

**RQ: How and to what effect do  
NieR:Automata's camera mechanics  
utilize postmodernism to explore the  
game's central theme?**

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**Course: MA Games Design**

**Unit: Critical Play and Development**

**Word Count: 2793**

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## Introduction

Samsara, the “suffering-laden cycle of life, death, and rebirth, without beginning or end” (Wilson, 2021) is fundamental to Buddhism and the human experience in general. It has been studied through countless lenses, ranging from those of different religions, to philosophical and artistic ones. A recent interpretation of the theme can be discerned in the 2017 PlatinumGames action role-playing game NieR:Automata (NieR), in which players are confronted with the existential dilemma of finding meaning in an abandoned, dystopian world. While the game’s three automata protagonists wage a proxy war against invasive robots in the name of humanity, their own identities and purposes are put into question. Accordingly, NieR’s designers explore the subjectivity of life’s meaning by adapting the mentalities of renowned philosophers and pushing their principles to the extreme, leading to deconstruction and subversion. This technique closely resembles postmodernism, a movement the Tate Museum associates with “scepticism, irony and philosophical critiques of the concepts of universal truths and objective reality” (no date), and Britannica defines as “subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason” (Duignan, 2020). Though nearly all components of the game contribute to NieR’s study of meaning, techniques distinctive of and customizable to the medium of video games are especially noteworthy. Arguably the most conspicuous way to portray perspective is the game camera, through which, upon analysis, NieR strongly channels postmodernism. This paper will aim to extract the designers’ methods and intentions behind the use of postmodern techniques in the camera’s design.

## Literature Review: Postmodern Themes & Devices

The following section will establish a key understanding of postmodernist devices. Points of discussion will be limited and tailored to their relevance for the ensuing case study of NieR.

### Brief History

Postmodernism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as reaction to, or debatably just an outgrowth of, established principles behind modernism (New World Encyclopedia, no date). With its roots in the aftermath and disillusionment of World War II, features of postmodernism include a critical and satirical attitude towards established systems and beliefs, reflected through devices that create disorientation and confusion in audiences (New World Encyclopedia). Fragmented, indeterminate, discontinuous, or aleatory narrative structures and point of view (Hassan, 1978, p.43) along with irony, parody, and self-reflection are exemplary devices commonly used by

postmodernists to undermine an audience's preconceptions of what narratives, or reality, should traditionally resemble (New World Encyclopedia).

## Perspective & Subjectivity

One way postmodernism rejects preestablished conventions in media, and particularly literature, is by undermining the idea of the grand narrative, which is described as "theories which claim to provide universal explanations and trade on the authority this gives them" (Sim, 1998, p.261). Consequently, postmodernists frequently highlight pluralism, which emphasizes little narratives and plural interpretations as possible interpretations (pp.335-336). The practice of genre blending, meaning the mixing of multiple genres into one text (Todd, no date), can be used to the same effect. Implicitly, these devices accentuate fragmentation, subjectivity, and perspectives.

## Identity

Forcibly entangled with the exploration of perspectives is the concept of identity. Contrary to previous schools of thought, postmodernism no longer views identity as something intrinsic to an individual. Rather, it proposes that identity is external, only defined by the discourses and relativities between individuals (1998, Currie, p.25). In a narrative context, Professor of Contemporary Writing Mark Currie describes the identities of fictional characters as something that can be manufactured (p.25). He highlights distance, point of view, and positionality as devices authors may use to control a reader's perception of a character's identity, and debates if and how the reader's identity is affected by the sympathy that may emerge (pp.27-27). In short, the postmodern identity of real and fictional characters can be viewed as subjective, its existence reliant on the existence and position of an audience.

## Presence

The self-awareness of an audience, and its role as a part of the narrative is another postmodern manoeuvre. Mark Currie explains that postmodern novels "like to thematise their own artificiality, often by constructing an internal boundary between fiction and reality, which allows for reflection on the relation between fiction and reality, as well as the irony that both the fiction and the reality are, in the end, fictional" (1998, p.2). There is an implication of the fourth wall and self-reflexive narratives that are broken through devices such as irony or, as further elaborated by Currie, intertextuality (1998, p.3). The audience as recipients, critical thinkers, and perceivers of their own reality are hence given a presence and an identity in the work itself.


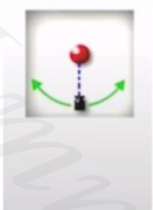

## Literature Review: Game Cameras

While cameras are clearly not exclusive to or an invention of the video game medium, their implementations and purposes differ widely from those of cinematic cameras. The following section will briefly elaborate on established camera techniques and terminology. Furthermore, links between the postmodern concepts explained previously and video game cameras will be drawn where possible.





### Gamatography Styles

Gamatography refers to, as stated by game designer Tadhg Kelly, “a set of rules and best practises to describe how best to deploy a camera in a game” (no date). Figure 1 summarizes Journey's (2012, Thatgamecompany) feel engineer John Nesky's descriptions of three styles of gamatography from his 2014 GDC talk:

**Figure 1 : Gamatography Styles & Camera Distances after John Nesky**

Camera Distances	Fixed-angle 3 <sup>rd</sup> Person	Dynamic 3 <sup>rd</sup> Person	1 <sup>st</sup> Person
Diagrams by John Nesky (2014, 2:52)			
Camera-Player Distance	Long	Long-Short (Variable)	None
Camera Swivel Diameter	Limited	Variable (360° possible)	360°
Avatar Tracking?	Sometimes	Yes	No
Walls of Confined Spaces Broken?	Yes	Sometimes	No

**Key**

- Camera 
- Avatar 
- Distance 
- Camera Swivel 

Nesky describes the “distance between the camera and the avatar” to be the key difference between the styles. Distance can thereby be interpreted as a determining factor in both how obstructive or helpful a camera is for players, as well as how players perceive and interact with the game world and characters. This is reminiscent of Mark Curries explanations of manufacturing fictional identities through point of view and distance, hinting at similar applications.

### Viewpoints

In addition to the distance and interaction between the camera and the player, it is also important to consider how the placement of the camera determines visibility. In her book Game Design Workshop, Tracy Fullerton states: “The controls, viewpoint, and interface all work together

symbolically to create the game experience and allow the player to understand and have agency within the system” (2019, p.260). She highlights five common viewpoints and their effects, as summarized in Figure 2:

**Figure 2 : Viewpoints after Tracy Fullerton**

Viewpoints	Overhead View	Side View	Isometric View	First-Person View	Third-Person View
Cited Examples by Tracy Fullerton (2019, pp.260-263)	Atari Adventure, Atari Football, Desktop Tower Defense	Bit.Trip Runner, Castle Infinity, Earthworm Jim	Myth, Dungeon Siege	Unreal 2	The Last of Us, Ratchet & Clank
Dimensionality	2-D	2-D	2D, implies 3D	3D	3D
Player Visibility Field	Variable, usually large	Variable	Variable, usually large	Limited	Variable, usually limited
Player-Character Intimacy	Weak	Weak	Weak	Extremely Strong	Variable, usually strong

If camera viewpoints determine the game experience via essentially perspective alterations, they may have similar uses to postmodern devices highlighting pluralism through subjectivity and fragmentation, and equally resemble positionality which can be used to manufacture identity.

## Distances, Viewpoints & Angles

Combining Nesky’s and Fullerton’s categories reveals significant overlap, as for example, a side-view game can both have a fixed angle, or a dynamic third-person gamatography style, but a first-person game is both an exclusive viewpoint and a gamatography style. The blurred terminology suggests the need for a more detailed framework, but also that both distance and viewpoint must be considered in conjunction.

## Genre

Styles of gamatography are key components of certain game genres. The genre label “side-scrollers” for example, confirms absolute dependence on the side-view. As such, a game’s camera should be considered a determining key factor of genre and player experience. Relating to postmodernism, potential for genre blending and fragmentation in games arises through the changing the camera distance or viewpoint.

## Presence

Jesse Schell’s The Art of Game Design (2018) discusses the role of player presence in the game world. Even though his argumentation is rooted in VR and AR technology, certain points may be carried into traditional games: Schell cites players “looking around” as a method to increase players’ physical self-awarenesses (pp.422-423), connecting camera mechanics to player presence. Furthermore, Schell declares the importance of player identity in the game world, resembling

postmodernism. “Failing to address the question of the player’s identity will be a nagging reminder to the player that they aren’t really there” (p.419). As the camera acts as the player’s lens into the game world, the relationship between player identity and camera is of further significance to gamatography.

## Methodology

NieR’s critical attitude towards its proposed dilemma of meaninglessness arguably brands it as a postmodern work by default, which qualifies its components for postmodern interpretations. NieR’s camera design specifically will be examined by identifying three notable instances in which the camera’s behaviour draws attention to itself by deviating from player expectations or genre conventions. Each instance’s camera angle will be identified according to Nesky’s and Fullerton’s categories and analysed through the lens of a comparable postmodern technique to understand the designers’ intentions.

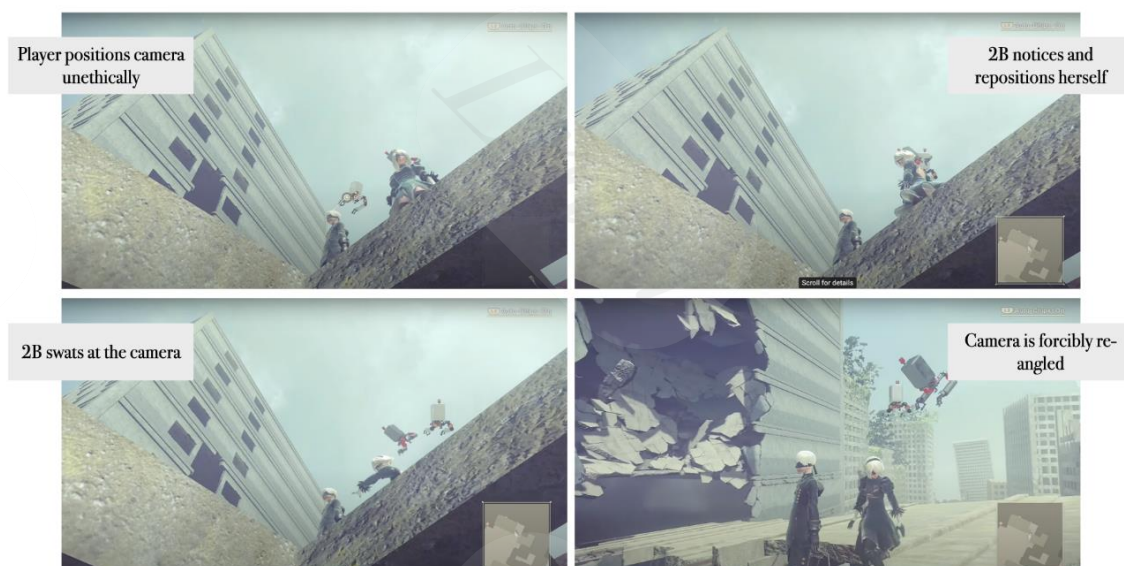
An ensuing discussion will contextualize the case study’s findings within NieR’s narrative and its dilemma’s conclusions to allow for a more wholistic view of the game’s meaning.

## Case Study: NieR:Automata’s Camera

### Moment 1: Up-Skirt

The first moment to be analyzed establishes the role of the camera in NieR. The promiscuous design of NieR’s protagonist 2B draws particular attention during the third-person dynamic gamatography sections, where players can angle the camera below her skirt and surprisingly be swatted away (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Up-Skirt Swatting**



This design detail has two implications:

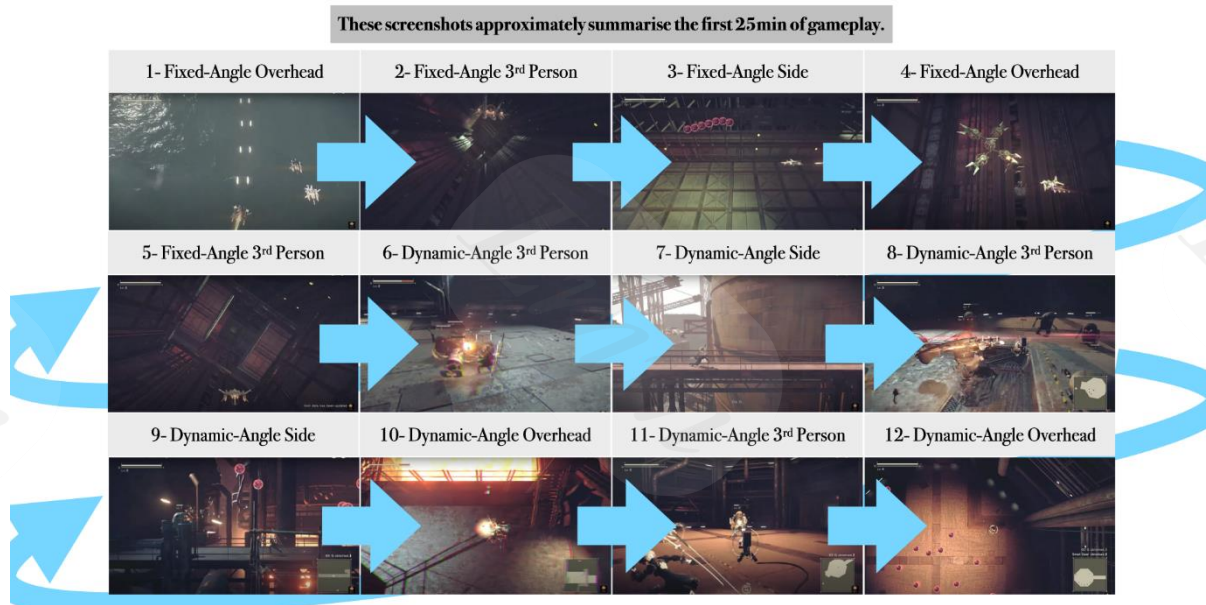
Firstly, and most significantly, 2B swatting away the camera, and by extension forcing the player's perspective to change, means that she, as a character, displays an awareness of the player's presence in the game world and breaks the fourth wall by colliding with an object reactive to physics. Essentially, the player is given a physical presence in NieR through the camera. This means the player is an active agent in the world, their identity and reality blurring with the fictional, a technique heavily reminiscent of postmodernism.

Furthermore, the irony of dressing 2B in suggestive clothing and giving the player the means to act immorally via the camera angle all while denouncing them for doing so implies the judgement, self-awareness, and moral ambiguity of the game designers themselves, which yet again fractures NieR's fiction with reality.

## Moment 2: Changing Perspectives

The second and most encompassing instance of NieR's camera design is the continuous switching of perspectives, or in accordance with John Nesky and Tracy Fullerton, distance and viewpoint. The game opens with a shooting sequence that begins in a fixed-angle third-person distance and an overhead viewpoint. When the player enters a confined space where they are tasked with dodging obstacles, the view shifts into a fixed-angle third-person viewpoint where the camera is stationed behind the avatar, before changing yet again to a fixed-angle side-view for another shooting section. Figure 4.1 summarizes all prologue gamatography styles.

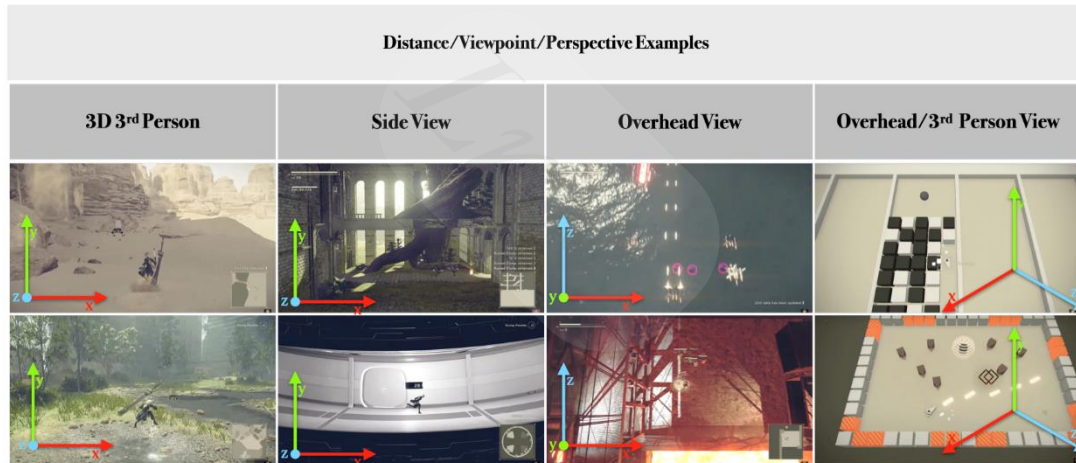
**Figure 4.1 : Prologue Gamatography Styles**



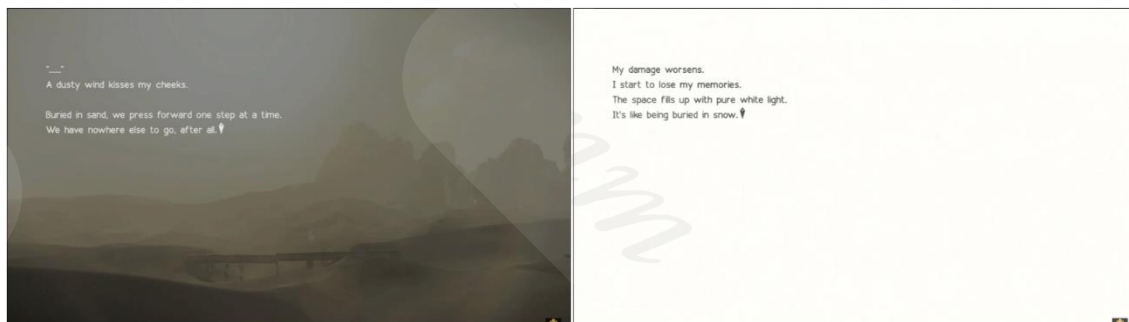


Not only are these frequent changes upkeep throughout the whole game and various spaces (Figure 4.2), but NieR even introduces brief text adventure sections in which camera angles become entirely irrelevant (Figure 4.3).

**Figure 4.2: NieR Gamatography & Genre-Blending**



**Figure 4.3: NieR Text Adventures**



Because gamatography styles can define game genres, it is reasonable to assert that NieR changes genres repeatedly, sporadically becoming a 2D or 3D platformer, top-down shooter, etc... This technique bears significant resemblance to postmodern genre blending and the themes of perspective, subjectivity, and pluralism. The game, as viewed by the player through the camera's lens, is told from various angles and fragments, refusing to be pinned to one perspective or interpretation.

Combined with the knowledge that the camera is a representation of the player's physical presence in the world, it could be view as an invitation for the player to become aware of their own individual perspective and judgement of the game and its themes.

## Moment 3: Simone

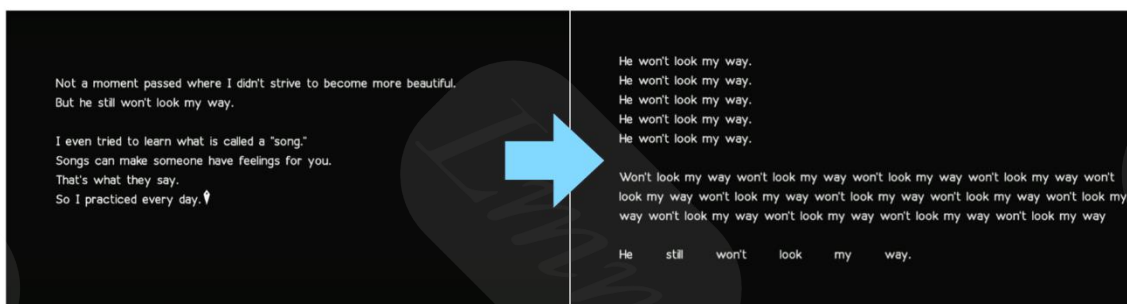
The last instance consists of the fight against a boss named “Simone”. As a clear reference to the pioneering second-wave feminist Simone de Beauvoir, the boss can be interpreted to be an exploration of female identity and a reflection on the “male gaze”, which de Beauvoir analysed (Joseph, 2008). The fight has three stages (Figure 5.1):

**Figure 5.1: Simone Boss Fight Stages**

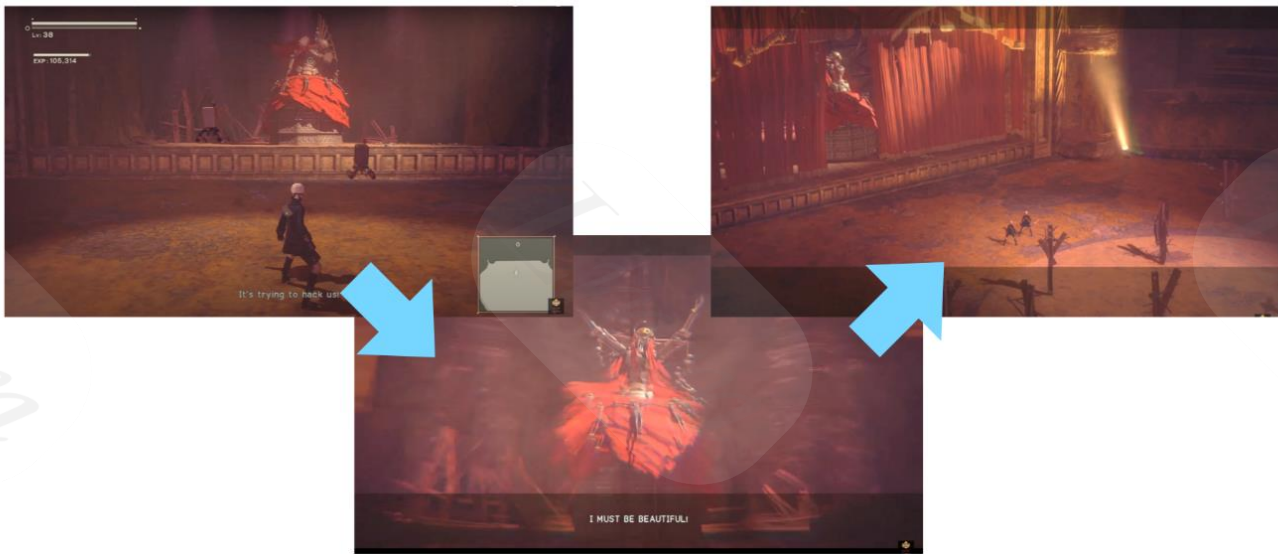


Stages one and three are designed in the third-person dynamic camera style, meaning players will benefit from locking their camera angle onto Simone to track her rather than their avatar. This action carries meaning, since, as expressed by her monologue after her defeat, all she desires is to be “looked at” (Figure 5.2).

**Figure 5.2: Simone Monologue**



After stage one of the fight, Simone climbs onto the stage, screams “I MUST BE BEAUTIFUL”, and hides behind the closing curtains. The cinematography style changes to a dynamic third-person overhead view, and the player is completely unable to look at her for stage two (Figure 5.3).

**Figure 5.3: Simone Stage 2 Initiation**

Yet again, the camera design can be considered ironic and self-aware, making it a storytelling device rather than a simple tool by drawing parallels between the male gaze and the player's gaze through the camera.

## Discussion & Contextualization

The following discussion will aim to contextualize the findings from the camera case study within the most significant of NieR's other postmodern features to pinpoint its resolution of the meaninglessness dilemma. Furthermore, instances of the camera's basic technical functions inherently relating to the theme and postmodernism will be noted.

### Three Perspectives, Three Identities

NieR is played from the perspective of three different characters: 2B, 9S, and 2A. During their individual playthroughs, the protagonists meet, interact, and reflect on each other. Though the choice to follow three protagonists was likely narratively driven, in this instance the camera's inherent function, namely projecting the world to the player, takes on postmodern qualities:

NieR's camera, as previously discussed, is not always concerned with tracking the player character. Nevertheless, it does almost always feature them on screen, making them a reference point for players. Assuming the camera to be the player's physical presence in the world, the proximity to each character and whom the player shadows change. As a result, players experience the story, the protagonists' identities, and even the identities of repeatedly encountered bosses such as Simone, from different perspectives. Character reliability, point of view, and player-protagonist

relationships are questioned repeatedly through the explicit acknowledgment of subjectivity and perspectivity.

It should be noted that the only time the protagonists are not within frame, namely during the text adventure segments, the identities of supporting characters are explored through their respective voices. This implies that the designers did not want to frame these moments through the protagonists' perspectives, removing them from the camera and player view entirely.

## Five Endings, Five Meanings

NieR's full story unfolds after five playthroughs, each of which, in theory, could serve as a conclusion to NieR's search of meaning (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6: NieR:Automata Main Endings**

	Parallel Timelines, Concurrent		Parallel Timelines, Mutually Exclusive		Ending C Continued
	Ending A	Ending B	Ending C	Ending D	Ending E
Title	flowers for m[A]chines	or not to [B]e	meaningless [C]ode	child[D]hood's end	the [E]nd of yorha
Protagonist	2B	9S	2A	9S	Player persona
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2B and 9S defeat the villains Adam &amp; Eve.</li> <li>9S is fatally injured and corrupted, so 2B kills him at his request, ending "the [him] that exists at this moment".</li> <li>9S is resurrected in the body of a machine, as his code was still accessible via the network.</li> <li><b>This causes 2B to reflect on the consciousness and emotions of machines, leading her to regret killing them.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2B and 9S defeat the villains Adam &amp; Eve.</li> <li>9S is fatally injured and corrupted, so 2B kills him at his request, ending "the [him] that exists at this moment".</li> <li>9S is resurrected in the body of a machine, as his code was still accessible via the network.</li> <li><b>9S reflects on how even though the war has most likely been won, his and 2B's battle is not yet over.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After 2B's death and finding out that humanity is long extinct, 9S and 2A discover a cannon disguised as a tower. It aims at the moon, ready to destroy all data and traces of humanity.</li> <li>9S wants to destroy the moon, having lost all sense of hope and meaning, claiming he's a "sacrificial lamb".</li> <li><b>2A hacks 9S to destroy his logic circuits and take his pain.</b></li> <li><b>2A then sacrifices herself and destroys the cannon tower.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After 2B's death and finding out that humanity is long extinct, 9S and 2A discover a cannon disguised as a tower. It aims at the moon, ready to destroy all data and traces of humanity.</li> <li>9S wants to destroy the moon, having lost all sense of hope and meaning, claiming he's a "sacrificial lamb".</li> <li><b>9S and 2A kill each other in battle.</b></li> <li><b>The cannon is fired.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After the events of ending C, the character companions (named pods) gain self-awareness and reflect on the events.</li> <li>The pods believe that <b>"life is all about the struggle within"</b> "a never-ending spiral of life and death".</li> <li>They have saved and reconstructed all three protagonists from their original parts with full access to their past memories.</li> <li>The pods discuss the possibility of this leading to the same exact outcome as before, but argue the possibility of a different outcome: <b>"The future is not given to you. It is something you must take for yourself."</b></li> </ul>
Potential Message	Emotions and consciousness make us suffer, but also human.	Personal struggle is independent of communal struggle and meaningful.	The preservation of beauty, innocence, and memory are worth sacrifice.	The feeling of meaninglessness is fatal and destructive.	Struggling is living, taking control of the struggle is meaningful.

Each ending serves as a frame for and tentative answer to the quest of finding meaning, but evidently, the designers viewed none as satisfactory or conclusive. This is on par with the postmodern rejection of the grand narrative and reemphasizes the importance of subjectivity. Because the playthroughs overlap in chronology, players are literally experiencing events from a different perspective and from the lens of a different character identity, since the first three playthroughs each focus on a different protagonist. The camera's inherent function of providing a view of the world and characters, and its use as the player's physical presence, makes players active witnesses to and participants of the journey towards each ending's meaning.

## Open-Ended Journeys

The meanings of NieR's endings can be seen as either cumulative or revisionary. In both cases, it can be argued that despite the game's repeated attempt to conclude its quest of finding meaning, it leaves the responsibility to determine a clear solution with players. The game's deliberate attitude of vagueness is supported by Yoko Taro's statement when asked about the reason for NieR's mention of Jean-Paul Sartre: "The answer to this question is something players should find out for themselves. However, please keep in mind that YOKO did not mention Sartre's name without careful consideration. That's right, I didn't just randomly throw him in the mix because I thought, 'it might be cool if I mention a philosopher's name,' while drinking some beer. Absolutely not" (2022). This comment confirms the game's postmodern intention to instigate player self-reflection and for players to generate their own conclusions.

## Conclusion

Nier:Automata is a game full of meaning about finding meaning. Under the game's hack-and-slash, anime-trope laden facade lies an intricate exploration of diverse philosophies that have attempted to determine the meaning of life or explore human suffering and purpose, whether given or self-determined. But NieR does not aim to prescribe meaning to its audience, adamantly refraining from lecturing or over-simplifying the dilemma. Accountability and responsibility for finding meaning are ultimately left in the player's hands, who has participated in the journey as a physical being in the body of the camera. NieR channels postmodernism's emphasis on subjectivity and ineffability through the camera's mechanics, positioning the player in close proximity to and as an agent of the game's perplexing themes. The camera's postmodern design therefore raises engagement, self-involvement, culpability, and sympathy for the protagonists' journey of finding meaning in an inherently cruel and meaningless world. "The reason why there are so many characters who suffer in my games is that I want to show reality. That is why people can empathise with the suffering of characters", states Yoko Taro (2018), clearly defining himself as a designer concerned with and reliant on not just his audience's emotional and intellectual reflexivity, but equally with their personal growth through his games.

(Word Count: 2793)

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## Figures

*\*any unlisted figures were made by the author of this paper*

### **Figure 1:** Gamatography Styles & Camera Distances after John Nesky

Includes screenshots of:

Nesky, J. (2014) 50 Game Camera Mistakes. [Talk with PowerPoint Presentation]

(Timestamp : 02:51) Available at : <

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7307qRmlMI&t=249s&ab\\_channel=GDC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7307qRmlMI&t=249s&ab_channel=GDC) > (Accessed May 2023)

### **Figure 2:** Viewpoints after Tracy Fullerton

Includes theory from:

Fullerton, T. (2019) *Game Design Workshop*. 4th edn. Boca Raton: CRC Press. pp.260-263.

### **Figure 3:** Up-Skirt Swatting

Includes annotated screenshots from:

randomChievos (2017) *NieR Automata – Look under 2B’s Skirt (What are you doing?*

*Trophy Guide*). 1 March. Available at: <

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnp2v9gt3as&ab\\_channel=randomChievos](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnp2v9gt3as&ab_channel=randomChievos) > (Accessed May 2023)

### **Figure 4 & 5:**

Include annotated screenshots from:

Fighting Cowboy (2017) *NieR: Automata Let’s Play* [Video Playlist]. Available at: <

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7RtZMiaOk8jppq98QWVnqpV4BLjyypicX> > (Accessed May 2023)