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"This. Cannot. Continue." – Ludoethical Tension in *NieR: Automata*

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Introduction

This paper deals with the ethical dimensions of action in *NieR: Automata* (*N:A*; PlatinumGames 2017). I begin by outlining the game, focusing primarily on three themes which find their expression on the game's ludic and narrative levels and making a claim that *N:A* represents an interesting object of study which in many ways challenges our understanding of ethics and action in the context of single-player computer games. At the end of this section, I also posit the research question guiding the rest of the paper, focused on issues of player behavior and ethical value formation. In the second section of the paper, I discuss several ways in which action can be defined and structured in single-player computer games, with the aim of showing the ways in which *N:A* limits and guides the behavior of its player. In the next section, I introduce Espen Aarseth's notion of *the implied player* (Aarseth 2007) and problematize it from a standpoint of (computer game) ethics. I then propose a parallel, complementary concept in relation to ethical and moral values, as opposed to instrumental behavior, which I use in tandem with the notion of the implied player to answer the driving question behind the paper.

Throughout the paper, I follow an understanding of action as fundamentally *intentional*, forwarded by, among others, Jean-Paul Sartre (1978), Donald Davidson (2002) and Elizabeth Anscombe (2000). However, due to the limited scope of the paper, I unfortunately do not engage in detail with the specificities of their theories of action, though I do not dispute that such an engagement would enrich any and all conclusions I make.

An outline of *NieR: Automata*

What is *N:A*, and why is it a worthy object of discussion with regards to concepts of action and ethics in games? The first question may easily and immediately be answered by recourse to terminology from popular gaming discourse and factual information. *N:A* is a single-player, third-person action role-playing game, directed by Japanese game developer Yoko Taro. The game's diegetic setting is post-apocalyptic Earth in the far future, a battleground for an ongoing war fought between, on the one hand, androids in service of humanity, and, on the other, machine lifeforms created by alien invaders. The game's scripted narrative is presented linearly, in the form of conversations and cutscenes alongside a series of quests that the player undertakes, and centers primarily on the three androids the player gets to control during the course of the game – 2B, 9S, and A2. Gameplay-wise, the player of *N:A* will frequently alternate between "hack and slash" and "shoot 'em up" combat in various modalities, characterized by different cardinalities of play and camera perspectives. Apart

from these somewhat idiosyncratic shifts between different modalities of combat, it would at first glance seem that the game simply reproduces most of the conventions of the action role-playing genre. However, prolonged engagement with *N:A*, both with regards to its ludic and its narrative content, casts significant doubt upon this claim and brings us closer to answering the second question posed at the start of this paragraph.

Recurrence and closure

The diegetic world of *N:A*, inhabited primarily by artificial lifeforms, is replete with references to philosophers (Kant, Pascal, Marx, Engels, de Beauvoir, and Hegel, among others) and their tenets. One concept, however, stands out as thematically the most ubiquitous. Upon first starting the game, the player is greeted by a short speech made by 2B, obliquely referencing the idea of *eternal recurrence* popularized by, and central to the writings of, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (see Nietzsche 1974: 273-274):

> 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. (*N:A*, opening speech)

The idea of eternal recurrence prominently features in *N:A*'s scripted narrative: the current android models and their machine opponents are, over the course of the game, revealed to be just the latest iteration fighting in a multi-millennial proxy war between humans and alien invaders, who have in actuality died out thousands of years prior. Furthermore, the idea in question thematically contextualizes the gameplay of *N:A*. For most of the game, dying in combat is systematized in a mechanically similar fashion to the games of the *Souls* series (FromSoftware 2009), with the avatar respawning at the last save point and the player being able to collect their lost possessions by returning to the place of their defeat. The new avatars granted to the player are described in-game as brand new android bodies, containing the saved memories of their predecessor which are stored in servers in the android base in Earth's orbit, uploaded each time the player saves the game. Each gameplay loop from respawn to defeat is therefore thematized as a life cycle of a single android in a never-ending series of replicated, disposable bodies.

Perhaps the most interesting realization of the Nietzschean concept, however, is not on the level of the game's gameplay or narrative content, but of *structure*. *N:A* features not one or two, but twenty-six different end-states openly designated as "endings," one for each letter of the English alphabet. Most of the endings are humorous and/or optional – a result of consuming a fish to which androids are allergic, or of running away from combat at a crucial story moment – but, to witness the entirety of the game's scripted narrative, the player is required to reach all of the first five, successively unlocked endings (A through E). This process involves continuing to play past the designated end-states marked by the game's closing credits, sometimes to the extent of replaying significant portions of the game. For

example, reaching the B ending is a matter of following the same core narrative events from the perspective of the android 9S instead of 2B, with only small narrative additions and gameplay alterations. As a result of its highly idiosyncratic narrative structure, *N:A* continually deprives the player of a sense of narrative closure, often simply present in an unproblematic fashion in narrative-driven games of the same genre. In a manner resembling the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, that which we could colloquially conceptualize as "the ending of the game" is repeatedly moved away from the player the more they are trying to reach it, with the game itself beginning anew or unexpectedly continuing at what seem to be points of definite closure.

Perspective

N:A's structural experimentation complements the game's problematization of another important issue with regards to war, that of perspective. On a strictly ludic level, and as mentioned before, combat in the game often shifts from one cardinality and/or camera angle to another, giving the impression of playing a multiplicity of different "games" within a single game artifact. During the second playthrough, and while in control of 9S, the player can also hack into machine lifeforms and control them in combat, further adding to the complexity and variety of gameplay. The notion of shifting perspectives is crucial on the narrative level, as well, which sees the androids interacting with certain non-violent machine lifeforms, only to uncover that the machines as a species are becoming self-aware, struggling with existential issues and capable of an uncannily human range of emotions. This idea recurs in quest upon quest and interaction upon interaction in *N:A*, and can be said to form the thematic kernel of the game.

Unlike a self-reflexive game about war like *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), which seeks to directly confront the player with the unethical nature of their ludic actions (Murray 2016), *N:A* tries its best to instill the player with a critical awareness of the sheer complexity of conflict by not lionizing or demonizing either of the sides involved. The narrative of *N:A* eschews the simple dichotomy of good and bad often found in single-player narrative-driven games in favor of an examination of forces which nourish and propel war, to the point of bleakly presenting violence itself as an eternally recurring element of humanity. The player is, for the most part, only tangentially implicated as having a role in the violence, in the form of addresses and implorations by the machine enemies during certain combat scenarios.

Limitation

The more the player follows the guiding line of the scripted narrative of *N:A*, the more they will discover that violence is an inescapable, practically institutionalized part of the game. After reaching the B ending, the player is informed (via a short cinematic trailer) that there is yet more to the game's story, and is instructed to continue playing. The happy conclusions of a handful of the game's earlier quests and the relative narrative closure of its A and B endings get progressively undone during the third playthrough of *N:A*, and are revealed to be

temporary stops in the ever-growing android-machine war. By the end of the third playthrough, most of the named characters, minor or major, end up dead: most of the androids, including 2B, die as a result of a computer virus, the android base and backup servers get destroyed, the village of peaceful machines is massacred, the children of the village commit mass suicide, and 9S and A2 end up killing one another in their final duel. The player has no say in any of these narrative developments – the only explicit choice allotted to them is which of the two androids to control in the fight against the other, which determines the ending scenario (C or D, with the option to replay the other given afterwards).

If the second playthrough is meant to guide the player to reconsider (and perhaps do away with) their value dichotomies with regards to the two opposing factions in the game, the third playthrough is meant to shock the player into feeling limited with regards to their repertoire of actions in the game. The continual and genre-characteristic improvements on the ludic level (more experience points, better equipment, more refined gameplay skills) are sharply contrasted by the player's inability to meaningfully affect narrative events, whose progression requires ongoing participation in combat and the indiscriminate killing of intelligent and continually humanized androids and machines alike. Via this dichotomy, increasingly emphasized throughout the third playthrough, *N:A* seeks to evoke a feeling of tension in the player between ludic ability (and the need to exercise it to progress in the game) on the one hand and ethical inability on the other. This ludoethical tension also thematically ties into the game's conceptualization of violence as a fundamental, systemic element of humanity, as the continuation of the game's story quite literally depends on the exercise of violence the game as a system requires, regardless of the attitude of the player towards it.

What separates *N:A* from similar games which deliberately strip players of ethical agency is the fact that the game eventually provides that agency *back*, framing it as potential to act ethically within the game with real-world consequences. To reach the E ending of the game and resurrect the fallen android protagonists, the player will have to take part in a top-down "shoot 'em up" level of the game, piloting a ship and shooting the game's very end credits in a symbolic act of rebellion against the game itself and those involved in creating it. Most of the level can be navigated in isolation, but the last third or so is immensely difficult, ensuring that the unskilled player will die multiple times. After several deaths, the player is given an offer by a random fellow player of the game, via the networking features of *N:A*; should they accept, they will find that help from others makes the level relatively easy to complete. After a final narrative scene, which presents the idea that the meaning of life is to be found in the struggle within the cycles of violence, the player is given an option to help another fellow player, a random stranger somewhere in the world striving for the E ending. The cost of choosing to help is the player's save data, which gets erased should they accept. At no point is any of the two choices valorized or touted as correct; the player will choose what they think is right for them[1].

[1] If one is so inclined, they could follow the implications of the game's opening speech even further and interpret the gameplay scenario in question in a Nietzschean modus – after the death of the game's gods at the

This brief description of *N:A* ought to be sufficient to showcase the game's worthiness as a ludic object of study with regards to issues of ethics and action. In light of its dramatic, unusual, possibly ultimate moment of closure, one question logically arises: how does a game like *N:A* get the player to the stage where they would willingly accept to delete their save data under the pretense of helping a random fellow player? It is this question, partly concerned with player guidance and partly with ethical value formation, that the rest of the paper is devoted to answering.

On the possibilities for action in single-player computer games

To what extent can a single-player computer game define and direct the player's actions? At the most basic of levels, we could examine this issue by talking about *game mechanics*[2]. In, for example, *Grand Theft Auto III* (*GTA III*; DMA Design 2001), the player is able to walk, run, jump, punch and shoot a gun, among other actions, throughout most of the game. Jumping or falling into a large body of water, however, results in the quick loss of health points and the eventual death of the player-controlled character. Put another way, one cannot swim in *GTA III*. Within the context of the game unmodified by third-party programs such as trainers or mods, such an action is simply not afforded by the game system. *Flying*, on the other hand, is also a possibility, albeit one requiring a particular vehicle, and more importantly, a lot of time and effort to successfully perform. Should the player board the Dodo, a small airplane with sawed-off wings found in the last area of the game to be unlocked, they will be able to both taxi on the runway and take off into the air, with the distance and height of their flight determined by their prowess at controlling the awkward, unbalanced aircraft. According to the game developers, the Dodo was "never meant to be flown very much at all [...] it was just a fun thing that people then went crazy with when they figured out various bugs that let them fly it!" (Anon. [1]). Even though the singular plane in the game was never designed as fully functional, the fact remains that the game's system still enables it to fly – in the hands of a skilled player, potentially very far.

The difference between the availability of different actions in the form of mechanics in *GTA III* is illustrative of different ways of understanding, in the most simplest of terms, the active relationship between the player and the digital game system. In game studies, this relationship has most often been analyzed with regards to the concept of *rules*, a concept which has, throughout the years, been substantially debated and revised by different scholars. According to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, for example, the chief characteristic of game rules, both in computer and non-computer games, is that they limit player behavior – "rules

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hands of the player, there is space for moral reevaluation and self-definition (see Nietzsche 1974, 2006). I will return to aspects of this interpretation at the very end of the paper.

[2] When talking about this concept, I follow the general definition of Miguel Sicart, who defines game mechanics as "methods invoked by agents for interacting with the game world," methods being "actions the player can take within the space of possibility created by the rules" (Sicart 2008). Seeing as there is already a significant overlap between the terms *mechanic* and *action* in Sicart's definition, I will use the former in specific instances, when talking about those actions formally defined in a particular game system, while reserving the latter as a more general term, applicable across different domains of the player-game relationship.

are ‘sets of instructions,’ and following those instructions means doing what the rules require and not doing something else instead” (Salen & Zimmerman 2003: 122). In “Half-Real,” Jesper Juul disputes the exclusively-restrictive view of rules of Salen and Zimmerman, arguing that, in addition to prohibiting certain actions within the game, rules “also *set up potential actions*, actions that are meaningful inside the game but meaningless outside” (Juul 2005: 58, italics original). Juul’s view is echoed by the authors of the Game Ontology Project, for whom rules also “define and constrain what can or can’t be done in a game” (Zagal et al. 2005: 4). More recently, certain authors, like Chris DeLeon, have insisted that rules in computer games fundamentally differ from rules in non-computer games, with the former being “more like laws of physics” and the latter “more like laws of society” (DeLeon 2013: 1). According to DeLeon, the player of a computer game can perform only those actions which “constitute valid maneuvers within the game’s construction” (2013: 8). DeLeon builds on the argument forwarded by Michael Liebe, who similarly claims that the affording function of rules is of paramount importance for understanding the relationship between the player and the computer game. For Liebe, without the formally codified rules within the software of the game, no action at all would be possible for the player to take:

> Action possibilities first have to be provided by the computer game program before they may be performed [...] In computer games, the player could not do anything at all if the rules and the game space were not defined in the software. [...] So, instead of restricting potential player behavior, the computer game rules first of all facilitate or *enable* possible player actions. (Liebe 2008: 337-338, italics original)

Returning for a moment to the example of *GTA III*, we may say that the player is able to walk, punch and run because the game system – the programmed and executable code of the computer game in question – has certain formally codified rules which enable these actions to be performed by the player in most situations in the form of available game mechanics. Similarly, the player is unable to swim because such an action has not been programmed into the game system – *GTA III* does not feature a swimming mechanic. When it comes to flying the Dodo airplane, however, the mechanic in question is an interesting outlier. On the one hand, the designers of the game, by their own admission, did not intend for or design the flying mechanic to be *functional*. The game certainly does not feature anything close to the array of fully-pilotable aircraft implemented in later games in the series. Nevertheless, the mechanic is formally defined and present, albeit in an incomplete form, on the level of the game’s code. In actual practice, players *can* fly in *GTA III*, to varying degrees – the novices would only muster rudimentary flight, lasting a few seconds, but those willing to invest time and effort honing their skills would be able to fly in a very functional way, across the entirety of the virtual game space. From the standpoint of design, flying a plane in *GTA III* is an anomalous, unpolished mechanic, neither truly a bug nor truly a feature, functionally available only to those willing to experiment and practice with the Dodo airplane. As such, however, it functions as an excellent illustration (on one ontological level, at least) of the not-always-clear boundary between the restrictive and the affordable natures of the computer game system, in the interaction with which there is always room for appropriative play behavior (Sicart 2011).

The example of the Dodo in *GTA III* also highlights the limitations of classifying actions in a computer game as merely mechanically available or not available in anything but the broadest of senses. During the course of playing a particular computer game, the player may (and often does) find that certain mechanics are restricted at certain times, as part of a scripted sequence of events which forces a particular outcome. At one point in *Metal Gear Solid* (Kojima Computer Entertainment Japan 1998), the player is observing a conversation between two characters through the by-then familiar scope of a rocket launcher, able to target either of them but unable to actually shoot them. In single-player computer games in particular, new mechanics can (and often do) get progressively introduced, changing the gameplay experience to a lesser or greater degree. In *N:A*, only when controlling 9S can the player hack into machines and open specific locked chests. Perhaps most importantly, we also need to take into account the fact that the *validity* of actions in computer games is always evaluated by the game system itself; in certain cases, the game system may elicit certain actions, or combinations of actions, in order for the player to simply continue playing the game. With regards to that, and discussing the example of *Sim City 4* (Maxis 2003), Olli Leino writes:

> In the materiality of *Sim City 4* the extent of my freedom is defined before I set out to play: some kinds of actions and their combinations are possible whereas others are not. [...] That as a consequence of certain choices I can fail and be prohibited to continue playing *Sim City 4*, exemplifies that the game resists my actions, and that the notions of "choice", "success" and "failure" are meaningful in the specific context of *Sim City 4*. (Leino 2009: 11)

Drawing on Bernard Suits' notion of *lusory attitude*[3], as well as Jean-Paul Sartre's writings on freedom and resistance, Leino refers to the responsible freedom of choice provided by a particular game and predicated on the continuation of the gameplay activity as *the gameplay condition* (2009: 12). Given a game-specific scope of choices at a particular moment, as well as a desire to prolong the activity of gameplay, the player is responsible for choosing correctly in order for gameplay to be able to continue. What is more, this responsibility imparts meaning to the actions that the player chooses to take, because the very activity of gameplay is at stake in the choosing. In the case of computer games, the player's choices are both provided and evaluated by the game system; if the system interprets an action or a combination of actions as incorrect, it may resist them and bring gameplay to a halt. Therefore, the computer game system as a whole, with its specific, designed configurations and scopes of action (and (if any) implied directions for action), has an essentially *normative* character by virtue of prescribing and delimiting player behavior to a lesser or greater degree[4]. We could rephrase the assumptions behind Leino's notion of the gameplay condition as a prescriptive, normative statement directed to the player: "You may do what you wish

[3] Suits defines the lusory attitude as "the acceptance of constitutive rules just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur" (Suits 1978: 40).

[4] Along a similar vein, Alexander Galloway talks of computers in general as being "*an ethic*," describing general principles and methods for their practice to the end-user – in his words, the computer as a machine is an ethic "because it is premised on the notion that objects are subject to definition and manipulation according to a set of principles for action." (Galloway 2012: 22, 23, italics original).

with what is at your disposal, but your choices should first and foremost always make it possible for the gameplay activity to continue"[5].

It ought to be said that some scholars have problematized the strict submission to what Leino dubs the gameplay condition. In Veli-Matti Karhulahti's view, the "artifactual *performance evaluation* of the player" (2015a, italics original) can be seen as the identifying property of computer games, with successes/wins and failures/losses as subjective attitudes of the player towards the different ending states of the game, rather than indisputable factual states which come about as a result of player choice. A computer game "*evaluates all player performance*, equally" (Karhulahti 2015b, italics original), and though it can certainly impose criteria for reaching a particular end state, the player can always choose whether or not to reach it and cannot be forced to feel one way or another about it. For example, repeatedly flaunting the gameplay condition can sometimes be enjoyable enough to warrant the trouble of restarting gameplay after the system halts the activity. Along a similar line, and from the perspective of enactivism, Jukka Vahlo sees the computer game as simply generating affordances for action; in such a system, the player's intention to continue playing the game is under their own autonomy, with the game not being able to dictate player behavior (Vahlo 2017). With that in mind, perhaps it is best to understand the gameplay condition as a precarious *construct* that is open to challenges and subversions by the player, but one which nevertheless serves to imply orientation to the player's activities.

In addition to a particular scope of affordances for player action, certain games also feature explicit goals which serve to more explicitly orient those actions, framing them as part of a structure of *progression* towards a (usually) predefined end state (Juul 2002: 324). In single-player computer games in particular, structures of progression are often contextualized with the aid of various narrative elements (characters, textual narration, cutscenes, scripted events, and the like). These narratively-reinforced schemata for ludic behavior can be explicitly formalized and labeled as missions, objectives, or quests[6], among others, but regardless of the form in which they are presented, they provide an opportunity for extrinsically motivated, structured, goal-oriented gameplay, and can furthermore be a vehicle for the conveyance of scripted narrative content when combined with appropriate spatial design (Aarseth 2005: 9, 11).

Just because a game features a prescribed structure of progression backed by a scripted narrative does not, of course, mean that the player blindly follows it at all times. For example, as Leino points out, simply maintaining play within the boundaries of the gameplay condition can be enjoyable enough for players to continue the activity of gameplay, regardless of

[5] In a later paper, Leino himself seems to hint at the normative aspects of computer game systems by stating that, while interacting with them, "the player appears *as being subjected to the gameplay condition*" (Leino 2012: 70, italics original).

[6] Espen Aarseth subsumes all of the labels in question under the heading of quests; in addition, Aarseth views the quest as a more general structure in games, one which may not necessarily involve narrative adornment (Aarseth 2005: 2).

whether or not the player is striving for any goals (Leino 2009: 12-13)[7]. How, then, are we to reconcile the scripted (narratives, but also goal-oriented structures) and the unscripted (player behavior, motivations for play) factors which need to be considered when talking about the possibilities for action in single-player computer games?

Drawing on the writings of Roger Caillois and the structuralist narrative terminology of Roland Barthes (in particular the concepts of cardinal functions and catalysers[8]) Hans-Joachim Backe presents a three-layered model of computer games which can help account for both rigid narrative content and a possibility space for varying kinds of play behavior in games. According to Backe, we can conceptualize games as having three different structural levels – *substructural*, *microstructural* and *macrostructural* (Backe 2012: 254). The substructural level is a venue for "unstructured, aimless play" (2012: 252), for intrinsically motivated experimentation and exploration, which "constitutes the game's events and the catalysers of its fabula" (2012: 254). The microstructural level is characterized by structured play, in the form of formalized challenges with achievable goals which "act as cardinal functions on a narrative level by identifying singular, meaningful situations with potentially relevant outcomes" (Backe 2012: 254). Finally, the microstructural events are connected into a meaningful whole on the macrostructural level. Macrostructure is especially relevant when talking about single-player games because it introduces the concept of *an achievable ending* to the game in the form of a final challenge, which in turn imparts meaning to the actions and events which take place in progression towards it and a sense of closure upon reaching it – in Backe's words, "the existence of a final challenge indicates consequentiality and cohesion" (2012: 253). Of course, speaking strictly in terms of gameplay, overcoming the final challenge in a game (however that challenge may be formalized and presented to the player) hardly ever signals that the game is "finished" in any appreciable way[9]. In addition, the player need not play a game for its macrostructure, so to speak, at any or even all times – they may simply enjoy the experimentation and unstructured play on the substructural level, or the occasional microstructural challenge in isolation. Still, in the case of games which have a scripted narrative, the macrostructure implies a more-or-less definite end state towards which the player can and should orient their actions, a point at which the game's *story*, at least, will come to some sort of definite halt.

At this point, we can return to *N:A* and shortly discuss how it specifically limits and guides the player. *N:A* presents the player with a fixed set of predominantly combat-oriented

[7] Vahlo qualifies this view by saying that if the game does not generate "changes that emerge for the player as novel affordances for exploration and continuation" over time in some form, "the game artifact will deprive the self-sustaining autonomy of gameplay instead of nourishing it" (2017). Still, Leino's point is more than valid, as it helps explain the frequent phenomenon of prolonged unstructured engagement with a game even in cases when all its affordances have been revealed to the player.

[8] Cardinal functions are "the nuclei of stories," their constituent parts – they are connected by a "logic of consequence" and form the narrative framework – while catalysers are supplementary events which afford "coherence and verisimilitude by fleshing out actions, yet which are not crucial and could be omitted or changed without significantly altering the story" (Backe 2012: 246).

[9] The concepts of *replayability*, *post-game*, and *New Game +*, among others, are particularly relevant with regards to this, especially with the current prevalence of downloadable content, expansion packs and third-party mods for single-player games.

mechanics and systems of skill and attribute progression characteristic in the genre of role-playing games. Additionally, the game includes microstructures in the form of narratively-adorned quests and linear combat scenarios in varied, but scripted modalities. Most importantly, however, *N:A* features a highly idiosyncratic macrostructure, complete with multiple points designated as endings, as part of which narrative closure is continually deferred. The game's macrostructure, with its "false," often humorous endings and explicit announcements to the player that there is "more to the game," can be regarded as purposefully *intriguing*, aimed at not only guiding player behavior in the direction of the ever-shifting narrative end-point, but also making the player engage with the game's narrative content and ethical themes, brought to the fore all the more because of the unusual way in which they are presented.

On ethics in single-player computer games

Another way to conceive of macrostructure is as a guiding element which helps in the construction of what Espen Aarseth, following the narratological notion of *the implied reader* popularized by Wolfgang Iser, has dubbed *the implied player* (Aarseth 2007). Aarseth describes the implied player as "a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to 'exercise its effect'," noting that these are expectations for, specifically, player behavior, "a limitation to the playing person's freedom of movement and choice" (2007: 132). Much like the implied reader, the implied player is a construct whose elements can be traced to the structure of the game; the actual player fulfills the role to a lesser or greater degree. With that in mind, we could combine Aarseth's notion of the implied player with Backe's three structural levels, and talk about the different implied player *criteria* in a single-player computer game. For the activity of gameplay to be able to occur on the most basic of levels (the substructural level), the player is presumed to be willing and able to interact with the hardware and software required for running the game. In the case of *N:A*, much like with many other computer games, this includes the ability to use either a controller or a mouse-keyboard setup, as well as the ability to operate the game software itself. On the microstructural level, the player is presumed to be willing and able to take part in, and complete, goal-oriented ludic schemas such as quests. Finally, on the macrostructural level, the player is presumed to be willing and able to follow the game's macrostructure to the end. In *N:A*, this entails completing the relatively lengthy main sequence of quests, improving the player's avatar's attributes, and continuing to play past points of incomplete narrative closure (the A and B endings, for example). We could expand this conceptualization by including certain personality traits which act as preconditions for prolonged engagement with, specifically, *N:A* – namely, an enjoyment of the forms of gameplay on offer in the game, as well as appreciation for (or at the very least, tolerance of) the game's aesthetic sensibilities. This list is by no means meant to be definitive and definitional even for *N:A*, let alone any category of games, but is simply used to illustrate some of the (arguably many) criteria behind the notion of the implied player.

To what extent, though, can we talk about ethical and moral values in relation to the notion of the implied player? Speaking in broad terms and on the most fundamental of levels, for a player to play a computer game, their values must obviously be flexible enough to allow for

specific ludic acts to be committed, otherwise there would be no *player* behavior to begin with. In *N:A*, this includes a basic willingness to slash and shoot machines and androids into their constituent pieces of metal. On the other hand, specific ethical and moral values are in no way a formal *requirement* for implied player behavior in a game like *N:A* – one could exhaust the game's scripted narrative, reach the E ending, and delete or not delete their save data without once considering ethical issues at play in the game. The game system has no way of *knowing*, let alone judging, the personal values and beliefs of the player; it judges actions as such, not any justification behind them[10]. Therefore, just because a game can, to a lesser or greater degree, construct its implied player via formal strictures does not necessarily mean that those strictures foster certain ethical or moral values. Consequently, we could ask – what, if anything, *does* foster them?

As Miguel Sicart has pointed out, playing a computer game does not automatically entail a transmission of particular values because the game is encountered, and the gameplay experience realized by, the individual player who has their own set of values and is crucially able to reflect on the ethical content of the game, including their own actions during the gameplay experience (Sicart 2009: 146-147). Drawing the concept of the hermeneutic circle put forth by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Sicart puts forward a model of ethical interpretation of games which he calls *the ludic hermenutic circle*, a "layered interpretational moral process, which starts with the becoming of the player and goes through a series of interpretative stages that conclude in the development of the ludic phronesis" (2009: 118). According to Sicart's model, the person playing a particular game is first constituted by it as a specific *player-subject*, conditioned by the affordances and constraints of the game system and bound by it in action. The moral being behind that player-subject (i.e. the individual player) is then able to reflect on the relationship between that particular game system and the player-subject it is creating – in other words, on the "act of being committed to the power structure of the game" (Sicart 2009: 119). This dialogic reflection is aided by the player's previous gaming experiences and the practical moral and ethical knowledge originating from said experiences, which Sicart dubs *the ludic phronesis*. The player's ethical interpretation is further conditioned by two other important factors not related to the game system: influences stemming from their involvement in a wider player community, and, of course, their own personal values as moral, cultural, embodied beings external to the game. Each process of ethical interpretation further hones the player's ludic phronesis and, through time, leads to ludic moral maturation. The ludic hermeneutic circle model enables us to conceptualize of the ethics of the player in a processual manner, as fundamentally constructed and refined iteratively, through gameplay experiences which frame the player as a conditioned player-subject and reflections upon said experiences, both in isolation and with others.

[10] With regards to this, Miguel Sicart has proposed the concept of *ethical gameplay* as "ludic experiences in which regulation, mediation and goals *require* from the player moral reflection beyond the calculation of statistics and possibilities" (2013: 24, italics original). But, to what extent can we talk about moral reflection as a requirement of ludic experiences, if the very concept of reflection presupposes a *post facto* process – and if, as I have posited above, specific ethical and moral values cannot be formally required by the game system at all? For *ethical* gameplay experiences to happen, there must first be gameplay as such. The player's allegiance is, first and foremost, to the game – otherwise, they would not be a player at all. None of this is to say that computer games cannot *inspire* ethical reflection in the player, only that said reflection is by default a process of higher-level engagement arising from gameplay (an implication made by Sicart himself and noted later in the paper).

Sicart's understanding of a good ethical player is based on the Aristotelian framework of virtue ethics, with virtue in relation to computer games being defined as "the capacity for a player-subject to make a gameplay choice informed by her practical wisdom and understanding, taking into account her membership in a player community and her self outside the game" (2009: 92-93). Though Sicart presents a list of virtues which players should have and which improve through practice (including a sense of achievement, explorative curiosity, and balanced aggression, among others (2009: 103)), these virtues are not an absolute given for any player, in particular when it comes to single-player computer games in which a player may choose their own virtues and play accordingly (see Karhulahti 2016). The extent to which a particular game may trigger the ludic hermeneutic interpretative circle and inspire a particular ethical approach to gameplay depends on its design, and even in the case of games which feature a closed system of ethical values to which the player needs to adapt (Sicart 2009: 215), the design of the game can only do so much to encourage or discourage particular values because of the specific value makeup of the individual in question who is playing the game.

How, then, can we understand the process of ethical interpretation and, possibly, value formation with regards to games? Expanding on the ideas of Aarseth and Sicart, we may talk about the *implied being* of a particular game as an ideal construct in relation to ethical and moral values. While the notion of the implied player comprises a set of expectations for behavior, the notion of the implied being includes a set of engagement criteria expected of the moral, cultural, embodied being interacting with the game and the values on offer therein. These values can be interpellated and negotiated not necessarily *in* gameplay, but rather *from* gameplay, during moments of reflection inspired by gameplay experiences and subsequent interaction with the wider player community. Much like in the case of the implied player, the actual being behind the game can fulfill the implied being criteria to a lesser or greater degree, with their complexity varying from game to game; in some cases, such as highly abstract games like *Tetris* (Alexey Pazhitnov & Vladimir Pokhilko 1986), the implied being criteria may not exist at all because the game presents no interpretable ethical and moral values to begin with[11]. The implied being is thus a complementary, not necessarily correlative concept to the notion of the implied player, but one which can nevertheless be very useful when talking about games which explicitly deal with ethical and moral values, especially in cases when the player is expected to adopt these.

If we now return to *N:A*, we can try and conceptualize its idea of the implied being interacting with the game. On the most fundamental level, the implied being of *N:A* is willing and able to interpret the game's extra-ludic content, including its themes and narrative elements such as characters and plot lines, in light of moral and ethical values presented therein. This is the first precondition for the initiation of the ludic hermeneutic circle of ethical interpretation. Furthermore, the implied being of *N:A* is willing and able to actively engage with the intriguing nature of the game's macrostructure, as well as its unorthodox

[11] Needless to say, this does not necessarily preclude the formation of value interpretations.

thematic and philosophical content. This engagement may often include discussing the game with other players in an effort to fill in the game's narrative and thematic gaps, a move which may foster awareness of a wider player community and thus influence the decision made upon reaching the E ending of the game. Finally, the implied being of *N:A* is willing and able to consider and evaluate their own ethical and moral values and those presented in the game in relation to their own existence as player-subjects conditioned by the game's always-already normative gameplay condition and implied player criteria. This particular point represents what is arguably the final stage in *N:A*'s construction of the implied being behind the game; what is more, it enables us to finally answer the driving question behind this paper.

If *N:A* does indeed evoke a feeling of tension in the player, it is because it exposes them to two diametrically opposing roles, forcing the player who fulfills both of those roles into a balancing act. On the one hand, the game implies a player who will follow its scripted narrative through to the end, behaving in the way required to progress through the game's macrostructure. On the other hand, the game implies a being who will engage with the game's problematization of violence – its presentation of violent acts as institutionalized, self-replicating, and dehumanizing to both the agent and the target – and understand their limitations and involvement with regards to violence committed in the game. The player of *N:A* is instructed to continue playing, because there always seems to be more to the game and its narrative; the human being interacting with *N:A* is continually told, implicitly or explicitly, to *stop* playing, because the very actions required to reveal more of the game's macrostructure are the ones that the game problematizes from an ethical standpoint. The difference between the implied player and the implied being in *N:A* is thus a matter of teleology: in their ideal forms, the former will seek the colloquially understood "true ending of the game" and disregard the "false" points of closure, while the latter will essentially not want to be the player of the game because their ethical and moral values outweigh their acceptance of the player-subjectivity constituted by the game. For those who fulfill the roles of both the implied player and the implied being, the very act of playing *N:A* progressively turns into a struggle which threatens to collapse the activity of gameplay itself, a struggle which is thematically echoed in the closing moments of the game's scripted narrative.

The choice offered in *N:A* as part of the game's E ending can thus be understood as an existential test, a chance for the struggling person playing the game to, as Sartre puts it, "make himself by choosing his own morality" (2007: 46). From this perspective, the choice concerns not so much the existence of the player-subject in any objective way (because, of course, there are ways to "cheat the system," to back up the save data, to restart the game and once again be its player-subject), but rather the nature of the embodied being behind it, given at last the chance to define their own essence in relation to the game, to perhaps "stop continuing" once and for all. In hindsight, of course, this option was always there, though only hinted at by previous points of closure in the form of one of the other twenty-five endings. To return to Sartre, we may say that the embodied being interacting with *N:A* was always free to choose to stop being the player of *N:A*, but for this action to have been performed at all, there needed to be an awareness of a fundamental *lack* in the state of being the player, and of a new desirable potentiality in a different state, that of not being the player.

"Every action," writes Sartre, "has for its express condition not only the discovery of a state of affairs as 'lacking in ------,' […] but also, and before all else, the constitution of the state of things under consideration into an isolated system" (1978: 436). Perhaps therein lies the explanation for the game's idiosyncratic macrostructure with regards to the implied being it is trying to construct: to escape from the prison of the game, the game must first continue long enough to be interpreted as a prison.

Conclusion

Games like *N:A* present many challenges not just to us as players, but as scholars of computer games, testing the limits of our vocabulary and stretching our established concepts and discourses. My argument in this paper was twofold. Firstly, the discussion of the game itself was meant to abstract its being into a necessarily limited set of core ideas with which to illustrate the ways in which the game problematizes ethics and action in the context of single-player computer games. Secondly, the examination of the theoretical framework with regards to these issues was meant to showcase the fact that we are still insufficiently well-equipped for analyzing value-charged games such as *N:A*. With that in mind, I also tried to somewhat amend the situation by explicating the concept of the implied being, which, in tandem with the existing theoretical framework, could potentially be used to analyze and talk about these games in greater detail. The concept is here offered in its preliminary form; any further theoretical engagement, as well as wider application to different games and game types, will test its validity. Regardless of the results, the claim behind the concept – that new analytical tools and perspectives are needed for analytical inquiry into games like *N:A* – seems to me to be very much valid and in need of addressing.

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