs from the human. While Colebrook (2014) claims that the posthuman turn is similar to the removal of God from a humanist world, where formerly human subjects retain the exclusive power of universal access and interpretation (pp. 160–161), in posthumanism there is a potential for the responsible construction of boundaries. Cyborgs may yet leave the worlds that go beyond human *or* posthuman subjectivity in peace.

Conclusion

Addressing a potential objection to her cyborg subject, Haraway (1991) discusses the claim that "women more than men somehow sustain daily life, and so have a privileged epistemological position" (p. 180). While she acknowledges that this claim has an appeal for those who wish to make undervalued female activity more visible, Haraway cautions how such a claim would confer onto women an untenable status as the "ground of life itself," adjacent to godhood (1991, p. 180). Thus, she concludes her manifesto with this statement: "Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (Haraway, 1991, p. 181). After completing *Automata*, I feel much the same. I would rather be a posthuman cyborg than a human god because as those who sought to imitate the dead gods of *Automata* demonstrate, becoming human is an impossible task for beings made from disparate and flawed parts. To find a better way to be, the player must embrace their own ambiguous, imperfect self, and play in affinity with equally strange and imperfect others.

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