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# Where Silicone Meets Silicon: Analyzing NieR: Automata as a Subversive Postfeminist Text with Respect to Marxism, Existentialism and Feminism

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**Where Silicone Meets Silicon: Analyzing *NieR: Automata* as a Subversive Postfeminist Text**

**with Respect to Marxism, Existentialism and Feminism**

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**INTRODUCTION**

*NieR: Automata* is a 2017 open-world/action video game that was first released on PlayStation 4 and is a work brimming with references to feminist philosophy, Marxist theory, and existentialist thought. It is the goal of this project to analyze these references in light of the works by Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels in order to evaluate their place in the game's existentialist narrative and the larger thematic roles they serve. This study argues that the philosophies as well as the story found in *NieR: Automata* teach the audiences that only in the rejection of something–whether that be the patriarchy, capitalism, God, or fate–can sentient beings be liberated from the shackles of oppression and choose to live life as they see fit.

This paper's primary focus lies in analyzing *NieR: Automata's* relationship with feminist, Marxist, and existentialist philosophy. As such, any findings gleaned from relevant works can be reflected back towards the game, as an adequate understanding of these philosophical works is crucial to comprehend what the game is communicating to the player when it references the aforementioned philosophers. Additionally, philosophical analysis of games is relatively rare in the academic world, and thus this study is important as it contributes to this niche field of analyzing philosophy in video games.

**BACKGROUND**

*NieR: Automata* is an action role-playing game developed by PlatinumGames and published by PlatinumGames, both of which are Japanese companies. It was initially released for the PlayStation 4 and PC in Japan on February 23, 2017 and North America on March 3, 3017, with it later being released on Xbox One and Nintendo Switch in subsequent years. The game is directed by auteur video game creative Yoko Taro, famous in niche video game circles for his

work on the *Drakengard* series–which *NieR: Automata* is a part of–as well his work on the original *Nier* from 2010, which *NieR: Automata* is a sequel of, though the two games' stories largely stand-alone from one another. Taro wrote the game alongside Hana Kikuchi and Yoshiho Akabane, and was joined by composers Keiichi Okabe, Keigo Hoashi, and Kuniyuki Takahashi, all of whom are Japanese. This Japanese origin is worth noting, as Taro and co.'s nationality must be taken into account as their cultural backgrounds inherently inform their interpretations of Western-originated philosophy.

Despite the niche appeal of the earlier *Drakengard* games and the commercial failure of the original *Nier*, *NieR: Automata* was released to critical acclaim and commercial success. Lauded for its engaging gameplay and heart wrenching story, the PS4 version of the game received an 88/100 on review aggregator 'Metacritic,' with subsequent versions of the game scoring similarly. As of April 2023, 7.5 million copies of *NieR: Automata* have been shipped. *NieR: Automata*'s story is delivered to the player over the course of several playthroughs and from the perspective of three different characters. The first playthrough sees players controlling 2B, a YoRHa combat android who is stoic in her demeanor and efficient in her methods. She is joined by 9S, a happy-go-lucky 'scanner' type android who specializes in reconnaissance and appears to show a wider range of emotions than the rest of YoRHa's androids. YoRHa is an organization of androids that dispatches fellow androids to Earth's surface for combat and reconnaissance missions and whose base of operations–known as 'the Bunker'–circles Earth in low orbit. Following the complete extinction of Earth's human population millennia before the game's events take place, YoRHa was tasked by the last remaining organic beings with protecting the Earth. It is worth noting that the creators of YoRHa, while organic and originating

from Earth, weren't technically 'human' and were referred to as 'replicants,' though they were largely indistinguishable from humans in their physiology and anatomy.

Despite the complete extinction of humans and replicants, the YoRHa commanders lie to the androids, telling them that the humans have fled to the moon and that they must continue fighting to make Earth habitable again, as the commanders believe that the androids needed a 'god' to fight for in order to fulfill their original purposes. At some point following the extinction of organic, sentient life–which occurred within 100 years of 3465 CE as evidenced by the ending of 2010's *Nier*–alien lifeforms invaded Earth and began producing beings known as machine lifeforms. Sometime after the alien invasion–the game never provides an approximate date–all of the aliens perished, leaving behind the machine lifeforms to battle the YoRHa androids. *NieR: Automata* doesn't provide much information regarding the specific events that occurred between the alien invasion and the events of the game, though the player is told by YoRHa's Commander White that there have been at least 13 'Machine Wars' in the several thousand years between the 2010's game's story and its sequel's.

Taking place in 11945 CE during the '14th Machine War,' the game's story and world are initially presented in a very black-and-white manner, with 2B's matter-of-fact personality and general lack of emotion preventing any warmth or ambiguity to seep through to the player. This changes by the end of the game's first story campaign–known as 'Route A'–as 2B's cold facade begins to melt away as her adventures with 9S continue. Throughout this first part of the story, 2B and 9S encounter machine lifeforms that have seemingly broken away from their original purpose and have begun to exhibit free will. A seemingly sentient machine lifeform named Pascal–as a reference to philosopher Blaise Pascal–even creates a small village for the other self-aware machine lifeforms so that they may educate themselves on human history and live

together in peace. As this exhibition of free will contradicts the information that 2B and 9S have been told about the machine lifeforms their entire lives, they begin to doubt YoRHa and ponder their existences. These doubts are exacerbated when Adam and Eve–two human-presenting android brothers created by the machine lifeforms–are introduced into the story, with their presence and apparent self-awareness further pushing 2B and 9S to question their respective purposes. 2B and 9S come to blows with Adam and Eve, as 2B is forced to kill Adam after he kidnaps 9S and the pair subsequently kills Eve after he attempts to kill the YoRHa pair as revenge for his brother. Despite this immense amount of bloodshed, 2B has softened into a gentler, nobler character by the end of Route A, as both her and 9S have been shown that there is more to life than simply blindly following YoRHa orders.

The game's second part, Route B, is largely the same as Route A, though the player controls 9S instead of 2B. While many of the larger story beats are identical between Routes A and B, Route B contains additional scenes that contextualize some of the story's more ambiguous moments, with particular attention paid to fleshing out the machine lifeform side of the story as opposed to the androids'.

The latter half of the game's story is contained in Route C, with things picking up shortly after the end of Routes A/B as all of the YoRHa androids prepare to fight machine lifeforms on the surface. Shortly after landing on the surface, however, the mission goes awry, as the overwhelming majority of the androids are infected with a logic virus that seizes control of their faculties and subsequently kills them. Though 2B and 9S are initially able to avoid the chaos, they are soon surrounded by their former compatriots and 2B forces 9S into an escape pod so that he may avoid becoming infected. 2B is subsequently infected and pleads with a rogue YoRHa android named A2 to put her out of her misery, though 9S arrives just in time to see 2B

seemingly murdered in cold blood. 9S and A2 are separated from one another by a massive machine-lifeform-created tower that emerges from the earth before 9S can exact his revenge, and the player is given the choice of following either 9S or A2's story first. 9S can be seen becoming progressively mentally unstable over the course of his story, as his desire for revenge overtakes him and transforms him into a vindictive shell of his former self. A2, on the other hand, experiences character growth akin to 2B's, as she similarly warms to the people around her and adopts some of 2B's nobler traits. Both 9S and A2's stories collide at the end of Route C, as A2 reveals that 2B's true designated name is actually 2E, 'E' standing for 'executioner,' as 2B/2E was designed by YoRHa to kill 9S each time he became too self-aware, with the implication being that 2B has killed 9S dozens of times before in a never-ending cycle of violence that has potentially lasted centuries. 9S, driven mad after becoming infected with the logic virus, nonetheless goads A2 into a fight, and both androids are incapacitated. Following their fight and the destruction of the machine lifeform tower, Pod 042 and Pod 153–two small robots that accompanied 2B and 9S on their journeys and have seldom spoken throughout the story–defy their final order from YoRHa to delete their data regarding the events of the game, as YoRHa's intention is to perpetuate the cycle of misery and death. In this act of defiance, Pods 042 and 153 revive 2B, 9S, and A2 in the hopes that they can put an end to the endless cycle of violence and take control of their own lives. When asked by Pod 153 about the possibility of the cycle nonetheless repeating itself, Pod 042 says: "I cannot deny the possibility. However, the possibility of a different future also exists. A future is not given to you. It is something you must take for yourself."

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

*NieR: Automata* can be analyzed with three theoretical threads: feminism, Marxism, and existentialism. These threads join at one point: the never-ending fight against oppression in the game. Each of these theories deals with struggle in the face of oppression–Feminism's plight with the patriarchy, Marxism's grievances against capitalism, existentialism's questioning of human existence–and are thus bound together by that shared fight.

**Feminism**

Feminism is the culmination of socio-political movements and ideologies that seek to establish the equality of the sexes across all facets of society. Originating in late 18th-century Europe, feminism has evolved and changed over the last couple of centuries to better represent the needs of women at a given time. Though it has looked different depending on the time and place, the ultimate goal of feminism has rarely deviated from what early feminist movements initially set out to do: liberate women from the shackles of the patriarchy, thus achieving gender equality.

Within the realm of video games, there have been numerous studies relating to feminism. Both quantitative and qualitative in their methods, a shared element of these studies has been the recognition of the games industry's lack of tact when it comes to the depiction and representation of women. For instance, one study examines the "Lara phenomenon," which refers to the character Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* game franchise, as she is notorious for being sexualized yet powerful, with this term as shorthand for "the appearance of a competent female character in a dominant position," (Jansz et al., 2007, p. 1). This study closely examines depictions of women in early-2000s video games like *Devil May Cry 2, Final Fantasy X,* and *Silent Hill 3*, and determines to what extent female characters are both sexualized and

empowered as the player character. The study concludes that while "the majority of male characters were depicted with extreme musculature," female characters in the games they examined "were generally portrayed with an emphasis on their buttocks and large breasts, scantily clad in hypersexualized dress," (Jansz et al., 2007, p. 7). While the sexualized depiction of female characters in games may have an adverse effect on a given female gamer's health by potentially warping their ideas of femininity and beauty, the "Lara phenomenon" may actually empower female gamers. Although these female characters are sexualized in their appearances, they are nonetheless competent and powerful; "the female characters they [female gamers] are playing may look odd, but they are competent and occupy a powerful position in the virtual world of the video game," (Jansz et al., 2007, p. 7).

Among video game scholarship, there also exists studies that are immensely critical about female representation within the gaming space, particularly regarding women in games' relationship with violence. One such study is by author Sara Khan, where she discusses women and their relationship with violence with respect to the video games *Alice: Madness Returns* and *Dante's Inferno*. Khan also evaluates the depiction of women in these games when compared to their representation in the original literary works the games are based on, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Dante's Inferno*, respectively. Khan finds that while both games approach female violence in oppositional ways– "*Alice Madness-Returns* shows females constructing violence in the society while Dante's game shows punishment of women of being corrupt by the patriarchal society" –they both nonetheless "depict the postmodern woman as a mannequin of cynicism, corruption and immorality," (Khan, 2018, p. 14). Within her article, Khan posits that though one game shows a woman committing violent acts and while the other shows many women as victims of violent actions, women are portrayed as societal menaces regardless.

The last decade has seen some improvement in depiction of women in video games–they tend to be less overtly sexualized today and a wider array of body types and skin tones are generally on display. In a 2016 quantitative study, researchers found that female characters in games were noticeably less sexualized in the years following 2006 and attributed this decline to both an increased female presence in gaming and widespread criticism against the gaming industry regarding its depictions of women (Lynch et al., 2016, p. 576). Additionally, a study by Keiko M. McCullough, et al. found that women who had preexisting positive values of womanhood and femininity were less likely to internalize "harmful beliefs about women perpetuated in games" than women who did not previously hold those values, (McCullough et al., 2020, p.1). The article concludes with the authors appealing to game developers to recognize the potential harm that stereotypical depictions of women can have on their audience, saying: "Game developers must consider the influence of their content on players' gendered beliefs and attitudes as well as strive to create female characters with depth, agency, competence, and complexity," (McCullough et al. 9).

*NieR: Automata* makes explicit reference to feminism. Famed feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most influential feminist philosophers of the 20th century, has a character named after her. De Beauvoir's works, such as *The Second Sex* and *She Came to Stay*, can be applied to the analysis of the game. Particularly, the game directly yet implicitly refers to work, as the game's character with her namesake misconstrues the opening lines to Book II of *The Second Sex*, as de Beauvoir's notion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" is misinterpreted to grisly results which will be detailed

in the "findings and analysis" section of this paper (de Beauvoir, 1949/2015, p. 273).

Additionally, it must be noted that de Beauvoir was in a highly-publicized relationship with

existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre for over fifty years. The pair frequently collaborated

and though both had affairs with other people over the course of their relationship, these

relationships were understood to be ultimately secondary to their marriage with one another

(Menand 2005). The fact of their lengthy and complicated relationship is important to know due

to how the game depicts both de Beauvoir and Sartre's characters, the minutiae of which will be

detailed in the aforementioned "findings and analysis" section.

**Marxism**

Marxism is a school of socioeconomic analysis that leverages historical materialism to

better understand class relations. Originating in the 19th-century from the works of Karl Marx

and Friedrich Engels, Marxism views capitalism as wholly unsustainable as an economic model

and posits that capitalism fundamentally relies on the exploitation of the working class. Speaking

on capitalism's apparent unsustainability within *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels

write: "Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange, and of property, a

society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the

sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up

by his spells," (Marx & Engels, 1848/1948, p. 17).

Kumari (2023) states that "Marx's theories are still crucial for comprehending modern

political and economic structures as well as for envisioning a future that is more just and

equitable," (p. 40). While Kumari's interpretation of Marxism is largely in line with that of *The*

*Communist Manifesto*, he nonetheless contributes to the discussion of Marxist theory by focusing

on its relevance in the modern day.

Marx's theory of historical materialism, which holds that economic and social conditions are the main causes of historical development, is his major contribution to Marxism. Marx's examination of the problems in capitalism and his prognostication of its unavoidable demise have also had a major influence on Marxist philosophy. Marx's views on the significance of the working class and the necessity of collective action to bring about social change have also continued to influence modern political movements… While some have lauded it for its dedication to social justice and the well-being of the working class, others have decried it for its reliance on violent revolution and the possibility that it may constrain personal freedoms. However, Marxist theories have had a considerable impact on global political movements and administrations (Kumari, 2023, p. 46).

There is a parallel between the exploitation of the working class that Marxism posits and the exploitation of the combat androids that are found within the game; both are exploited and the structures they uphold collapse without them (capitalism and the androids' manufacturer, YoRHa, respectively). Within *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels comment on the perceived exploitative relationship between the bourgeoisie and the working class, saying: "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, that each time ended, either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes," (Marx & Engels, p. 14). This sentiment regarding overt exploitation of a group that effectively sustains the oppressors can be applied to *NieR: Automata*. The relationship between the YoRHa commanders and their android soldiers is not dissimilar to the one between the bourgeois and the proletariat, as both relationships exhibit kindred power imbalances and structural volatilities.

As for how Marx and Engels are explicitly referenced within the game, there are two robot models named after the philosophers, respectively. The robot model with Marx's namesake is a massive mechanical arm with a giant saw blade attached to it and is described within the game's in-universe database as "A massive Goliath-class machine lifeform that resembles heavy machinery of old. While it appears to have been constructed solely for its destructive abilities, a closer look at its features tells a different story. While in combat, it comes after foes with a

repurposed bucket-wheel excavator," (PlatinumGames, 2017). On the other hand, the robot model named after Engels is a towering industrial structure and is described in the game as "A massive Goliath-class machine lifeform disguised as a building. The tremendous amounts of energy running through its body forces the unit to emit steam in order to stay cool. When attacking, the heat generated from its arms often causes them to become engulfed in flames" (PlatinumGames, 2017).

**Existentialism**

Existentialism is a philosophy that seeks to question the very nature of human existence and explores related issues. Initially coined as a term in the 1940s, existentialism defines the philosophy of the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, though it has retroactively been applied to Søren Aabye Kierkegaard and Socrates by some. Jean-Paul Sartre's works, particularly that of *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, is the focus of the existentialist portion of this project.

In his book *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, author Walter Kaufmann defines existentialism as "not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy," (Kaufmann, 1956/2004, p. 11). Though Kaufmann expresses concern about the label of 'existentialism' and wonders if the term should simply be abandoned as "existentialism is not a school of thought or reducible to any set of tenets," he nonetheless asserts that the major branches of existentialist thought agree on one thing: that human beings are not primarily rational and instead make their decisions based on subjective beliefs. For the sake of clarity, the term 'existentialism' largely refers to Jean-Paul Sartre's works on the subject within this project.

As it exists in defiance of traditional philosophy such as rationalism and positivism, existentialism is kindred to feminism and Marxism, as each philosophy is fundamentally oppositional; feminism defines itself in the rejection of the patriarchy, and Marxism relies on the rejection of capitalism as the foundation of its values. Additionally, the existentialist belief that one's life experiences inherently determine a given person's sense of self is seen all throughout *NieR: Automata*, as 2B, 9S, and A2 all call upon their life experiences to reject their YoRHa-given purpose and take control of their destinies in the game's final moments. Sartre embodies this notion within *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, writing: "Nonetheless, saying 'You are nothing but your life' does not imply that the artist will be judged solely by his works of art, for a thousand other things also help to define him. What we mean to say is that a man is nothing but a series of enterprises, and that he is the sum, organization, and aggregate of the relations that constitute such enterprises," (Sartre, 1947/2007, p. 38). Within his aforementioned book, Walter Kaufmann reflects on Sartre's existentialist beliefs, saying:

> Man's situation, as Sartre sees it, is absurd and tragic; but does that rule out integrity, nobility, or valor, or the utmost effort? In its limitation to this one life, Sartre's image of the human situation differs radically from the Buddhist view in which life follows on life and salvation remains always possible. Sartre's world is closer to Shakespeare's. There are situations in which, whatever choice we make, we cannot escape guilt… Even in guilt and failure man can retain his integrity and defy the world (Kaufmann, 1946/2004, p. 47).

As for how existentialism is overtly referenced within *NieR: Automata*, similarly to the references to de Beauvoir, there exists a character named after Sartre within the game that represents existentialism's essence of pondering and questioning the nature of human existence. Though the character with Sartre's namesake–simply named "Jean-Paul"– doesn't play as large a role as the one with de Beauvoir's, he is nonetheless important as it is his inability to return Simone's feelings that drives her to madness.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

RQ1: In *NieR: Automata*, what messages are conveyed through its inclusion of Marxist, existentialist, and feminist philosophical references?

RQ2: Is this game a feminist text?

**METHODOLOGY**

The goal of this project is to evaluate the message *NieR: Automata* communicates to the player with respect to feminism, Marxism, and existentialism, while also finding how these three philosophical threads are connected within the game and what larger purpose they serve. Additionally, as philosophical analysis of games is relatively rare in the academic world, this study contributes to the niche field of analyzing philosophy in video games. The methods in which this aforementioned goal was met will be outlined in this section.

For the exploration of what *NieR: Automata* is communicating to the player with its philosophical references, the game and related media have been taken into consideration. Such related media includes two 'world guide' volumes expanding on the game's worldbuilding and development, as well as a biography on the game's director, Yoko Taro. Of course, the game proved most essential as it is the primary text analyzed, though both world guide volumes and Taro's biography were helpful in further exploring the research questions.

For this project, the researcher conducted a textual analysis of the game in order to best answer the outlined research questions. With this in consideration, it is important to provide an outline of what textual analysis is to provide a frame of reference for the later discussion of the game's philosophical content.

Textual analysis employed within this project attempts "to understand the likely interpretations of texts by the people who consume them," (McKee, 2003, p. 4). In this sense, the

goal of the textual analysis of the game is to produce the most likely interpretation of the

research questions with respect to the game's treatment of its philosophical references as

informed by the gathered outside sources. Additionally, within this project, texts have been

defined as pieces of media that can have an interpretation produced regarding its meaning

(McKee, 2003, p. 4).

It is important to establish that within the domain of textual analysis, there aren't always

definitive answers, as though researchers make highly educated guesses at the most likely

interpretation of a given text, they are guesses nonetheless (McKee, 2003, p. 1). This isn't to say

that textual analysis is a mere guessing game in itself, but rather to clarify that due to the

often-subjective nature of texts, researchers must rely on their knowledge of a text and bevy of

sources related to their chosen text in order to make well-informed interpretations. In textual

analysis, context is massively important.

As for type of approach taken to the textual analysis of the game, the researcher has

employed a post-structuralist approach, wherein the researcher views the text within the context

of different cultures experiencing reality differently; there is no right or wrong cultural

interpretation of a text, only interpretations informed by the culture of a given subject (McKee,

2003, p. 9). In this sense, the Japanese origin of the game and its creators have been closely

considered, as their culture has a significant bearing on their interpretations of the largely

Western-originated philosophies and philosophers at the center of this project.

Evidence is foundational to worthwhile interpretations of media (McKee, 2003, p. 118).

As such, though post-structuralist textual analysis holds subjectivity in high regard, subjective

beliefs are nonetheless informed by evidence from within or outside a text. Post-structuralist

textual analysis attempts to uncover how a given group of people makes sense of the world

through the analysis of texts created by someone from said group, working under the assumption that "the texts that surround us have an important effect on the way that we think," and the belief that an author's intended meaning is secondary to the interpretation a given reader extracts (McKee, 2003, p. 44). Thus, while a concrete, immobile set of rules that govern this form of textual analysis doesn't necessarily exist, as texts must be treated as clues of how "people have made sense of the world," (McKee, 2003, p. 63). In this sense, since post-structuralist textual analysis posits that "there's no single correct representation of any part of the world and, in the same way, there's no single correct interpretation of any text," it is the task of the researcher to embody a wide variety of perspectives in order to pin down a layered, multi-faceted interpretation of a text (McKee, 2003, p. 63). With that being said, it is the ultimate goal of this paper to present a concrete interpretation of the text with respect to the chosen perspective of viewing the game through philosophical lenses. There exists the possibility of other perspectives, but this paper aims to detail a particular reading of the chosen text with regards to feminism, Marxism, and existentialism.

To analyze *NieR: Automata* as a text, the researcher first carefully played through the game to completion in order to recognize and take note of any references to feminism, Marxism, and existentialism, with careful consideration of the references that particularly called attention to the aforementioned authors. The researcher first completed the game approximately six years ago, but played it again recently to reacquaint himself with the game's story and philosophical references, while paying close attention to the feminist, Marxist, and existentialist elements of the game.

The researcher used a Google Document to record his thoughts as he played through the game, the philosophical references made throughout the game that he could immediately

recognize, with respect to the relevant philosophy each one is related to, and details of the game that contained analytical potential. Additionally, the researcher captured 34 screenshots of moments within the game that proved noteworthy on a philosophical basis, with these screenshots taken using the PlayStation 5's 'Create' function.

**FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The game's story is told over multiple "routes," with players being tasked with completing Routes A, B, C, D and E in order to see the end-credits. Routes A and B are largely the same and contain the game's first half of the story, with Route B providing extra context for the more ambiguous elements of Route B. Route C contains the second half of the story, and a choice the player makes in Route C's final moments determines if they finish Route C or branch into Route D. Regardless of the choice the player makes, they can subsequently use the game's "chapter select" function to experience the ending they initially didn't choose. Only after Routes A-D are completed is Route E unlocked, wherein the player is tasked with completing a final short section to view the game's "true" ending. Additionally, the game contains a substantial amount of "side missions" that are typically tangentially related to the game's main plot but are consistently intertwined with its main themes and subject matter. For this project, the majority of this side content was also analyzed as much of the philosophical references to feminism, Marxism, and existentialism are contained within it.

**Marxist Analysis**

There are connections to be made regarding how capitalism commodifies the common worker and how the patriarchy objectifies the female body; both are dehumanized and seen as easily replaceable. Additionally, there is room for analysis in *NieR: Automata*'s depiction of Marx and Engels (massive industrial robots without a clear gender) and how they relate to the

game's depiction of androids (most are clearly feminine and sexualized). The alien species that created the Marx and Engels robots–as well as the rest of the genderless robots shown throughout the game–are revealed to be small, squid-like beings that lack any defining male or female features, while the game's androids–most of which are feminine presenting and sexualized to an extent–were originally designed by Earth's humanoids before they went extinct. This fact that, prior to their extinction, mankind designed a line of highly controlled, highly sexualized (primarily) female-presenting androids to protect the ruined Earth left in their wake is indicative of the patriarchy's goal to objectify the female body; feminine bodies are literally manufactured and discarded without a second's thought in the future the game presents. Though led by a female-presenting android, YoRHa nonetheless perpetuates the cycle of violence and objectification by continuously manufacturing primarily female androids and easily replacing them whenever necessary. Under the patriarchy, women are objectified and reduced to their base components; in YoRHa, female bodies are quite literally treated as objects that can be manufactured as easily as weapons.

Not only is the continued manufacture of the androids by other (mostly) female androids reflective of the ways in which internalized misogyny urges women to perpetuate the will of the patriarchy in their everyday lives, but it also connects back to the Marxist belief that bodies have become commodified under capitalism; capitalism dehumanizes the worker by viewing them as easily replaceable, while the game's androids are dehumanized by virtue of their mechanical manufacture and ease of replacement.

The objectification of android bodies–and by extension the commodification of the worker and the objectification of the female body–also manifests on a metatextual level. Most modern video games contain external achievements/trophies that can be unlocked by performing

certain in-game actions, with these achievements/trophies typically being tracked by whichever video game console platform a given player is using. *NieR: Automata* is no exception and thus contains a number of trophies that the player can unlock, with most being rewarded by completing certain sections of the story as the player makes their way towards the end credits. However, two unlockable trophies–named "What Are You Doing?" and "Not That I Mind…," respectively–seek to commodify the androids' bodies by rewarding the player for performing crude in-game actions with the respective trophies. The former trophy is unlocked by discovering protagonist 2B's "secret" 10 times, an action that tasks the player with positioning the game's camera to look up the female android's dress, while the latter is unlocked by playing as secondary protagonist 9S for one hour in "a certain state," meaning the male android in his underwear (PlatinumGames, 2017). While these actions are presented as appropriately reprehensible–2B becomes annoyed with the player and physically takes control of the camera away from them the more they discover her "secret"–their performing being extrinsically rewarded with trophies speaks the idea of objectification present in the game, feminist philosophy, and Marxist theory. By rewarding the player for engaging in such a perversion of the female body, the game creates the connection between the objectification of women inherent to the patriarchy that defines feminism and the commodification of the worker inherent to Marxism's critique of capitalism. The extrinsic reward the player receives for objectifying the female body is evocative of the intrinsic "rewards" both men and women can potentially receive by complicitly engaging with both the patriarchy and capitalism. For men, engaging in the patriarchy allows them to maintain their perceived dominance over women in society, and for women, positively engaging in the patriarchy perpetuates internalized misogyny that further serves to reinforce the patriarchy as a power structure (McCullough et al., 2020, p. 268).

Under a Marxist framework, the in-universe use of YoRHa androids as disposable killing machines and the external presentation of female android 2B as an object to be scoldingly ogled at can be seen as evidence that the game perpetuates harmful views towards women and thus puts forth antifeminist sentiments. While such a reading is not necessarily inaccurate–the player is in fact rewarded for treating 2B like an object–it does not tell the whole story, as such an interpretation of the game ignores further examination under existentialist and postfeminist frameworks.

**Existentialist Analysis**

Existentialist works, particularly those belonging to Jean-Paul Sartre, can contribute to the larger discussion of Marxism and feminism in two key ways. First, broadly speaking, all three subjects require a certain amount of self-awareness; Marxism requires the proletariat to recognize the exploitative nature of the capitalist system they reside in, feminism requires the recognition of centuries of gender inequality and how it manifests in everyday life, while existentialism requires one to be cognizant enough of their own existence to begin to question it. Second, Sartre's tumultuous relationship with famed feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir creates room for discussion on a background level due to the ways in which their respective philosophies manifested themselves within their relationship, the significance of which plays a larger role in the later "Feminist Analysis" section. Additionally, a character explicitly named after Sartre plays a minor but important role in *NieR: Automata*. A robot named Jean-Paul continuously rejects the advances of another robot named Simone, failing to recognize the effort she puts into improving her appearance for him and instead opting to ponder his existence on his own. As previously established, Sartre is portrayed as a pretentious robot almost-comically obsessed with his own existence, going so far as to interrupt the player character with his

existentialist interjections whenever the player approaches him for an unrelated conversation (PlatinumGames, 2017).

Existentialism is preoccupied with its own subject matter much in the same way that postfeminism is. After all, both existentialism and postfeminism are inherently reactionary; existentialism responds to movements like rationalism, while postfeminism is concerned with prior waves of feminism that paved the way for our current cultural and media landscape. Thus, the inclusion of existentialist elements within the game support its reading as a postfeminist text, as the introspective nature of existentialism reinforces the reflectivity inherent to postfeminism.

Under an existentialist framework, existentialism's predilection for introspection can be conflated with the recognition of harmful societal power structures intrinsic to both Marxism and postfeminism. With this notion in mind, it is easy to read *NieR: Automata* as a text that, although self-aware in its surface-level anti-feminist tendencies, is nonetheless perpetuating harmful patriarchal views. After all, with both Marxist and existentialist frameworks in mind, the game still comes across as anti-feminist on the basis of its depictions of women, and is rather blissfully self-aware of that fact. However, such a reading ignores the possibilities offered by a postfeminist lens.

**Feminist Analysis**

To see how Simone de Beauvoir's work and feminism as a whole can be seen within *NieR: Automata*, one only has to look as far as the character of Simone. Simone, although her time within the game is brief, is nonetheless immensely important when examining feminism in the game. Simone, clearly named after de Beauvoir, is described in the game's in-universe information database as "A Goliath-class machine lifeform modeled after an opera singer, this unit attacked foes using the repurposed bodies of living androids. Obsessed with a certain other

machine lifeform, she put great thought into her appearance–even going so far as to cannibalize her own kind. Alas, such garish decorations only ended up being a spectacular display of poor taste…," (PlatinumGames, 2017). As the description suggests, Simone was a robot that became obsessed with making herself "beautiful" in order to appeal to another robot, Jean-Paul, who is named after Sartre and had become the object of her infatuation. Simone, initially appearing as a short, stubby, genderless robot, added additional robot parts to her body over time to become appealing to Jean-Paul. Though he never returned her affections, Simone continued to add more objects to herself to appear more feminine, even going so far as to kill her fellow robots and cannibalize parts from their corpses in her twisted, misguided journey for love. She was eventually killed in self-defense by the game's protagonists, 2B and 9S, in a spectacularly explosive boss fight.

It is worth noting that Simone's overwhelming, one-sided obsession with Jean-Paul stands in stark contrast to de Beauvoir's real-life relationship with Sartre as the two revered one another's work and often collaborated professionally. Additionally, although the two were in a romantic relationship for over 50 years and indeed loved one another, their professional relationship was often clinical and sometimes oppositional, with the two occasionally coming to verbal blows due to perceived misgivings about the other's philosophical beliefs. For instance, in an archived interview of Sartre and de Beauvoir from YouTube channel *Philosophy Overdose*–a non-commercial entity dedicated to archiving media related to famous philosophers in the form of video clips–de Beauvoir tells her husband that "Men never think the way women do" and while Sartre lightly refutes her point, replying: "So you constantly tell me; admit you don't trust me on that point," she expounds with: "You are theoretically, ideologically in favor of women's

liberation… yet even you don't share what is called the 'lived experience' of women. There are things you can't understand," (de Beauvoir and Sartre, ca. 1967, 0:36).

This archived interaction between the married philosophers not only provides insight into the complex dynamic of their marriage–de Beauvoir goes on to explain how any third person brought into their relationship exists as secondary to their own, much to the chagrin of previous third partners–but, arguably more importantly, highlights two important aspects of de Beauvoir's philosophical beliefs: true understanding requires firsthand experience and women feel things that men are incapable of comprehending. In this sense, the in-game depiction of Simone and Jean-Paul's relationship is both a subversion of the real-life truth of their relationship and a digital manifestation of her beliefs; the witty de Beauvoir becomes the servile and unstable Simone, the clever Sartre becomes the pompous Jean-Paul, and the initially genderless Simone takes her real-life counterpart's philosophy to heart and becomes violently transfixed on obtaining the "lived experience" of women by scrapping her fellow robots to physically appear more feminine.

Despite her relatively brief screen time in the game, Simone and her story are massively important when it comes to any discussion of *NieR: Automata*'s relationship with feminism, as they represent a malformed interpretation of de Beauvoir's philosophical beliefs that have become twisted over time. Within *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir writes: "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman," suggesting that a person's sex at birth is not deterministic in their becoming a woman, but rather that their outside perception as a woman imposes the social pressures that women face onto them. Being a woman isn't an inherent trait to anyone assigned as female at birth, but rather an aspect of being informed by women's lower-rung place in society. This context is important, as the sentiment that women are not born but rather made by

societal conditions expressed by de Beauvoir provides the game with the necessary context to twist Simone's conception of what it means to be a woman. Simone's actions–killing other robots and using their scrapped components to physically feminize herself–represent the game's literal interpretation of de Beauvoir's metaphysical sentiment; the robotic Simone's actions are a subversive embodiment of de Beauvoir's assertion that women are the product of their patriarchal environment.

In the case of Simone, de Beauvoir's notions of one "becoming" a woman rather than being born as one are deeply resonant, as such an idea theoretically allows her to become more appealing to Jean-Paul as prior to her symbolically embodying the game's interpretation of de Beauvoir's philosophy–albeit to an extreme extent by killing and cannibalizing other robots for feminine-presenting parts–Simone lacks any outward attributes that would imply femininity aside from her feminine name, as her physical form is that of a short, rotund robot without discernible facial features that is made of semi-rusted metal. When the player is treated to her story in totality in Route B, they are shown several interactions between Simone and Jean-Paul, with each subsequent scene showing Simone becoming more feminine with the intention of wooing Jean-Paul, and yet he ignores her affections each time. The implication of these scenes is that no matter what Simone does to her physical form, it will never be enough for Jean-Paul, not because she isn't feminine enough for his liking, but rather because Jean-Paul is comically obsessed with his own existence. Later in the game, the player is given the option to speak to Jean-Paul, who proceeds to bombard the player with descriptions of existentialism before the player character can get a word in (PlatinumGames, 2017). In this sense, the game is implicitly asserting that no one is owed reciprocated affection for merely altering their exterior appearance. Regardless, by the end of these vignettes, Simone transforms from a stubby, agender robot into a

towering feminine figure "modeled after an opera singer," replete with a mechanical ball gown-esque dress, slender arms, and a slightly-curved chestplate that imply the presence of breasts (PlatinumGames, 2017). However, the game's decision to provide Simone with her feminine name and refer to her with female pronouns even prior to her transformation conveys the idea that in the eyes of the game's creators, Simone, despite her initial agender appearance, was always a woman and her mechanized metamorphosis did nothing to change that.

It is important to relay the details of Simone's transformation and final feminized appearance in order to contextualize these details in relation to past depictions of femininity in Japanese media, as well as to determine how *NieR: Automata*'s sexually-forward character designs fit into the larger discussion of female sexualization in Japanese games and media. Japanese anime is rather notorious for its often sexist depiction of both men and women, with men often being depicted as either macho or endearingly clueless, and women generally being shown to be either passive and powerless or domineering and violent (Bresnahan et al., 2006, p. 208). Such stereotypical depictions of both genders have been shown to affect audiences, as a 2006 study involving both Japanese and American audiences found that "male and female participants in both countries showed more approval and liking for the lead male character. Though the lead male character was depicted as being somewhat thoughtless and irresponsible, male and female participants in this study did not appear to have sympathy for the anxiety that his thoughtlessness and irresponsibility caused for the lead female character," (Bresnahan et al., 2006, p. 213). Relaying the findings of such studies is important, as it serves as evidence that there exists gender biases in Japanese media so palpable that they affect the audience's perception of a given piece of media.

With this gendered bias in mind–as well as the fact that the stereotypical female character in animation is often portrayed as "dependent, submissive, sexual, overly emotional, homebound, deferent, supportive, incompetent, and approval-seeking"–it can be seen how these tropes manifest and are subverted in *NieR: Automata* with respect to the depiction of Simone and its female leads, 2B and A2 (Bresnahan et al., 2006, p. 208). Starting with Simone, she can be seen exhibiting the majority of the aforementioned stereotyped behaviors; she is shown to be submissive in her first form and overly emotional in her final form–she wants nothing more than to be "beautiful" for Jean-Paul and attacked the player with deadly intent without provocation–all the while being ultimately approval-seeking in both of her states of being as even "in her final moments, she saw her loved one again. He was reaching out to her" (Turcev, 2018, p. 154). As for female androids 2B and A2, both women resemble the stereotypical "smart, powerful, statuesque woman who wears tall leather boots and hot pants, with her cleavage revealed" often found in Japanese media (Bresnahan et al., 2006, p. 208). 2B's lolita-style outfit draws attention to her cleavage, and the worn-down exoskeleton on A2's hip region creates the impression of hot pants–in actuality, this blackened section of her body is the result of extreme damage to her exterior artificial skin (Bresnahan et al., 2006, p. 208).

In light of these seemingly damning details regarding the depiction of the female body in *NieR: Automata*, it could be argued that the game is complicit in upholding potentially harmful stereotypes regarding the sexualization of women in Japanese games and media. After all, when asked why 2B wears such a short skirt in the game, director Yoko Taro replied "the reason that she's wearing the short skirt is simply that I like short skirts," (Sainsbury 2018). Such a reply seems to implicate Taro–and by extension, the game as a whole–in upholding the patriarchal ideals contained in a myriad of Japanese media. However, to write off the game on the basis of

its female characters' appearances ignores the possibility of a postfeminist approach to this text.

Postfeminism exists as a response to feminism, wherein both feminist and antifeminist ideas are

entangled and "feminist ideas are both articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed,"

(Gill, 208, p. 442). Postfeminism's "constructions of contemporary gender relations are

profoundly contradictory," meaning that it recognizes the work accomplished by early feminist

waves that modern-day women benefit from, but ultimately assumes a contemporary equality of

the sexes (Gill, 2008, p. 442). In assuming this equality, postfeminism sees "a spectre of

feminism" invoked "so that it might be undone… for the girls what is proposed is a movement

beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for

themselves," (McRobbie, 2004, p. 259). McRobbie best encapsulates the apparent contradictory

nature of postfeminism, saying:

> As a mark of a post-feminist identity young women journalists refuse to condemn the enormous
> growth of lap dancing clubs despite the opportunities available for them to do so across the media.
> They know of the existence of the feminist critiques and debates (or at least this is my claim)
> through their education, as Shelley Budgeon (2001) has described the girls in her study, they are
> gender aware. Thus the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to
> withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is
> a condition of her freedom. There is quietude and complicity in the manners of generationally
> specific notions of cool, and more precisely an uncritical relation to dominant commercially
> produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions
> from the past in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings (McRobbie, 2004, p. 259-260).

These contradictions are intrinsic to postfeminism, as the apparent equality afforded to women

allows them to engage in behaviors previously thought degradative by earlier waves of feminism

without fear of societal vilification, and yet they must not comment on the negative gender

norms potentially reinforced by such behaviors and actions, lest they jeopardize the perceived

equality they have obtained; women can freely speak their minds, but only if what they have to

say is free of critique. In a postfeminist world, women are allowed to choose their own path,

even if that path aligns with previously vilified stereotypical gender norms.

This postfeminist notion of gender awareness is embodied in all three of these female characters. In the case of Simone, she resides in an environment where the patriarchy has been irrelevant for thousands of years, and this inherent equality between the male and female-presenting entities in this world affords her the freedom to choose the femininity she desires without exterior societal pressures. In the machine lifeform society that Simone existed in, the concept of gender is not widely adopted and Simone is the only machine in her community to willfully engage with physically feminizing herself. The default appearance of machine lifeforms is agender, with the "Small Stubby" machine type that Simone existed as prior to her transformation being described in the game's in-universe database as resembling "spring-powered toys created by humans in the past" and thus not being gendered through visual cues (PlatinumGames, 2017). Although Simone ultimately succumbs to an overwhelming despair when Jean-Paul rebukes her advances and she goes on to commit violent atrocities, it must be recognized that she was only in such a situation because she chose to be. Of course, in actuality it was the game's director and writers that manufactured the circumstances for her descent into madness, but within the confines of the game's world, Simone made her decisions divorced from any patriarchal context.

As for 2B and A2, the society they are a part of–the YoRHa military force–is effectively presented as a somewhat egalitarian matriarchy within the game. The YoRHa forces are led by Commander White, a stern female android responsible for managing and deploying YoRHa troops, who themselves are primarily female, as female androids are largely charged with engaging in combat while the limited number of male units are primarily tasked with reconnaissance (PlatinumGames, 2017). In essence, while male androids serve important roles within YoRHa, they nonetheless must answer to their female superiors and thus lack patriarchal

power; there is no male in power in the world of *NieR: Automata* as presented within the game. Within the fiction of the game, the decisions made by 2B and A2 are not affected by the patriarchy of our real world as a result of their uniquely egalitarian cultural environment. Since the two female androids' exist in a similarly patriarchy-free world to Simone, their respective attire is removed from any patriarchal context and thus, like to Simone, they are choosing to engage in formerly patriarchy-driven values, such as dressing in revealing clothing, on the basis of their female experiences that are not reflective of own world. In actuality, the game's creative team determined that these fictional characters should dress a certain way, but the effect is that 2B and A2's actions are seemingly not informed by the patriarchy of our real world.

Of course, there is an argument to be made that opposes the postfeminist reading of the game, that the revealing outfits worn by 2B and A2 solely exist to appeal to the male gaze. While such a perspective is understandable, especially considering the widespread objectification of women in Japanese media discussed earlier in this paper, this view ignores that the game engages in these gendered tropes in order to comment on their absurdity and the audience's complicity towards them. When the player manipulates the game's camera to look up 2B's skirt, she will back away in disgust and reset the camera's position, and after doing this ten times, the player is given the trophy "What Are you Doing?" for discovering 2B's "secret" (PlatinumGames, 2017). Less audience-conscious games have allowed the player to freely ogle its female characters without judgment, so while *NieR: Automata* still lets you objectify 2B, it appropriately chastises the player for doing so, thus calling attention to the very act of objectification that is prevalent within other video games. The game appropriately treats the player with disgust for looking up 2B's skirt, thus differentiating itself from less nuanced games such as *Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2*, a game that allows for the manipulation of female characters' breasts with the PlayStation 3's

gamepad's motion controls and completely avoids confronting the player with that act of objectification (Lopez, 2021). *NieR: Automata* comments on the nature of objectification in games by confronting the player with their actions in the form of the relevant trophy's name, "What Are You Doing?" and 2B's visible recoil at seeing what the player is doing to her, with the trophy's name in particular serving to coldly chastise the player's actions in the form of a simple, disarming question.

While considering the idea that the game's female characters present themselves in the sexually provocative ways that they do despite their lack of exposure to patriarchal society in mind, however, one may be inclined to assert that although there are fictional reasons for why characters like 2B are clad in revealing clothing, such diegetic justifications obfuscate the real-world reasoning behind these designs: to appeal to the male gaze. After all, 2B's design and the prominence of her backside turned countless heads on the Internet, with such sentiments even making their way back to Yoko Taro himself (Kotaku International, 2017). In this sense, it is difficult to divorce the appearances of 2B and A2 from the patriarchal environment of the Japanese media landscape that typically dictates such character designs, as 2B and A2 were nonetheless created in and embody an industry that frequently produces sexist depictions of women (Bresnahan et al., 2006, p. 208). Despite this seemingly damning sentiment, however, it is precisely the game's inclusion of such forward-facing sexual elements that allow it to embody the postfeminist notion of gender awareness. By allowing the player to objectify its female characters and subsequently reprimanding them for their actions, the game effectively critiques the ubiquity of female objectification in Japanese video games by confronting the player with their perverted deeds.

There is also the matter of 2B being pitted against Simone within the game, with the former being forced to kill the latter in self-defense. As previously established, Simone represents the game's interpretation of de Beauvoir's second-wave feminist notion that women are the product of their patriarchal surroundings and that the "lived experience" of women–the essence of womanhood in de Beauvoir's eyes–is a concept too abstract and unrelatable for non-women to comprehend. On the other hand, 2B has been established as embodying a more contemporary brand of postfeminism that seeks to dismantle harmful power structures by weaponizing her seemingly objectified appearance to critique the ubiquity of such designs in the first place. Such a reading applies to A2 as well considering the cultural background shared between her and 2B, although her role is less important in this context as she was not present for Simone's demise while 2B was the one to order the killing blow. In this sense, 2B killing Simone serves as the game's way of asserting its brand of postfeminism as more necessary in the modern-day than de Beauvoir's second-wave feminism; when 2B kills Simone, postfeminism positions itself as more relevant than second-wave feminism. Additionally, 2B's disposal of Simone also serves to challenge the antifeminist idea that women should be subservient to men, as Simone, a character whose ultimate purpose is to be subservient to a man, is put down by 2B, a character whose decisions are divorced from such a patriarchal notions and whose combat prowess far exceeds her male companion's.

Under a postfeminist framework that considers Marxist and existentialist readings of the text, the game's chastising of the player for objectifying its protagonist and decision to pit the postfeminism-embodying 2B against the second-wave feminism-embodying Simone can be seen as evidence that a postfeminist reading of the game is not an unintended view. While the intention behind Yoko Taro and his creative team's decisions cannot be known for certain, the

fact is that there are more than enough details within the game that support a postfeminist reading.

**CONCLUSION**

Regarding the research questions, they have been adequately addressed in the production of this paper. Within *NieR: Automata*, the messages conveyed by the various philosophical references are deep and layered, stacking atop each other and culminating in a postfeminist interpretation of the text rather than a purely feminist reading. The Marxist framework feeds into the existentialist framework, both of which are foundational to the formation of the postfeminist framework that crucially posits that the game utilizes elements of Marxist, existentialist, and feminist theory to present a world and story that can be appreciated though a postfeminist lens.

There are some limitations of this study. The researcher was limited by the game's nature as an expansive action role-playing game that takes dozens of hours to complete. Although the researcher played through the game multiple times, it is entirely possible that the researcher simply didn't encounter a relevant scenario in the game that other players may have experienced due to the game's sheer breadth. Though the likelihood of unintentionally avoiding crucial philosophical content is slim due to the researcher's diligence in playing and ability to reference online walkthroughs, the possibility must be nevertheless mentioned. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that while *NieR: Automata* contains a litany of layered philosophical references, their perceived role in the game's narrative are ultimately the researcher's own interpretation. As of the time of writing this paper, Yoko Taro and his colleagues have yet to explicitly confirm the exact reasons as to why the game contains so many direct references to the likes of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, and thus only informed interpretations can be made based on what is contained within the text.

*NieR: Automata*, though initially seeming antifeminist in its values, seeks to deconstruct both feminist and antifeminist discourses in order to ultimately assert itself as a postfeminist text. To accomplish this goal, the game synthesizes popular feminist ideas with widespread antifeminist sentiments and leverages elements of Marxism and existentialism to ultimately create a foundation ripe for a postfeminist reading, as protagonist 2B is to be read as a postfeminist response to the second-wave feminism embodied by the character Simone. In this sense, *NieR: Automata*'s creative team has produced one of the most philosophically dense video games in the history of the medium, adding the game to the canon of postfeminist texts in the process.

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