Religion and Spirituality in *NieR: Automata*

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Introduction

> At the 2011 Game Design Challenge, an event taking place during the Game Design
> Conference in which video game designers compete to present the best game about a
> specific theme, Jason Rohrer premiered a *Chain World*, which won him the first prize.
> The theme of that year's competition was "Bigger Than Jesus," a slogan that inspired
> designers to imagine games that would tackle issues of religion and spirituality. In
> his presentation Rohrer explained how *Chain World* was inspired by one of his main
> beliefs, namely that "we become like gods to those who come after us." Rohrer's game
> embeds this assumption into its very nature, since it is a *Minecraft* mod installed on
> a custom-designed USB stick of which only one copy exists in the world. The player
> of *Chain World* can modify the world of the game at will, but is supposed to follow
> what Rohrer defined as the game's canon, a set of rules that limit the behavior of
> the player possessing the USB stick. (Fassone 2017: 135)

The case of *Chain World* (Jason Rohrer 2011) is useful to anticipate some elements of
NieR: Automata (Platinum Games 2017) – the most famous videogame made by Yokō
Tarō – about spirituality and the passage of data between players. At the same time,
Chain World demonstrates the wide variety of religion in videogames, with a wide
array of religious situations emerging beyond the mere inclusion of deities and reli-
gious symbols in a product such as in the connection with Tolkien's subcreation (Wolf
2012; Hemminger 2014), the use of religion as a playful mechanic in medieval-themed
videogames (Pitruzzello 2013), the parareligious lore related to the *Twitch Plays Pokémon*
event (Mallory 2014), and the archaeology of gamified religious practices in predigital
contexts (Fuchs 2014). A complex and differentiated list of spiritual practice or feeling.

The interest for these practices begins in the early history of the videogame medium.
A good starting point is an article titled *The Theology of Pac-Man* (McFarland 1982). It's
not an academic analysis, but it shows an early interest in the relationship between
videogames and spirituality. However, a stable reflection only developed later.

Among the first monographic studies on these themes there are the works of Detweiler (2010) and Bainbridge (2013), followed by Campbell and Grieve (2014), Bosman (2019) and by the monographic issue of "Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet" edited by Heidbrink and Knoll (2014).

Several contributions, in the form of articles and book chapters, like Bainbridge and Bainbridge (2007), Plate (2010), Oldenburg (2011), Kücklich (2012), Geraci (2012), Wagner (2012; 2013), and others, highlight a rapidly growing interest of the field.

During the same period, a more specific kind of research on single videogames or sagas emerged, as for example with Walls' book (2011) about *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo EAD 1986), or Mitropoulos' (2009) about *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) and Hutchinson's (2019, 47–69) on *Ōkami* (Clover Studio 2006).

Another focus of research became the so called 'god games' (Meneghelli 2007; Cogburn/Silcox 2009: 73–90): "a god game is one that gives the user an omnipotent and, in some cases, an omnipresent perspective on the world they are engaging" (Ferdig 2014: 75). It is a videogame genre and should not be confused with the 'god mode', which "often refers to a cheat code or limited-time supernatural power that makes the user invincible" (ibid.). A game mode that also inspired the bizarro fiction novel *The Cheat Code for God Mode* (De Fonseca 2013).

Considering the connection between the (spiritual) sublime and horror (Krzywinska 2009: 278), a peculiar union of these elements was found in the connections between horror (especially gothic-derived) videogames and religion, as stated by the essays by Pruett (2010), Walter (2014), Marak (2015), Hoedt (2019) and others.

These representations can also be linked to the specific case of *Resistance: Fall of Man* (Insomniac Games 2006), a videogame that ended up in a controversy for staging a bloody battle in Manchester Cathedral. The debate provoked more than one reflection and "demonstrates a growing awareness, even among the severest critics of video games, of their social and spiritual relevance" (Brown 2008: 101). If the digital desecration of a place of worship may appear to be a blasphemous act, then even a digital prayer could have the value of one in the real world[1]. However, this was not the first example of religious moral panic linked to videogames. There is a long tradition of cases, back to tabletop games (Laycock 2015).

However, *Resistance: Fall of Man* was not the only videogame that has sparked religious controversy. A complete list would be long, but it is worth to remember at least some of them, like the videogames of La Molleindustria *Operation: Pedopriest* (La Molleindustria 2007) and *Faith Fighter* (La Molleindustria 2008), or *Nun Attack* (Frima 2012), less political and controversial, but still considered a source of potential direct offenses (Morelli 2014: 79–84), as could be the gunslinger exorcist Father Paul Rawlings of *Clive Barker's Jericho* (MercurySteam 2007).

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1   It should also be noted that it was not the first videogame to propose a fight inside a church. Even leaving out the numerous examples in fantasy contexts (for example *Hexen II* (Raven Software 1997)) there is at least the precedent of *TimeSplitters 2* (Free Radical Design 2002), in which the player has to fight zombies, skeletons and a giant ogre inside Notre Dame of Paris. Such cases, however, do not seem to have aroused particular debates.

Another element that shows the difference between humanity as we see it in the game with what we classically view as divine can be found in evangelical propaganda videogames, such as *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (Inspired Media Entertainment 2006), which proposes a conflict between the distinct forces of good and evil (Wagner 2013: 251) and which has raised various criticisms and perplexities, especially because of the religious guerrilla on which it is based (Brown 2008: 105–7).

The present paper introduces *NieR: Automata* within this debate on spirituality in videogames, in which it has only been mentioned marginally so far (Bosman 2019: 101–4). *NieR: Automata* is a case of particular interest for its explicit philosophical and religious elements[2]. But, also, because it represents a reflection on the way in which videogames represent themselves (Jaćević 2017).

The story is set in a distant future, where planet Earth is dominated by Machine life-forms[3], mechanical entities created by invading Aliens. The last humans live on the moon and send combat Androids to the planet from their orbital base. The main characters of the videogame are three of these Androids, playable in three different game sessions, which progressively add further details to the story. The player takes control of 2B, 9S and A2, in order. These are three meaningful names, because the way in which they are pronounced evokes, respectively, the Shakespearean '**to be**', the Latin '*non esse*' and the expression '*et tu*' which Caesar would have pronounced when addressing Brutus and which is used by Shakespeare in the tragedy of the same name (act III, scene I, Shakespeare 2014: 604). These names constitute three references to the history and the personality of these Androids (A2, for example, is a traitorous Android, who rebelled against her commanders).

Progressively, numerous overturnings take place: first, with the discovery of peaceful Machine lifeforms, like Pascal; later, with the discovery that all Machine lifeforms feel emotions, fears and desires. There is, in particular, a short sequence in which a Machine is controlled by the player. It only lasts a few minutes, but it's quite important:

> Before the player controls 9S, they are given over to Friedrich, a small machine who is retrieving oil in order to revive his clearly irreparable "brother." Despite the fact that the player has been killing machines like Friedrich until this point, the switch from the agile, lightning-fast 2B to the slow, shuffling robot fosters a sympathy for his helplessness, which deepens into an empathetic frustration when, burdened by the bucket, the player inevitably trips over one of the seemingly inconspicuous pipes that litter the ground. (Gerrish 2018: 3)

As the game progresses, further overturnings and changes of perspective take place. Both humans and invading Aliens are long gone, completely extinct. Therefore, Androids and Machines are fighting an eternal war without meaning and purpose. Finally, at the 'ending E', the player is asked to clear all game data. A similar choice was already used in one of the endings of the previous *NieR* (Cavia 2010) and, for this choice, Yokō Tarō had been

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2   Among the principal critical contributions about *NieR: Automata* there are Jaćević (2017), Gerrish (2018), Turcev (2018) and Paquet (2021).

3   Sometimes they are simply called 'Machines'.

acclaimed as a genius by some players and pointed out as a sadistic megalomaniac by others (Turcev 2018).

In ending E, the player has to fight the credits of the game, shooting at the names of its creators. Here, in an extremely critical moment, the videogame suggests the player to admit that there is no meaning in this world, that everything is pointless. However, a moment later, messages of hope and encouragement from other players appear, and it's possible to get their help. The battle against the credits goes on, but now with the help of what remains of other people's game data. And so, it's possible to defeat the 'authors' of *NieR: Automata*. Meanwhile, the words of the song *Weight of the World* (Okabe 2017) underline the need to continue the fight, even if everything seems meaningless.

After this battle the PODs – the small support robots that accompanied the three Androids during their long journey – reappear. And, with some minor changes, reappears also the sentence that 2B had pronounced at the beginning of the game: "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?" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.). It is perhaps the moment of the game in which the influences of Nietzsche's thought appear most clearly (Jaćević 2017). The PODs ponder on a state of eternal recurrence: even starting everything from scratch (the reconstruction, but also the videogame itself) somewhere else, it's possible that the same conclusions will be reached again. That's a possibility, but they also recognize that, maybe some change is still possible.

After this cutscene, the player is asked if wants to clear all of the game data to help 'someone somewhere in the world', just as she or he has been helped before. A strongly empathic but very difficult gift, since it involves the sacrifice of hours and hours of play. An empathic sacrifice which, however, could be the only thing capable of restoring some meaning to a path that seems to have lost any significance and any practical usefulness.

This is also what the aforementioned song *The Weight of the World* seems to suggest: "Cause we're going to shout it loud/Even if our words seem meaningless/It's like I'm carrying the weight of the world/I wish that someway, somehow/That I could save every one of us" (Okabe 2017: n.p.).

The Role of Divinity: A Narrative Frame

In *NieR: Automata* we don't have any real god. The only time the word 'god' is used in a classical sense[4] is in the stage of the game in which the Machine Pascal and the Android

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2B come into contact with a real sect of Machines that worship their leader as a god[5]. However, this does not mean that the weight of deity is not felt. This happens in several ways.

The most apparent way it occurs is with the idealization of Humanity, as shown by the Council of Humanity that inhabits the Moon. In fact, since the early stages of the game, the meaning of the existence of the playable character has been clearly explained to the player: fighting for humanity; or better: "for the Glory of Mankind" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.). If from a strictly diegetic point of view the purpose of every action would seem to be to allow humans to return to Earth, from a deeper point of view what characterizes the actions of Androids is the desire to glorify humanity in exile. No sacrifice is excessive to fulfill this sacred purpose. In a sense, this desire to please mankind, which is seen as if it was a deity to satisfy, is the engine that moves everything. This is consistent, *mutatis mutandis*, with some of the more traditional visions of the divine, from Aristotle with the concept of motionless motor (in turn taken up by Dante, "La Gloria di Colui che tutto move" *Par.* I: 1; "l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle", Par. XXXIII: 145 in Petrocchi 1994) to Saint Augustine for which true freedom consists in complying with the divine will[6]. From this point of view, therefore, Humanity fully satisfies the requirements of divinity.

Another element that links Humanity as we see it in the game with what we classically view as divine is its spatial and figurative location. In fact, the Council of Humanity resides on the Moon, a 'heavenly' place, very distant from the player's actions, that take place almost entirely on Earth. In this aspect the comparisons would be innumerable, by simply looking at the Greek world we find both the concept of the Olympus (classical mythology) and that of Hyperuranium[7]. The location of the deity in a celestial place does not only imply 'superiority' but also the distance par excellence: the sky is that limit beyond which one can't go, the unbridgeable distance that metaphorically expresses a basic ontological difference. After all, there are moments in which the Androids find themselves having to ascertain that they are not humans[8]. The distance of the divine world from the human one also implies two other aspects, which are closely interconnected. First of all, the human attempt to reach divinity, e.g. with prayers and sacrifices, which are echoed in the videogame by the missiles launched to the moon with supplies.

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5   At a certain point in the game Pascal is invited by a group of Machines who have created a religious pacific society and want to ally themselves with Pascal's Village. Pascal decides to go and meet this group together with 2B but after a while they discover that this group is planning a collective suicide. Cf. Bosman 2019: 231–4.

6   This topic is dealt with across the board in many of St. Augustine's works (e.g., *De Civitate Dei* XXII,30; *In Psalmum 67* 13; *De dono perseverantiae* I, 13; *Epistula 101* 2; *De gratia et libero arbitrio*; all in Mayer 2000). Cf. Paulinus of Nola, *Epistola 8*, 3, 33–34: *Haec bona libertas Christo servire et in ipso Omnibus esse supra* (translated in English in Walsh 1966: 78).

7   Plato, *Phaedrus* 246 c-e. In any case it must be remembered that Hyperuranium is a location *sui generis*; according to Reale it is a *place not-place* ("Il termine onsi ὑπερουράνιον è stato onsiderate dalla cultura occidentale come emblematico e recepito come tale. […] Si tenga presente che col cielo termina il luogo fisico, e, per conseguenza, il sopra-cielo è *luogo al di là del luogo*, ossia *luogo non-luogo*, vale a dire la dimensione metafisica d'll'intelligibilità", Plato 2006: 228 note 98).

8   For example, when operator 21O confides to 9S that she would have a family like humans do.

Secondly, the lack of communication, expressed with the deity's silence or with its cryptic answers[9]; the Council of Humanity, in parallel, does not speak directly with the Androids, it uses the figure of the Commander just as in most religions' ministers communicate the will of god(s) to the faithful (and when gods communicate directly it is never a dialogic relationship but a simple declaration to be accepted as it is, and no worshippers would dare to question it). This distance or absence[10] is in turn connected to the sense of precariousness of the creatures (human beings in religions and Androids in the game) and of their life, but we will return to this at the end.

Progressing in the game, however, the player discovers that the Council of Humanity does not actually exist: it is a staging designed by the Commander to give meaning to the lives of the Androids and convince them to carry on the war against the Machines. Impossible not to hear the echoes of Marx that screams against religion, "the opium of the people'" ("*Die Religion ist das Opium des Volkes*" Marx 1844: 72.) that serves to control the masses. In any case, while with Marx this revelation must serve as a stimulus for the human being to reappropriate his own life otherwise alienated by religion, in the videogame this announcement of the **death of God** scorches the Earth and leaves the Androids without any purpose. In the fictional narrative this **impasse** is overcome by 9S thanks to the affection he feels for 2B and that pushes him to continue his tasks as if he had never discovered the truth. However, once 2B is dead, 9S has no reason to live and goes completely insane. Therefore, while in contemporary philosophers the liberation from the idea of God serves as a springboard for a reappropriation of one's own life[11], in *NieR: Automata* it reveals the nonsense of life, its precariousness and its tragicomic nature – this is perhaps the true thread of Yokō Tarō's videogame.

Opposed to humans are, ideally, the Aliens, the creators of the Machines. Again, the actual existence of the Aliens is a lie: they died several centuries before the events took place. Despite this, the 'Aliens → Machines' and 'Humans → Androids' parallelism mirrors one of the typical ways of thinking the religious phenomenon, namely that of radical/absolute dualism[12]: on one side the positive deity (humans) and on the other the negative deity (Aliens); in the middle, lower rank beings who support one of the two sides and who fight among themselves in place of the deities. Of course, this is an extreme simplification, as not all dualisms are realised in this way, but it is perhaps one of the ways that has been most influential in videogames and fiction based on dualistic schemes[13].

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9   See Psalm 22 (cf. Benedictus XVI 2011).

10   The absence of divinity often causes a response anger and not infrequently both 9S and, above all, 2B manifest this emotion (in one of the first phases of the game 2B is clearly disturbed by the fact that 9S has lost his memories and her fists are visibly clenched as it is usually done when angry).

11   Nietzsche (1882: Aph. 125, 343; 1885).

12   The perfect example is that of Zoroastrianism/Mazdayasna, a ditheism in which Spenta Mainyu ('the good spirit' simplifying) and Angra Mainyu ('the evil spirit', as known as Ahriman) are engaged in a cosmic struggle and human beings have to choice sides. This ditheism should not be confused with duotheism where the two gods or principles are complementary and not counter, like Yin and Yang in Taoism.

13   We can cite *Prince of Persia: Prodigy* (Ubisoft Montreal 2008), based on Zoroastrianism/Mazdayasna and its radical dualism, or *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo EAD 1986) (and in all series), in which we have Link and Ganondorf eternally opposed like Good and Evil. In a different way, the dualism is

The Difficult Relationship with the Divine: Betrayals and Imitations

However, this elementary scheme is disturbed by several factors, at least three of which can be framed within the perspective of the religious phenomenon of betrayal, albeit in a very different and peculiar way.

The first type of betrayal is what we might call 'of rebellion', 'of rage', and is mainly carried out by the Android A2. As already mentioned, by the way, that the pronunciation of A2 is very similar to the pronunciation of the Latin '*et tu*' with which Caesar refers to Brutus in the Shakespearian play. This type of betrayal arises from the torment experienced, not only because the deity didn't try to reduce it, but the deity itself is the actual cause of it. In the videogame this translates into the fact that all A2's sacrifices and efforts only lead to further pain, which in turn pushes the Android to rebel against the system that has imposed all this on her. In the final moments of the game, we will also see that the pain of 9S culminates in contempt for the system that deceived him and for life itself. These feelings are thus closely related to the theme of the absence of the divine that we anticipated earlier. It would not be wrong to say that this betrayal is actually an understandable response to the betrayal suffered. Particularly interesting for comparison is the biblical episode of Job, where the patriarch's misfortunes, though caused by Satan, occur with God's consent. However, in the biblical episode, the saint does not give into the temptation to be angry with God but continues to praise him. Job thus assumes the role of a model in the face of the feeling of being abandoned by God, to educate believers not to be drawn into the feeling of revenge against God who apparently punishes the righteous. On the other hand, as Jung (1952) observed, Job's story, despite its conclusion, cannot fail to bring out a criticism of an immoderate God who treats his own children as pawns, just as the Androids are pawns in the chessboard of the war against the Machines.

A second type of betrayal is that of the Machine Pascal and the entire village he manages. Pascal is a defector in all respects, who wants to escape the logic of war and therefore tries to create a micro-world based on his pacifist principles. In a way, this betrayal could be considered as more serious than the previous one. In fact, while before the relationship implied a critical tension towards the divine, now the center of gravity is shifted elsewhere and the traitor tries, in his own way, to be in turn a divinity that creates its own space. Pascal therefore enters in direct competition with the two deities identified (the Council of Humanity and the Aliens); however, this sin of ὕβις (**hybris**)[14] cannot go unpunished and at the end of the game even Pascal's world will be brutally wiped out. Like every other glimmer of hope throughout the entire game. Pascal is a Machine, but his message of peace reaches Machines and Androids alike; it reaches B2 and 9S, it reaches some members of the resistance[15], it reaches defecting Androids seeking shelter in his

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developed in the *Fable* (Lionhead Studios since 2004) and *Black&Whyte* (Lionhead Studios since 2001) series where the player has to constantly choose between doing good or evil actions.

14   in ancient Greece, the term ὕβις (**hybris**) denotes a serious sinful action toward the deity; literally, it can be translated as *tracotance*.

15   Resistance is a group of old models of Androids that lives on Heart created before project YoRHa; Ameonna, their leader, became friends with Pascal and they started to collaborate often giving each other a hand.

village[16], and it even reaches A2. The universality of his message may evoke the openness of the message of universal religions, which extend toward all humans regardless of their origin. Thus this 'betrayal' towards an imposed system goes beyond mere individual confrontation and evokes the system of proselytizing.

As a counterbalance to Pascal's ecumenicality there is the sect of the Machines of the factory[17]. The attempt to imitate the religious systems to which we are accustomed and their rituality is obvious:

> When Pascal and 2B enter the facility, they are greeted by an oddly dressed machine-man: "You enter the domain of God. Down this corridor if you would". The machine man is identified by the game as 'priest'. The 'priest' is dressed in a garment not unlike a Roman Catholic priest or Protestant minister: a purple cloak with a white-and-purple embroidered collar. [...] Pascal and B2 [...] enter a long corridor lit by the torches of two rows of machine priests, all identically dressed. [...] In the middle of the room, positioned on a platform, 'His Grace' appears to be sitting on his throne made of scrap metal, surrounded by torch-carrying machine priests. He wears the same cloak and collar, but on his perfectly round ball-shaped head (a characteristic of almost all machine-men) is a head, also in purple and white, with the same geometrical patterns. Qua-shaped, the head holds the middle between a papal tiara. (Bosman 2019: 231)

At first, despite the occasionally eerie setting, the gamer gets the impression that this religious group sincerely wants to pursue peace like Pascal. At a certain point, however, the situation plummets, the Machine worshipped as a god literally loses its head that comes off and rolls on the ground and is given to all the order to commit suicide and kill each other to become all gods: "You also must die and become gods! […] Let us die and become gods together! […] We shall become gods. We shall" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.). If from a certain point of view this may seem to be a reference to the theme of the **folly of the cross**[18], on the other hand it clearly recalls the sad events of well-known sects, first of all that of the People's Temple[19]. It is interesting to note, however, that although this sect could not aim to expand for obvious reasons, the message promulgated is also in the perspective of universality, even more than that of Pascal, going to include even humans, in fact now extinct: "Machine! People! Androids! Every one of them, a god!" (ibid.).

The third type of betrayal is that of Adam, a Human/Android-looking Machine who, with his brother Eve, is the main enemy of the A/B narrative arcs. Adam, as a Machine, should continue the war against the Androids in the name of the Aliens. However, at the first useful opportunity, he reveals the truth about the Aliens (i.e., that they died centuries ago) and shows no interest in them or in the war itself. It is clear from every action

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16   Two Androids, tired of fighting in the resistance, decided to run away to escape the war. After several side quests related to these characters 2B and 9S will discover that the male Android is in love with the female one but she only pretends to reciprocate the feeling for her own interests.

17   See note 5 above.

18   In Christianity, this term refers to the notion that God's actions may appear incomprehensible to reason (e.g. the fact that Christ had to sacrifice himself on the cross). Cf. Paul *Corinthians* 1, I, 20–25.

19   Much emphasis is placed on the importance of doing the deed all together: "The moment we've planned for is here. Let us all go together" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.).

and word of Adam that his only purpose is to satisfy his own curiosity about humans and to want to feel like them. It is no accident that the name recalls the first man of the biblical creation, whose sin was to eat the forbidden fruit in order to attain the knowledge of God. In the biblical myth, in fact, the Serpent instigates in Adam the desire to place himself on the same level as God and only the awareness of evil, hitherto ignored, seems to be able to bridge that distance (*Genesis* 3:6). Similarly, the Machine Adam, after reading several books about human beings, decides to put in place a series of behaviors that will lead him to understand what it means to be a human. He decides to detach himself from the collective network of Machines, in search of a kind of uniqueness that traces the uniqueness of human life: doing so, however, he also renounces the immortality of his data (in a similar way this will happen with 9S). During the fatal clash with 2B herself, in a sort of macabre reconstruction of a city still inhabited by humans, Adam will use every means necessary to live an authentic human experience rather than to pursue victory. Finally, all this allows him to feel the human experience par excellence: death. From a certain point of view all this traces what we said about the sect of Machines, although in a profoundly different sense. There, death was seen as the necessary act to overcome the condition of precarious existence, to overcome the nonsense of existence to which the Machines are condemned; in a certain sense, the sartrian drama of being condemned to be free is taken to its extreme consequences[20]. Death is thus tied to an escape from the hic et nunc[21]. Here, in the case of Adam, death is not an attempt to escape from life, it is the very fulfillment of life, it is its greatest exaltation. Adam betrays the cause for which he was created and wants to become to all intents and purposes like the god of the opposite faction, accepting the consequences till the end. If the biblical man Adam, seeking to equal his god, goes to meet the experience of death[22], the Machine Adam, seeking the experience of death, manages to equal his chosen god, the human being.

Redemption and Sacrifice: The Self and the Other

In addition to these three types of betrayal, there is another episode that, from a certain point of view, could be analyzed through the filter of betrayal. At a certain point in the game, 2B and 9S discover that Engels, one of the Machines they had previously fought

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20   It should be noted that one of the Machines in Pascal's Village is called Jean-Paul – an obvious reference to Jean-Paul Sartre – and explicitly questions the meaning of life. However, the theme is constant in all the Machines; just to mention a few: Father Servo, the wise Machines, the Machine that challenges the Androids in a speed race, the actress Machines… all Machines that, once the events with which they try to distract themselves are over (a sort of videogame transposition of the theory of **divertissement** of the Pascal philosopher), find no other solution than suicide, sometimes striking and almost artistic (e.g. the actress Machines who end the theatrical performance with their death), at other times relegated and humble (e.g. the last wise Machine who, having reached the conclusion that without someone's love life has no meaning, without too many frills throws herself from a building and smashes to the ground).

21   Perhaps Yokō Tarō wanted to echo Schopenhauer (1819).

22   "*Propterea, sicut per unum hominem peccatum in hunc mundum intravit, et per peccatum mors, et ita in omnes homines mors pertransiit, eo quod omnes peccaverunt*". Saint Paul, *Romanos* 5,15; cf. also *Concilium Tridentinum*, 5a canone 2: DS 1512.

with, is still alive, albeit badly damaged. Despite 2B's initial distrust, 9S convinces the friend to search for the necessary parts to gradually repair Engels. At the end of this secondary mission Engels reveals that he has understood the suffering caused to the Androids and that he is repentant; for this reason, he will decide to sacrifice himself by donating some components extracted from his circuits to help 2B and 9S in their mission.

In this case we can see simultaneously two types of betrayal, but also redemption. In the first instance 2B and 9S betray their cause when they decide to help Engels, who was their enemy and could become one again because of the help given to him. In a specular way Engels too, when he finally sacrifices himself to help 2B and 9S, makes a betrayal, donating useful objects to the Android faction. These two acts of betrayal towards their respective 'deities' for whom they should fight (Aliens and Humans), are actually an act of redemption towards individuals of the opposite faction: 2B and 9S help the same Machine that they tried to eliminate earlier in the game; Engels at this point will try to help his destroyers – now redeemed – in order to redeem himself from the pain he caused[23].

As the game progresses, the scheme initially presented (Aliens & Machines VS Humans & Androids) is slowly but steadily dismantled and, **de facto**, overturned: Machines and Androids versus their 'gods', Aliens and Humans.

This feeling of commonality between Machines and Androids continuously emerges during the game; for example, in the initial phases of 9S's adventure, the player finds himself having to command a Machine remotely controlled by 9S; later this will be repeated in the Factory and in the secondary mission of the tournament where it is necessary to take control Machines. After these experiences – which are experienced during the second story arc of the game (B) – we can finally understand why at the end of the final A (first story arc) 9S calmly accepts the fact that his consciousness is still present in the Machine network. Slowly it is discovered that 9S's hacking ability does not consist solely of remotely controlling the hardware of the Machines, the different software also intermingles with each other. This becomes clear with the side mission of the wise Machines, when, after the third hack, 9S's hardware undergoes changes due to the feeling of distress felt by the hacked Machine's software.

A very curious aspect of the empathy between Machines and Androids is the contrast between the different levels of openness it manifests itself. As the game progresses, in fact, it will be noticed that the Machines tend to have a consistent and 'self-stereotyped' behavior: when their empathy is shown, it is oriented towards the whole category and not just towards the single individual they are empathetic with. Pascal and the villagers are pacifists towards all Androids, not just a few; Engels, repentant, sympathizes with the whole 'species' of Androids; the Machines' sect is open to all Machines and all Androids, not just to Pascal and 2B. This collective dimension of reality is not limited to retracing

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23   The act of donating one's own body for redemptive purposes is typical of Christian doctrine and constitutes its fundamental act, as is still recalled with the celebration of the Eucharist and the phenomenon of transubstantiation. However, we must not think that the sacrifice of Engels necessarily refers back to the Christian religion. The use of Engels' pieces by the Androids may recall various religious practices linked to cannibalism, for example those in use by the Aztecs (Duverger 2005: 83–93); for a general overview of ritual cannibalism see Bataille (2009: 69–70, 78–81,88-90).

the Judaic[24]-Christian-Muslim universalism, but tends to level out and nullify the distinctiveness of the individual, as it happens for example in the pantheistic and especially in the gnostic religious views where the individual is destined to reunite with the divine by merging into it[25]. This already happens partially with Machines that are constantly connected to each other. It is legitimate to think that, living their existence as a collective **unicum**, they are therefore led to look at the Androids with the same filter. Pascal himself is not exempt from this logic, so much so that in the final stages of the game, after seeing his village destroyed, he can no longer find a meaning to his life without a collective world to refer to. The only significant exception is represented by Adam who, as it has been seen, pursues a completely different goal from the other Machines and voluntarily separates himself from the network to try to achieve human individuality[26]. His own death, as already mentioned, serves as the crowning achievement of this quest: death sets out a limit to the expansion of our range of possibilities and, as such, gives value to each of our choices and the self-determination of our individual selves.[27]

On the other hand, there are the Androids in the completely opposite situation: each one of them selectively chooses the behaviors to have with other Androids and with the single Machines. Therefore, friendship and love stories are possible, as it emerges more or less clearly depending on the cases. Such behavior is of obvious human origin, like in a sort of creation *ad imaginem et similitudinem*[28]. The importance of the Androids' individuality emerges clearly in several contexts: for example at the end of the secondary mission of the wandering couple[29]; with the interactions that 2B and 9S have with their respective reference points on board the orbiting station where the command of the YoRHa unit is based; with the mission about the Android who decides to 'adopt' another Android even though he was expressly forbidden to do so; or with the fact that the Androids show empathy with single Machines in their individuality (or, at most, with small and circum-

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24   Judaism is a *sui generis* case because it expresses characteristics typical of universal religions and national religions; (cf. Sfameni 2011: 130, 148–9).

25   It happens especially in Valentinians view (cf. Chiapparini 2012: 373, 378).

26   On closer inspection there are other cases in which a tendency towards individualism can be observed, but these are episodes that are for their own sake and not detailed enough to be analysed in depth; for example we recall the secondary mission in which a child Machine lost in the desert has to be recovered, the secondary mission of the letters to Jean-Paul, the secondary mission of the child Machine that locks itself inside the house and the story of the king Machine in the forest. In all these cases, however, there is a constant element, namely the presence of an affective feeling that places a 'specific other' in a privileged position compared to 'all the others'. From the same point of view we can understand Eve's behavior that puts his brother Adam in a privileged position compared to any other Machine.

27   Heidegger (1927: §§ 50, §§ 52,§§ 53); cf. Toni (2011). About the relationship between freedom and death in videogames see Seregni (2020: 52–56).

28   *Genesis* 1:26.

29   At the end of this secondary mission, the player discovers that the male Machine is ready to do anything for his beloved, even to give up his memories, i.e., his own self; on the other hand, the female Machine exploits this love for her own benefit; in both cases, although diametrically opposed, a single individual is at the center of everything.

scribed groups, for example Pascal's village or the peaceful Machines of Luna Park[30]) or with single Androids with whom they establish special affective relationships.

The theme of the uniqueness of each Android is inextricably intertwined with another theme typical of many religious movements, namely that of corporeality. In one of the initial phases of the game, the player must help one of the resistance merchants who cannot move because of a damage to his left leg; 9S, intrigued, asks the merchant why he doesn't repair his leg, since he has the necessary spare parts. The merchant's answer is that that leg is the only thing he has never replaced of his original body: if he changed it, he would no longer be what he was originally. The uniqueness of his own body seems to clash with what the game had conveyed shortly before, when 2B and 9S had blown themselves up, aware that their memories, copied in the central server, would continue to revive in new bodies identical to the previous one. This dichotomy between software and hardware seems to follow exactly the dichotomy between soul and body present in various religions. The same concept of body is continually questioned in *NieR: Automata* in various contexts, thanks to the mechanics for which, once the character dies, all the items he has equipped are lost and the only way to get them back is to find your body in time and recover them[31]. It is clear that to continue the game from the diegetic point of view does not mean to continue 'as if you had not died', but to continue with a new body different from the previous one that has died. It would seem that memory is the fundamental thing, which is the soul's counterpart and, like it, is immortal. This would seem to be confirmed also by the fact that 2B gets fiercely angry when, just after her and 9S' sacrifice at the factory, she discovers that 9S has lost most of his own memories. On the other hand, just before the sacrifice, 9S jeopardizes the mission itself to give time to 2B to upload his memories. However, all of this is called into question as the plot progresses. First of all, as already anticipated, with the merchant's reflections; then with the reflections and stories of other NPCs[32] such as Devola and Popola[33]; finally, with the sacrifice of 9S at the end of the parallel A/B narrative arcs. At this point 9S, thanks to his Android scanner skills, hacks the Machine Eve, but in doing so his own software is damaged irreparably. Thus, 2B must accept that the new 9S will have to use the data of the previous backup, giving up the memory of the last events: the 9S in front of her will die forever.

> **9S**: I must have been corrupted when Eve detached from the network […] I can always reload my backup data from the Bunker.

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30   In an old, abandoned amusement park there are peaceful Machines celebrating with each other instead of fighting with Androids.

31   The same mechanism occurs in other games, e.g., *Diablo II* (Blizzard North 2001); instead in other games (e.g., *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware & SCE Japan Studio 2015)) the player has to go to the place where her/his character is dead to retrieve unspent experience points.

32   **Non-Player Character**, i.e., characters with whom you interact but who are controlled by the program and not by other players.

33   Devola and Popola's story is related to the prequel of *NieR: Automata*, i.e., *NieR* (Cavia 2010) (as known as *NieR: Gestalt* or *NieR: Replicant*, depending on the reference market), and to the starting series *Drakengard* (Cavia 2003; 2005; 2013), where the soul/body dichotomy theme is central to the development of the story.

2B: But you'll lose you. The you that exists at this very moment. (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.)

In any case, not even limited backup data's immortality is guaranteed. This becomes tragically evident when the Bunker's entire backup server is attacked by a virus through a backdoor and 2B herself must accept death in a definitive manner[34].

The theme of the extreme sacrifice, that of life, is thus presented on a double level: that of contingency, with the loss of the single individual identifiable with a precise body (e.g., the repeated sacrifice of the Androids to destroy too powerful enemies with the explosion of their 'black boxes', explicitly provided as a mode of attack as demonstrated by the 'self-destruction' function that can be activated through the prolonged and joint pressure of certain buttons[35]), and the absolute one, with the loss of the backup data that serves as a matrix for the continuous replicability of the Androids. At the end of all the narrative arcs, the player will be asked to try to live this same experience: he will be asked to permanently delete all the game data. We will come back to this choice later, but it is worth noting right now that the deep message that Yokō Tarō wants to send to the player about the precariousness of human life compared to the whole cosmos is typical of different religious sensitivities in the East; just think, for example, of the tradition of the Sand Mandala practiced by Tibetan monks.

A special attention must be dedicated to Emil, a bizarre character who hides behind a mask of light-heartedness that has one of the saddest stories of the whole game. He is a life form *sui generis*: he was created as a weapon centuries before the events of *NieR: Automata* and fought directly against the Aliens. However, being alone, he had no chance of victory. For this reason, he began to 'split and double' an incalculable number of times, in order to create a real army. At each duplication, however, each copy found itself with gaps in its memory. At the end of the countless duplications the memory of the original Emil was completely lost; only with the help of 2B and 9S Emil will be able to recover part of his memories, but these will throw him into a deep anguish, so that at the end the player will have to fight with Emil and kill him before he destroys himself by destroying the entire planet. In the unfolding of the plot of *NieR: Automata* Emil has no role; however, the slow discovery of his story makes it clear how important his sacrifice in the previous events was. Emil's sacrifice does not consist in a renunciation of his life in the strict sense (as in the case of Engels), but in the loss of memory that, as we have seen, constitutes the fundamental core of the lives of the characters in *NieR: Automata*. Emil's fate is even more terrible than death, it is a condemnation to an eternal existence without any connection to reality, it is the complete loss of self. The complete alienation of the character is well

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34   Actually, in the real last game sequences it will be discovered that an intact backup of some of the game's characters (including Adam and Eve) has been preserved and sent to space.

35   It should be highlighted that this function must first be manually enabled by Androids although they are formally obliged to have it always active; in the early stages of the game 9S clearly explains it to 2B, but equally clearly admits that he will not spy if 2B decides not to activate it. This behavior could be one of the cases already analyzed of 'rebellious' betrayal: an innate sense of survival – a Spinozian *conatus*, which is present in the Androids that, in accordance with what has been said so far, try to preserve their individual identity – pushes to put a limit beyond which the will of the creator, human being, cannot go.

rendered by the childish and circus music that accompanies him in the middle of a scenario made of death, destruction and loneliness: the jarring dissonance evokes the tragic nature of his story.

Restore Humanity: Beyond Illusions

The theme of sacrifice and the relationship with other people deserve a further analysis, related to the videogame's ending.

> And yet, through the poetic lens of defamiliarization and renewal, we understand that this repetition is constructive, and that the "final antagonist" is instead our automatized perception of games and what they can achieve—and by extension, what *humanity* can achieve. (Gerrish 2018: 7)

In this vision of the world and humanity, there is a fluctuation between nihilism and hope, and it seems possible to grasp a parallelism with certain positions of Giacomo Leopardi[36]. *NieR: Automata* doesn't mention the poet from Recanati. Rather, it refers to Nietzsche on several occasions, from the very start of the videogame. However, the philosophical al poetical vision of Leopardi helps too, to understand the thoughts of the characters of *NieR: Automata*, considering the similarities between Nietzsche and Leopardi on themes like the search for truth and the illusions, to the point of a definition of pre-Nietzschean Leopardi (Otto 1963; Negri 1994; Carrera 1999).

One example is the *Dialogo di Cristoforo Colombo e di Pietro Gutierrez* (Leopardi 2008). Gutierrez accuses Columbus of putting the lives of all the expedition at risk following a simple speculation (ibid.). The answer of Columbus is quite interesting. He says that their journey is meaningful precisely because they are risking something, because it's not sure that they will find a land beyond the ocean (ibid.). If they had only followed established certainties, then they would never have left home, but without any risk there's also no love for life. As some commentators have pointed out, Christopher Columbus's answer seems to draw on Pascal's thought (Savoca 1999; Biancu 2004).

Almost all of the characters in *NieR: Automata* try to escape the nonsense of this eternal war. However, it's difficult to set a new goal, outside of the conflict. Many Machine lifeforms (such as Father Servo and the sprinter Machine) persistently pursue a certain goal and, once achieved, self-destruct. Others (the factory's religious Machine lifeforms) commit suicide **en masse** to ascend to divinity.

Progressing in the game gradually destroys illusions, for both the characters and the player. However, no single and definitive 'True' is reached. Even in the ending E, the two PODs wonder about what would happen if we started all over again, elsewhere: will everything be repeated, or will something change?

The same question is found in the choices made by the Machine Pascal. Teaching baby Machines about feelings is what ends up destroying them. The children, in fact, commit

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36   The quoted translations of his *Zibaldone* are those of Kathleen Baldwin et al. in Leopardi (2013). The numbers in the text do not indicate the page number, but the internal numbering of the *Zibaldone*.

suicide, terrified, when they are under attack. But without those feelings would Machine lifeforms be 'alive' and 'human'?

What the Machine Pascal does is teach emotions and notions that destroy the illusions of baby Machines.

> Each day we lose something; that is, some illusions, which are all we have, perish or wane. Experience and truth daily deprive us of some portion of our possessions. We do not live except by losing. Man is born rich in everything, and as he grows, he gets poorer, until in old age he finds himself with almost nothing. (Leopardi 2013: 636)

The Machine Pascal seems obsessed with knowledge, research and transmission of information. Similarly, the Machine lifeforms Adam and Eve appear obsessed in their search for understanding of human beings. In the end, all searches for truth turn out to be destructive and deceptive. Not because they lead to falsehood, but because there does not seem to be an actual truth.

There's a point in *NieR: Automata* where the Machine Adam and the Android 2B face off. On that occasion, Adam says that he understood the truth about human beings: "the core of humanity … is conflict. They fight. Steal. Kill. THIS is humanity in its purest form" (Platinum Games 2017: n.p.). 2B replies that he knows nothing about humans.

Up to a certain point, in the game, it would seem possible that one of their two positions is correct, that is 'right'. Yet, as already said, both are ultimately overcome. They are not false, but neither are they true. No antithesis between true and false, but only different degrees of illusion (Carrera 1999: 87).

This position, experienced by almost every character of *NieR: Automata*, also concerns the players. At the end of the game, in the 'true ending', when they have to decide whether to sacrifice their save files, a rational approach to the 'right' choice does not seem to work. More precisely: it's implicitly asked to renounce to the videogame fictionality, and to face a decision – marginally, but truly – impacting.

To be certain, one should remain within the perimeters of the playful experience. But this final connection with other players requires something different. A leap of faith and optimism towards the sacrifice of someone's time (all the hours spent playing) to help a stranger, maybe even a despicable and hateful person. As long as one remains in the purely playful dimension, truths are progressively revealed to the characters, but for the player the videogame itself performs a function similar to poetic language. Or rather, it would be if that condition had not been irremediably lost. But a faint resemblance is perhaps possible.

> And in actual fact the first sages were the poets, or rather the first sages made use of poetry, and the first truths were announced in verses, not, I believe, with the express intention of veiling them and making them barely intelligible, but because they presented themselves. (Leopardi 2013: 2940)

It's the truth dressed in the language of the imagination (D'Intino 2009: 160–1). It's not a trick or a deception.

NieR: Automata presents many biblical and Christological references, but its spirituality is always closer to paganism. And, precisely for this reason, it's able to better veil the truth, for characters and players.

> And I venture to say that the happiness promised by paganism (and in the same way also by other religions), as paltry and scant as it is, must have appeared much more desirable, especially to an utterly unhappy and unfortunate man, and the hope of it must have been much better able to console and quieten, because it is a happiness that is conceivable and material. (Leopardi 2013: 3506)

Back to the characters:

> But the modern truth, the third truth? As formulated by Nietzsche, it says that little men have killed God, that no one has taken the place of the disappeared gods, and that therefore we continue to live as if a divine instance were still there, in a conscious collective lie. As formulated by Leopardi, the modern truth is that modern man, unable even to hate himself because he no longer knows how to feel a strong love for himself, lives in a sort of indifferent languor, in which sense, desire and passions are now extinguished. (Carrera 1999: 92)

NieR: Automata offers both. On the one hand – as already mentioned above – there is languor, boredom, indifference, which reaches the point of self-destruction if the purpose that had been set is exhausted.

On the other hand, there are the 'little men' who have taken the place of the vanished gods. Androids and Machine lifeforms play at being the humans they killed. They partly adore the (extinct) humanity, distant and unreachable, almost like a divinity. And partly they adore themselves, but they are also made in the image of human beings. It should be remembered that androids are human-like robots, so they are quite similar to their creators. This enforces the connection between the distant humans, adored like a divinity, and the Christian God, who created mankind in his own image.

There's a point, towards the beginning of the game, where 2B and 9S see Machine lifeforms that mimic the behaviors and expressions of human beings in the desert. According to Android 9S, those Machines are not aware of what they are doing: they are just mechanically reproducing things they don't understand.

> However, if that is true, if the machine-men are not conscious of their own existence, what does that tell us about the deeper motivations of 2B's and 9S's behavior? Are the two Androids, and all their fellow YoRHa members, self-aware or not? If the machine-men are just imitating their Alien creators and/or the humans they have encountered, then the Androids are doing exactly the same (although on a far more sophisticated level): imitating their human masters in whose appearance they were created. (Bosman 2019: 102)

Conclusion

It has been said, albeit as a probable joke, that if killing in videogames is a sin, then saving digital lives is also a good deed (Morelli 2014: 87). Joke or not, one would wonder about that emphatic chain, that "*Social catena*" (*La Ginestra*, v. 149 in *Leopardi* 1991), in which *NieR: Automata* players huddle, as they sacrifice their save files and their playing time to help each other, without even knowing who will be the beneficiary of such actions.

There is an alliance against a greater obstacle, which oppresses everyone without distinction. Both in *NieR: Automata* and in Leopardi's last canto. As underlined by Leopardi himself (2013: 4428), in *La Ginestra* he expresses a philosophical thought that wants to unite men against their common enemy, nature. His poetry is an appeal to social solidarity (Binni 1973). *NieR: Automata* is a call for factual actions. It's a videogame that reflects on the videogame experience.

Marie-Laure Ryan called Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercises* (Ganss 1992) a foreshadowing of virtual reality (2001: 115–9). Her position was then expanded by the Jesuit Antonio Spadaro, who says that:

> The most authentic destination of Ignatius's text is not mere reading but, precisely, the spiritual exercise that affects life and action. Reading video games would be like consulting a train timetable: it's useful for those who travel, but it is boring and useless for those who remain stationary. (2008: 158)

Whoever plays a videogame is not simply the judging spectator of another's actions. The videogame interaction conducted through the avatar with NPCs can easily lead to empathizing with them.

In *NieR: Automata* it's possible to empathize towards enemies who are considered objects (even more than the protagonists themselves, whose bodies are only expendable and rebuildable shells, as long as they manage to preserve the memory of their black box). It's possible to empathize not only with what is not human, but also with materiality itself, with entities that would not actually appear 'alive'. Therefore, empathy, as defined here, also extends beyond the human and animal kingdoms. "At the center of empathy and compassionate understanding lies the ability to see the other as a true peer, to recognize intelligence and communication in all forms, no matter how unlike ourselves these forms might be" (Hogan/Metzger/Peterson 1998: XIV).

Even more, this call to an empathic 'doing' in the end, towards other real and unknown people, can really be like the *Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola: an invitation to actively **do** what it's written. There's a strong connection here between the sacrifice of the game files and the sacrifice of the androids (with their memory loss), so there's a further link between players and characters.

The aforementioned song *Weight of the World*, probably the best known and most characteristic part of the *NieR: Automata* soundtrack, repeats twice "Tell me God, are you punishing me?/Is this the price I'm paying for my past mistakes?/This is my redemption song/I need you more than ever right now/Can you hear me now?" (Okabe 2017). The God of *NieR: Automata*, unlike the Christian God of Ignatius of Loyola, is not there, and if there is, he does not respond. Yet, even in this case, like the "*lenta ginestra*" (*La Ginestra*), the

invitation is not to surrender to nonsense, following at least a 'secularly spirituality', empathic.

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