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> Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped… in a never-ending spiral of life and death. Is this a curse? Or some kind of punishment? I often think about the god who blessed us with this cryptic puzzle… and wonder if we'll ever have the chance to kill him.[1]

Yoko Taro's NieR: *Automata*—An Existential Journey through the Absurd

Introduction

Yoko Taro is a well-known Japanese game director and storywriter. Previously affiliated with the studio Cavia, he has been working on his own series of video games since the first one, *Drakengard*, was released in 2003. The products he has created have been immensely successful, with *NieR: Automata* becoming perhaps the most popular one.[2] In his lecture titled "Making Weird Games for Weird People"—which took place during the Game Developers Conference in 2014—Yoko Taro talks about the unique approach to story writing that seems to be at the core of the success of

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[1] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata* (Square Enix, 2017).

[2] Macrospace, *Drakengard* (Square Enix, 2003); Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*. "Yoko Taro," *Meta-Critic*, accessed 10 February, 2021, https://www.metacritic.com/person/yoko-taro?filter-options=games&sort_options=date&num_items=30.

his games. "Backwards Scriptwriting," as he labels it, is the idea that the story can be written from its ending. Yoko Taro explains that it helps him plan the flow of the plot and deliver the climax by distributing emotional components in such a way so that they lead to a powerful peak towards the end of the story.[3]

That the success of Yoko Taro's games results mainly from the narrative skills of their creator is also confirmed by scholars who explore his oeuvre. One of the major trends in the research on the *Drakengard* and *Nier* series is concerned with the narrative structures informing them both. From among the representatives of this trend, I would like to refer to Nicolas Turcev, whose explorations of the relationship between the loss of meaning and absurd—as depicted in *Nier: Automata*—have been inspirational for this article. In *The Strange Works of Taro Yoko: From* Drakengard *to* NieR: Automata, the author declares his interest in the mentioned relationship and tries to investigate it via the lens of the ideas that Albert Camus presents in "The Myth of Sisyphus." Nicolas Turcev's work, however, is more of an introduction to the problem and "The Myth of Sisyphus" is a reference rather than an analytical frame against which the presented thoughts are developed. More than that, having pointed out a number of interesting points in the mechanics of the presented world and listing the in-game stories that have some absurd ending, the author does not delve into their details. And, most importantly from the perspective of this work, when he addresses the problem of the absurd in the case of 2B and 9S— two key protagonists of *NieR: Automata*—its complexity is not sufficiently explored with individual absurd events in their story merely listed. Finally, the author's conclusion is that, in the world of absurd, the only solution is to rebel.[4] In what follows, I propose an alternative reading of the absurd— also with regard to ideas presented in "The Myth of Sisyphus"—with which selected heroes of *NieR: Automata* struggle. My sole focus are the key protagonists and antagonists of the story developed by Yoko Taro and my analysis is more in-dept rather than across-the-board—with the purpose of substantiating that, in lieu of rebelling, Yoko Taro encourages selflessness in the face of absurd.

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[3] Taro Yoko, "Making Weird Games for Weird People," *YouTube*, December 18, 2015, accessed 19 April,2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OO_d3fwTNP0.

[4] Nicolas Turcev, *The Strange Works of Taro Yoko: From* Drakengard *to* NieR: Automata (Toulouse: Third Éditions, 2019), pp. 214–221.

In the Beginning Was the Wor(l)d and It Was Existentially Absurd

When the player enters Yoko Taro's post-apocalyptic world of *NieR*: *Automata*, he or she lands in the midst of the war between the androids and the machines. Called into existence by humans, the androids fight to erase the machines from the face of the earth so that their creators could safely return from the moon. Orchestrated by an alien race, the machines fight so that their masters could seize the land. Although the artificiality of this world is very tangible, these are the androids that, in some ways, parallel humans. It is, after all, 2B, an android, who utters the—so very human—dilemma opening this article and the game. The game which, as I intend to show in this article, is a tale of falling for and overcoming the absurd by non-human beings.

The objects of my interest are, however, not only or all the androids that appear in *NieR*: *Automata* but the four main characters of the game: androids 2B and 9S as well as machines Adam and Eve. They are exceptional amidst their own kind not only because they are the main focus of this instalment of Yoko Taro's great story but also because they are the ones that strive most actively to fight the absurd into which Yokoverse invites them. Following their evolution in the game, I intend to show that they serve the author as a tool with which to propose that the sense of absurd, and the sense of life's meaninglessness concatenated with it, can be fought with selflessness. In order to support my thesis, I avail myself of the selected ideas that Albert Camus presents in his "The Myth of Sisyphus."[5] On their basis, I show, first, that the world of *NieR*: *Automata* might be read as an existential one,[6] and, second, that the evolution of the four mentioned characters—as regards their encounters with the absurd—might be read as partially parallelling the path taken by Sisyphus.[7]

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[5] Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in: *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), pp. 107–112.

[6] An existential rather than the existential one because Yoko Taro's transplant of the features that existential philosophers usually attribute to our reality—absurd, existence preceding essence, etc.—to his virtual world is not imitative. However, apart from pointing to a number of features that allow me to interpret this word as an existential one, for the sake of brevity, I do not delve into the matter further. The reader might also notice that Yoko Taro has his name and surname changed to Taro Yoko in the footnotes. This is so because, in the main text, I use his most widespread name in its proper Japanese form and, in the footnotes, I follow the requirements of the style sheet.

[7] It is important to note that there is no definite evidence that Yoko Taro has been inspired by Camus, or even Sisyphus himself. I will, however, use this philosophical work as a device for reading and analysing Yoko Taro's ap-

Fig. 1: Androids Gazing upon the City Ruins (Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*).

Galbraith Hunter explains the irony hidden behind the quotation opening the game as follows:

> If God is described as a creator and one who defines the purpose of existence, then humans are the undisputed gods of the androids. The humans, however, are extinct. 2B can never get the chance to kill God, because God's already dead. This sinisterly humorous inversion makes fools out of the androids and genre-savvy players alike.[8]

As the very quotation and Hunter's elaboration on it suggest, the world of *Nier: Automata* might be seen as an existential one. The absurd which suffuses it is that it has been turned into a battlefield of a futile war; which, initially, is the axis of the androids' and machines' existence, but which turns out to be unnecessary, purposeless. If humans are long dead,

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proach to leading his characters. There is, however, a passage that is clearly indicative of Yoko Taro's knowledge of the text by Camus: "I don't think there needs to be a kind of 'final answer' to everything we do. Just to give an example, if someone were to climb a mountain, and they were to fail along the way, they're still having the experience of climbing that particular mountain, and I think there is some meaning from that experience." Quoted in: Turcev, *The Strange Works of Taro Yoko*, p. 218.

[8] Hunter Galbraith, "*First as Farce, Then as Tragedy*: Chronicling Transactional Storytelling from *Drakengard* to *NieR: Automata*," *Planck Storytime*, April 25, 2017, accessed June 30, 2020, https://planckstorytime.wordpress.com/2017/04/25/nier-automata-analysis/.

the androids have neither a reason nor a need to wage it. If the machines do not, as a matter of fact, want to aid their creators in their pursuits, their military aggression seems irrational. But just like Sisyphus, they have been endowed with a task to perform—labour that is neither needed nor makes any sense. And, like contemporary versions of Camus's existential hero, they strive to handle the absurd situation. How they manage it is explored in the next section of this article.

Sisyphean Androids—2B and 9S

The game's main characters are two androids and mission partners: a female Battle model 2B and a male Scanner model 9S. Their personalities seem clashing: 2B is cold and work-focused, while 9S is curious and more cheerful. Both of them are members of an elite squadron of the androids called YoRHa. However, what is most important from the perspective of this work is that their purpose of existence and only drive is to work for humanity: to free the earth from the machines and prepare the planet to be reclaimed by humans, who have, according to the official android information, emigrated to a moon base and await better times.[9] Their initial existential situation is thus not much different from that of Sisyphus who does not know yet that the rock he is pushing is going to slide from the peak of the mountain. Just like him, 2B and 9S function in the world which they perceive as meaningful and whose construction allows them to think of themselves as beings endowed with a purpose.

Nevertheless, somewhere midpoint in the game, the main characters stumble upon a shocking discovery that both humans and aliens are long dead.[10] For the miserable androids, this means that the only purpose that has ever mattered to them is lost and that the fundamental values they have operated on have crumbled. Suddenly they find out that, metaphorically-speaking, their pushing up the "rock" of the android-machine conflict leads nowhere; that all their work—like that of Sisyphus—is futile.

The Truth(s)

One rational decision in such an absurd situation would be to abandon the pursuit and find another way to make one's life meaningful. However,

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[9] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata.*
[10] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata.*

let us remember two things: first, Yoko Taro's work is deep-seated in existential absurd, and second, old habits die hard. As it seems, that is why both android protagonists try to push their rock up the mountain one more time. Having already learned that it is meaningless, they keep operating according to the initial concept, until, later on, all the YoRHa androids—besides 9S and a deserter unit A2—become infected with the logic virus which brings about their decimation. This puts 2B and 9S again at the top of the mountain looking back at another absurd fall of their "rock," and forces them to reconsider one more truth they have been fed with.

2B, 9S, and other YoRHa androids can survive any physical damage because it is possible for them, first, to use a new or repaired body and parts derived from the machines—called black boxes—to resume functioning,[11] and second, to upload and retrieve their data—most apparently, memories concurring to their consciousness—from the so-called Bunker.

Fig. 2: Black Boxes (Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*).

But when the logic virus strikes, things change. 2B is infected with it and is mercifully killed by another android, A2, to whom she transfers all of her memories. As harsh as it may seem, this gesture of Yoko Taro might metaphorically signal another aspect of the absurd of his word—one is not

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[11] They could use the cores of the machines—something akin to the heart of their construction—as a power source, rebuilt into small cubical black boxes which serve for the androids as hearts.

only pushed into it but also destroyed by it for no particular reason. 2B dies not because she is bound to but because the absurd works with contingency and makes one die by slipping and falling under the rock one pushes up.[12]

9S—with the destruction of the Bunker, and, resultantly, with the removal of the possibility to upload and retrieve data, making the death of the androids a real threat; and the loss of his beloved comrade—starts to descend into madness. Paradoxically, having all this slipped through his fingers does not break 9S entirely. As befits a variant of Sisyphus, he suffers from the real knocking his truth/rock out of his hand and continues his journey. It should therefore not be surprising that another truth of his life is in store for him to be shattered.

When an enormous construction resembling a tower appears from under the ground, 9S enters it. Inside, through his struggles, he learns the truth about the origin of YoRHa, their true destiny, the black boxes, the extinction of humans; and that the units like him are meant to be disposed of. All this pushes 9S into insanity. Fighting A2, various machine lifeforms, as well as the personification of the network and the ego of all the machines, and confronting their own fears and traumas, 9S and A2 face each other at the top of the tower,[13] the peak of which will prove to be the last in the course of 9S's Sisyphean struggle.

Fig. 3: 9S versus A2 (Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*).

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[12] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.
[13] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.

There, A2 confesses another horrific truth to 9S—i.e. that the true identity of 2B is 2E, a special type of YoRHa designed to eliminate him and erase his memories every single time he has been close to uncovering the truth about the project. This is the last blow the boy android can take. Afterwards, he goads A2 into a fight to the death. The game then gives the player a choice—whether they want to control the heartbroken but blood-lusting 9S or the collected but dispirited A2, and continues to ending C or D. However, seeing both of them is required to experience ending E, the final chapter of the emotional spectacle Yoko Taro offers the players.

Sisyphean Machines—Adam and Eve

In the course of the game, the player, as well as the main characters, notice a peculiar phenomenon: the machines, initially perceived by the android forces as mindless and merely following their programs, begin to show signs of sprouting consciousness and emotions. For instance, 9S and 2B express uneasiness when seeing a machine lulling a smaller one to sleep, and keep reassuring themselves that "[t]hey don't have any feelings. They're just imitating human speech."[14] Later on in the game, we see more and more various human-like activities—and their results—performed by the machines: a pacifist village populated by them, religious practices on their part, a societal concept of a kingdom arising, pastimes like racing, martial arts, going to or working at an amusement park, singing, all the way down to contemplating philosophical ideas or even committing suicide. As the game shows us, the machines, despite never seeing humans themselves, learn from their resources. For example, the most complex of them, "brothers" Adam and Eve, are shown learning from a physical copy of the Bible, left by humans thousands of years before.[15] One may therefore be spurred to ask how, in the absurd world into which Yoko Taro invites us, the machines have managed, as it seems, to rid themselves of the rock given them by their gods? How come they seem to have escaped their Sisyphean fate?

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[14] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.
[15] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.

Fig. 4: Brothers' Conversation (Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*).

Purpose

One seemingly reasonable answer to the above question can be found in the short story titled "The Flame of Prometheus" from the book *NieR: Automata—Short Story Long* (referenced in the game by a simple picture book-like cutscene "Spirit of Fire"). The story offers a bizarre but meaningful explanation as to how the spark of intelligence appeared among the machines and how they managed to escape the absurd task which they had been ascribed. It describes a hundred-day-long journey of one machine through a junk heap. During this pilgrimage, the machine kept changing. Having repaired itself, improved and fused with different parts and other machines met on the way, the robot climbed on, repeating "Let's live! Let's find a reason for our existence!"[16] Reaching the peak of the junk heap as a completely changed entity, countless beings as one, it charged at the mountain's ceiling with determination and, finally, reached the outside world in an explosion. The so-called "form that attempted universal harmony," "superintelligence consisting of numerous conjoined memories and consciousnesses" emerged.[17] The form saw the war between

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[16] Jun Eishima and Taro Yoko, "The Flame of Prometheus," *NieR: Automata—Short Story Long,* trans. Shota Okui (San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2019), p. 12.

[17] Yoko and Eishima, "The Flame of Prometheus," p. 15.

the machines and the androids and became frightened. It wondered: "Why are these Machines having a war? The answer was simple: because they had been ordered to […]. Their purpose in life was to break themselves against one another."[18] This story shows us that a highly evolved being needs meaning in life. It cannot operate on orders or instincts only. The creature understood that and found it incredibly sorrowful that the outside world is limited to a never-ending battle because of cold, order-oriented motivations of those long dead. "Then let's give it to them. A reason to live," the amalgamation decided. If this is so, apparently, evolution is what allowed the machines to abandon the "rock" that their creators ordered them to push and decide that they would find for themselves another goal. As the next section of my article shows, unsurprisingly, evolution is also what these modern versions of Sisyphus will consider as the new idea giving meaning to their lives.

Evolution—The *New* Purpose?

Among many topics that *NieR: Automata* tackles, evolution is one of the most conspicuous ones. It is intertwined with most of the events of the story and soon enough reveals itself as the main spur for the conflict of the game. The reason why aliens were eliminated by the machines, and why the latter fight the androids, is evolution. The potential for growth in the machines was so great that, after some time, they turned on their creators because, in Adam's words, "[t]hey were simple. Infantile. Almost like… plants."[19] In this way, he highlights how the aliens remained unchanged and stagnant, at least from the perspective of the rapidly developing machines, capable of sharing the intel through the network. Supporting their creators would be against the evolutionary needs of the machines. In the case of the androids, their aggression towards the machines posed a threat to the development of the latter, and hence, made both parties enemies. Thus, if the machines wanted to evolve, they needed to defeat the androids to ensure the process. These observations cumulatively corroborate the view that evolution becomes, for the machines, a metaphorical rock which they hope to push *effectively* at the very top of their mountain. Unfortunately, and as it might

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[18] Yoko and Eishima, "The Flame of Prometheus," p. 17.
[19] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.

be predicted, evolution turns out, for them, to be yet another misfire. As in the previous case, also this effort of the machines proves to be futile.

Fig. 5: Protagonists Meeting Adam and Eve (Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*).

First, the machines realise that their evolution-driven need to "defeat the enemy (androids)"[20] would generate an unfavourable outcome. With no enemies, it would be problematic for them to maintain their learning mechanism as they would have nobody to learn from on the daily basis. That is why the machines decide intentionally to handicap their own chances in the conflict. "Machine Research Report" found in the game explains this as follows: "In order to resolve this inherent contradiction, the machine lifeforms began to intentionally cause deficiencies in their network, diversifying the vectors of evolution for all machines."[21]

But does all this show that the machines, in fact, succeed in pushing their rock at the very top of their mountain, even if the cost is not winning the war with the androids? Indeed, they do strive to evolve. The question that remains to be answered, however, is whether their "evolution" is indeed successful or merely veils their other efforts of the Sisyphean character.

In another picture book included in the game, "Treasured Items," we see a crowd of machines with various symbols on their chests. The narrator

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[20] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.
[21] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.

explains that "[t]hey were found by the machines. The machines called them 'treasures.' Each treasure had a different shape."[22] This short story presents various ideas that the machines focus on, after they have evolved enough to at least try to understand such concepts as beauty, family, religion, society, sport, theatre and other forms of expression. Even if, at times, those are just mere attempts at imitating humans, the machines still try to learn and evolve and find their own *raisons d'être*. While evolution is the general purpose for the machine network, they still want to have their personal life goals, which, in the case of artificial beings, is quite unusual. However, not being able to differentiate fully between good and evil, they also adopt the worse qualities, often resulting in grotesque and illogical mixes of both. In Adam's case, as explained in yet another picture story "A Reason to Live," his treasure is hatred. He believes that both hate and conflicts taking roots in it are what keeps the world spinning, evolution continuing.[23]

At this point, it is worth considering preliminarily if Adam has evolved, and if so, whether this evolution of his saves him from the fate of Sisyphus. On the one hand, it may be safely concluded that he has. As a machine capable of hatred, Adam is superior to a machine incapable of feeling; he simply has an additional feature that surely makes his functioning more effective.[24] On the other hand, I believe, it would not be amiss to argue as well that his evolution is not really of the type that would enable him to abandon his initial fate. If he is driven by hatred which is targeted at both his creators and the androids and which leads him to no further evolution—the game shows no further development of his; on the contrary, he fails at protecting himself and is killed—then his mental return to the "rock" the machines decided to abandon might denote his return to the Sisyphus-like fate.

In the *NieR: Automata—Long Story Short* novel, he says: "Humans were nurtured and educated by parents and teachers. But I have neither. I have to nurture, educate and inform myself to reach enlightenment."[25] Later

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[22] "Treasured Items," in: Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.

[23] "A Reason to Live," in: Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.

[24] One may obviously question whether hatred is a feeling that would be evolutionary beneficial. Considering the fact that Adam's job in the game is to kill the androids, hating them seems more likely to help him than not in performing the ascribed task.

[25] Jun Eishima and Taro Yoko, "The Flame of Prometheus," *NieR: Automata—Long Story Short,* trans. Shota Okui (San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2018), p. 26. In the original, the text is stylised to resemble "machine speech." I have simplified it for the reader's convenience.

on, he also references how, apparently, the first humans also had no one to rely on after they had been expelled from the Garden of Eden. Adam holds a grudge against his masters for remaining unchanged, stable, and not being able to pass any more knowledge onto their creations. He feels lonely, without a parental figure. He complains how Eve can rely on him, but he has no one to rely on. In the third picture book in the game, titled "Parenticide," the narrator declares: "*I killed my father. I killed my mother. And in his hand, he coldly gripped… Both the joy of growing up. And the agony of being alone,*"[26] clearly speaking about Adam and how confused he felt knowing all this—all alone, with no "parent" by his side to guide him. Paradoxically, despite his changes, Adam is as lonely in his killing of the androids as Sisyphus is in pushing his rock up the mountain. His job in the game, i.e. killing the androids—whom he cannot annihilate, and hence, whom he is doomed to kill endlessly—is as absurdly futile as that of Sisyphus. Evolution as a life purpose does not seem to work for Adam, it does not seem to save him from the fate of Sisyphus. Perhaps, this is why he is, finally, destroyed by 2B.

Although we know much less about Adam's brother, Eve, the knowledge imparted by the game allows expanding on the above claim and substantiate the view that evolution was, for the machines, just a cover with which to conceal that they have not escaped their Sisyphean fate, that they have not freed themselves from the absurd. After losing his brother, Eve shows himself as a machine with the freedom of choice but with nothing to base his choices on. Rather than evolution, his small family of one sibling is so important to him that he sees the world meaningless without it. With the words "my brother… was everything…," he charges at the protagonists—visibly consumed by rage, and concerned with nothing else but revenge—and, when defeated by his enemies, he merely repeats the same word: "Brother…."[27]

Eve's behaviour shows more than clearly that evolution is, in the game, more of an idea with which to veil the absurd that drives the existence of the machines. If Eve openly admits that his brother is everything to him and shows himself so dependent on him, this leaves us with no doubt as to what role evolution has—or rather does not have—in his life. Childlike,

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[26] "Parenticide," in: Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.

[27] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*. The name of the music track that plays during this grand battle is titled "Dependent Weakling," describing Eve in just two words which are enough to express his despair and solitude.

impulsive and not much interested in learning about humans, Eve kills the androids not because he sees it as meaningful as such or because it could lead to something meaningful. If being dependent and, as it seems, imitating his brother, is the essence of his existence, then evolution appears to have nothing to do with his life. And, since imitating another person is a rather poor idea when it comes to making one's life meaningful—especially if their life focuses on pointless killing—it might be concluded that the "rock" that Eve pushes up his mountain is most likely much heavier than that of his brother.

Us, Sisyphuses—Conclusions

With all the game's protagonists shown as modern incarnations of Sisyphus that cannot but keep failing in their futile tasks, and with most of them killed, one may ask about the selflessness mentioned at the beginning of this article. None of these characters has been shown thus far as a selfless being that overcomes the sense of absurd, and the sense of their life's meaninglessness.[28] As a matter of fact, none of them is to be shown as such because Yoko Taro does not make his androids and machines selfless. Rather than that, he asks his players to step into their shoes, feel the absurd that crushes them and, finally, see how acting in a selfless manner helps the players to deal with the absurd to which they have been vicariously exposed. In order to show this, let us focus, first, on the endings the game offers.

In ending A, it is revealed that the tower is a cannon aimed at the moon with the intention of destroying the human server along with all the remaining samples of human DNA. However, after observing all the events throughout the story and "considering the meaning of existence"—ending B—the ego of the machine network decides that, instead, the tower would launch the Ark. This Ark contains the data and memories of the machines and is supposed to send them into space in search for another world in which they could exist and continue to evolve. In ending C, after ordering the support unit to evacuate 9S's unconscious body, A2 presumably deletes the data from the Ark and falls down along with the rubble from the collapsing tower. In ending D, we witness a really violent scene in which both androids end up impaled on each other's swords. 9S, after falling unconscious, has a

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[28] This is why the aforementioned thesis of rebellion as a means of fighting with the absurd is untenable.

vision. The game follows with a text-only scene in which the android says that he sees a blinding light and describes the inside of the Ark. He sees Eve and Adam who smile and ask him: "Will you come with us?"[29] 9S replies that he does not hate the machines anymore and he wonders who he has been fighting for. The player is then given another choice: to go or stay. The Ark launches no matter the answer, and we can continue to ending E. This fever-dream-like scene, however, has a really bittersweet feeling to it. It is not exactly happy, but it is constructed in such a way so that the player can almost feel the blinding, enveloping light that 9S describes. The screen is white, and the music is soothing like a lullaby. The credits start rolling, with the theme song "Weight of the World" playing in the background. But after a short while, we are interrupted by a conversation of pods (small, flying support units). They initiate the elimination of all the data regarding project YoRHa. However, when one of them points out that the personal data of the three main androids are leaking out, the other refuses to delete them and starts speaking in a much less robotic manner. "You hoped they would survive as well, didn't you?,"[30] the pod asks. The player is then given the same question. After being warned about the risk, they can still choose to save the androids.

Afterwards, the credits roll back and this is the point at which the player's greatest battle in the game starts. The player appears as a small arrow-like object attacked by nothing else but the contents of the credits. As one of the pods keeps talking and points out that "[p]erhaps we now understand that not everything has to have an answer,"[31] the attack becomes more and more violent until the player is destroyed over and over again, and unable to progress. The game then taunts the player with questions: "DO YOU ACCEPT DEFEAT?," "IS IT ALL POINTLESS?," "DO YOU ADMIT THERE IS NO MEANING TO THIS WORLD?"[32] but also with texts which seem to be messages from other players. Finally, the player is asked to accept help from a randomly chosen person. If the request is accepted, the player's arrow is joined by a few others, each representing a real player who has decided to give up their save data and upload them in the hope of helping another person. In this way, the player can win the fight and finish

[29] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.
[30] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.
[31] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.
[32] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.

the game. The last cutscene seen by the player shows the pods flying above the familiar places in the game, salvaging the android's body parts in order to revive them along with their memories. The quote from the beginning of the game is repeated but also expanded with the following line: "A future is not given to you. It is something you must take for yourself."[33]

Fig. 6: Pods reassembling the androids (Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.)

This intriguingly crafted climax lets us—the players—see our own reflection in the portrayed struggle and think about life goals. After hours spent with the characters, tracking their personal fights to understand their reasons for these, we might see how Yoko Taro tries to encourage us to think how choosing one's goals translates into one's sense of the absurd or its lack and life meaningfulness or meaninglessness; how such goals might be illusory.

However, most importantly, Yoko Taro does not show us a naïve way with which to try to bypass our existential problems. On the contrary, he encourages us to accept defeat, admit that life is pointless and has no meaning. When, at the definite end of the game, the player is asked to act selflessly, to delete their entire save data in order to help another person whose identity will be never known to them—it might even "be someone

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[33] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.

you intensely dislike"[34]—their selflessness is definitely of no help in the game, and it will definitely solve no real problems of theirs. However, this selflessness—metaphorically—pushes us to the edge of the fear that existential problems generate and gives us a helping hand and might lead us to the understanding that, in the face of such problems, selfless gestures might abate the feeling, might comfort us at least slightly. In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus writes that "[Sisyphus's] fate belongs to him."[35] In *NieR: Automata*, Yoko Taro tells the same of us, contemporary humans, players. As it seems, according to him, it is a matter of our choice if we want to keep being consumed by our existential fears or resort to selflessness to try to abate them.

Martyna Pęcak

Yoko Taro's NieR: *Automata*—An Existential Journey through the Absurd

The focus of this article is Yoko Taro's *NieR: Automata* in general and its four main characters—androids 2B and 9S as well as machines Adam and Eve—in particular. Following their evolution in the game, I intend to show that they serve its author as a tool with which to propose that the sense of absurd, and the sense of life's meaninglessness around which their world is created, can be fought with selflessness.

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[34] Platinum Games, *NieR: Automata*.
[35] Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," p. 110.