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The Outsider: An Examination of Misfits in *Watch Dogs 2*, *Persona 4*, and *NieR: Automata*

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis project, the social outsider is examined in the video games *Watch Dogs 2*, *Persona 4*, and *NieR: Automata*. These games present the outsider as a resistance fighter, gender non-conforming individual, and android. I analyze how these games' narratives and gameplay work in tandem to present the outsider to players. Video games' interactivity allows players to connect to and understand the outsider. *Watch Dogs 2*, *Persona 4*, *NieR: Automata* present the outsider to the players as a figure excluded from their society based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and/or political position. These games cultivate sympathy towards the outsider. They also envision a society that does not exclude marginalized groups. This thesis aims to analyze how these video games challenge, reinforce, or disregard assumptions about the outsider through narrative and gameplay.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The resistance fighter. The gender conforming. The android. Video games illustrate the experiences of these outsiders through incorporating gameplay with storytelling. The medium's interactivity allows players to immerse themselves as an outsider. When I say "outsiders", I refer to individuals and/or groups who are excluded from society based on their race, gender, and/or political position. I will explore these outsider figures in the following video games: *Watch Dogs 2*, *Persona 4*, and *NieR: Automata*. By examining these works, I plan to show how gameplay illuminates the status of the outsider. Media tends to depict the outsider as a loner (i.e. the film *Taxi Driver*). The film's protagonist, Travis Bickle, is portrayed as a violent loner. However, I want to highlight how an individual is branded as an outsider because of oppressive systems in society and their own inner conflict. In the first chapter, I will analyze the 2016 action open world game, *Watch Dogs 2*. The game tackles issues relating to data privacy and racial inequality in the technology industry. In the second chapter, I will critically examine how the 2008 Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) *Persona 4* addresses gender and LGBT identity. In the final chapter, I will analyze the action RPG *NieR: Automata*, which focuses on a trio of androids on a journey of self-discovery. I will draw upon the academic fields of game studies, critical race theory, and gender studies to examine how culture—inside and outside the game—plays a role in the ostracization of the outsider. I will also analyze how these games challenges stereotypes of race, gender, sexuality, and identity.

Outsiders highlight the inequalities in society concerning race and gender. *Watch Dogs 2* points out how the tech workforce values whiteness, and black workers are subjected to discrimination and/or tokenism in the workplace. In addition, the game portrays hacktivism as an outlet for African Americans to enact change in their society. Meanwhile, *Persona 4* shows how conforming to gender norms and roles serves as a necessity in a Japan, a country with rigid gender expectations. Naoto Shirogane and Kanji Tatsumi from *Persona 4* face an inner conflict about their gender identity and gender roles. *NieR: Automata* depicts the existential crisis that androids face; they question whether they are humans despite their mechanical parts and perceived lack of emotion. The game illustrates how being human does not necessarily constitute as being composed of flesh. Through the android's existential journey, they develop into emotive beings who transcend their designated purpose.

In the cases of *Watch Dogs 2* and *Persona 4*, the outsider belongs to groups who are underrepresented in games: African Americans and LGBT persons. Compared to twenty years ago, representation of these groups in video games has grown. However, “conversations about identity have only ever happened on the margins” (Malkowski and Russworm, 1). The dialogue about how marginalized identities is portrayed in video games was not as widespread during the inception of game studies. *Watch Dogs 2* depicts a subversion of black stereotypes with its protagonist Marcus Holloway, which results in a positive portrayal of an African American man. Meanwhile, in *Persona 4*, Naoto Shirogane and Kanji Tatsumi's portrayal reinforces harmful stereotypes about LGBT people. For instance, Kanji's implied queerness makes him deviant and predatory towards other men. *Persona 4's* portrayal of these topics further highlights the criticism of video games being “less willing, overall, than other media industries to pursue meaningful diversity or refrain from egregious stereotyping” (Malkowski and Russworm, 2).

Video games' still limited representation pales in comparison to films and TV shows. In recent years, popular movies and TV shows such as *The Hunger Games*, *Black Panther*, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *She-Ra* (the 2018 Netflix reboot) illustrate how plots centering on marginalized groups can be successful while telling engaging stories.

Video games as a cultural artifact are recent compared to other artifacts such as literature and film. However, due to the medium's stigma of being children's entertainment, video games are dismissed as non-artistic and non-substantial entertainment by the general public. In the last decade, this stigma has lessened because "games have grown highly complex—as has their development—inviting serious attention" (Nielsen et al., 9). As video games, especially their narrative grows more intricate, scholars analyze the narrative's themes akin to literature. An example is *Bioshock Infinite*, a 2013 first person shooter. The game is set in a seemingly idealistic floating city of Columbia—a fictional recreation of early 1900s America. As players explore the city, they notice Columbia's values are built on racism and xenophobia. The game's critiques of religion, racism, and nationalism resulted in numerous analyses about its themes. In addition, *Bioshock Infinite's* narrative received acclaim and numerous gaming awards. However, years after its release, the game received criticism for its portrayal of racism and the character Daisy Fitzroy, a black freedom fighter. Fitzroy leads the Vox Populi, a group that opposes Columbia's discriminatory ideology. Her character arc has been criticized because her violent methods are framed as evil. Later in the game, Fitzroy kills a racist raffle host and smears their blood over her face. This killing "marks Daisy as a savage-like character who now resorts to scalping and other primitive acts of violence" (Mafe, 115). The scene frames her as unjustifiably violent and a savage threat who must be stopped.

One advantage video games possess over their media counterparts is interactivity. Film and literature make the watcher/reader an observer. The audience cannot control the actions of the characters, and the character's actions are solidified by the author. Interactivity creates a direct connection to the outsider. The player is the outsider. They are not a passive participant in a character's journey. Interactivity encourages immersion, and therefore, the player can be sympathetic and aware of the plights of the outsider. By assuming an alternate identity for a certain amount of playtime, players are subjected to the same treatment as the character (i.e. *Watch Dogs 2* and *NieR: Automata*). In other cases, the player is in the position to understand the outsider character (i.e. *Persona 4*). Narratives and mechanics work in tandem to present these outsiders in the context of their game world, which either compares or contrasts to real life treatment of these outsider groups.

Although video games' inherent interactivity adds another dimension to understanding the outsider, some may argue that interactivity is a shallow avenue. Interactivity happens on a TV screen and/or computer monitor, and once the player turns these off, they may not interact with these people in real life. In addition, the simulated resistance does not necessarily translate into real-life reform or change. Playing video games does not necessarily equate to an individual opposing injustice against marginalized groups. However, video games such as *Watch Dogs 2* that subvert a stereotypical portrayal of outsiders can challenge the established viewpoint and beliefs of the player. At the game's conclusion, the player may become socially conscious about those institutions that affect the outsider. Even if the game reaffirms harmful assumptions about an outsider, the player could learn *why* the portrayal is harmful.

Chapter 2

The Resistance Fighter

In recent years, the link between hacktivism and video games has been strengthened because of the activities of and responses to Edward Snowden. He is known for releasing confidential information regarding the United States security. Snowden himself was influenced by video games. This influence “reaffirmed the significance of video games for political expression and resistance” (Milburn, 13). Through video games’ immersive mechanics, players live out the fantasy of overthrowing corrupt governments. *Watch Dogs 2* follows this narrative of resistance (to an extent) with its protagonist, Marcus Holloway, a hacker who was framed for a crime he did not commit. What distinguishes Marcus’s resistance from other games is that his status as a black man illuminates the technological and racial injustices his race faces. *Watch Dogs 2* incorporates the idea of the racialized hacker through its gameplay to highlight the discrepancies concerning race and technology. Marcus utilizing gadgets (i.e. smartphones and drones) subverts the occurrence of technology’s disempowerment of minorities through incarceration and constant surveillance.

Watch Dogs 2 is an action-adventure open world game. The story centers on Marcus working with an underground hacker group called DedSec. They aim to dismantle Blume, a company encroaching on the public’s data, by amassing social media followers through the DedSec application. By completing main and side missions, the number of followers increase, and this feature is also used as a progression system. The more followers gained, the higher your level, which grants you research points to buy new abilities from a skill tree. Players can improve upon seven skill areas: vehicle hacking, city disruption, social engineering, tinkering, botnets (the battery power in your phone), marksmanship, and remote control. In a real-world context,

hackers are divisive figures. They are often portrayed as either the hacktivist who is a purveyor of justice who expose harmful secrets of the government or corporations, or as tricksters who use deception to exploit personal information for their advantage. However, hacking culture originated in university and military settings; MIT is cited as the birthplace of hacker culture in the 1960s. Joss Winn “identifies early hackers as, broadly speaking, academics, working for and within ‘the university’” (487). Therefore, hacking was fostered in a learning environment, so the hackers’ discoveries were encouraged to be shared.

The hacker shares similarities with mythological trickster figures such as Loki and Anansi. Both use deceit to disrupt the current power hierarchies and are creative with the tools at their disposal. But what factors in society create a trickster? According to Hynes and Doty, “trickster acts [are] a reaction against the elements of classicism, the self-importance of the Enlightenment with its official formalistic and logical authoritarianism” (qtd in Nikitina, 142). Tricksters’ unorthodox methods allow them to express themselves without adhering to the rigid standards of creativity. In the context of *Watch Dogs 2*, the trickster element is present in skills such as the vehicle directional hack ability. This ability allows Marcus to control parked vehicles to distract enemies. The player can use this to either distract enemies or weaponize the car. The game rewards players who are crafty with the objects in their environment.

In contrast, hacktivists release damaging information about powerful organizations and individuals to inform the general public—for example, the prominent hacktivist group Anonymous, known for their Guy Fawkes masks. DedSec’s aesthetic takes inspiration from the group with their videos depicting a masked figure with an altered voice exposing the misdeeds of organizations and individuals. In addition, the group “stifles the voice of the opposition” similar to Anonymous (Klein, 397). The oppressed flip the tables on the oppressors by silencing them;

therefore, the words of the oppressed are amplified to the general public. For instance, Anonymous silences opposition by shutting down their main method of communication such as websites (Klein, 396). In *Watch Dogs 2*, DedSec silences Blume, their opposition, in the mission “Hack teh World.” Marcus plants a bug in a Blume satellite, and he gains access to its feed later in the mission. From the satellite, Marcus and the rest of DedSec shut down various Blume data centers around the world. Shutting down these centers allows DedSec to easily access Blume’s data, which reveals that the United States government is on their client list. Therefore, hackers utilize their computer smarts to reveal the truth to the people, which originates from hacking’s foundational purpose: to share information. Although trickster aspects may play into the stereotypical image of a hacker, the trickster’s unorthodox methods utilize smarts to challenge society’s power hierarchies.

The Racialized Hacker

Marcus escapes the trap of being reduced to only his race because of the game’s distinct characterization of him. The *Watch Dogs* franchise is not embroiled in controversy like the *Grand Theft Auto* series, a video game series developed by Rockstar Games. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* centers on an African American gang member named CJ, “who negotiates his way through intergang warfare and police corruption to save his brother and restore peace to his community, Grove Street” (Hutchinson, 165). However, due to the gameplay being boiled down to killing enemies or innocent civilians and stealing cars, CJ’s character is simplified to the racialized stereotype of the gangbanger. Hutchinson also points out how criticism of “racial representation has been based on the surface visuals of characters, rather than how they act in the

narrative or interact with other characters of different races” (166). This form of analysis only provides shallow insight into representation and plays into preexisting assumptions the player may have. Instead, criticism should aim to ask: How does the gameplay subvert or play into stereotypical portrayals of a certain race? How does the game depict the minority character in the narrative? And, if it applies, what is the purpose of positioning characters in a stereotypical role?

The opening of *Watch Dogs 2* presents a typical scenario for a black protagonist in mainstream media: breaking and entering a building. However, it is not to steal an expensive item or to kill a person. It is to erase his criminal record. His record includes offenses such as purchasing lockpicks, a broken taillight traffic stop, and loitering with intent. Yet his threat level (a measurement of the danger he poses to society based on his record) is eighty-two percent, and upon clearing it his level drops to forty-two percent. It illustrates the perceived threat of a black man based on his appearance alone. Marcus’s predicament mirrors the real-life situation of blackness defining him despite his evident intelligence and wit. As Pettit and Western states, “incarceration rates for blacks are about eight times higher than those for whites” (152). Black men are imprisoned at a disproportionate rate compared to their white counterparts. The prison system gives harsher sentences to black men even if the offense is minor. Ellis P. Monk states “that imprisonment is a common and normalized stage of many African Americans’ life course – especially for black men” (1595). Race comes before profession; the prejudices black men face cannot be solved by picking themselves up by the bootstraps and being successful. They fight against a system rigged against them. However, Marcus’s character avoids the mediated representation of blackness in media. Kishonna L. Gray remarks that the mediated version of blackness makes white and black characters interchangeable. As a result, “these narratives deploy the dangerous myth of assimilation for people of color without focusing on the racialized

reality that people of color still reside within or the myths associated with meritocracy” (Gray, 63). Narratives of assimilation erases the realities of inequality that a minority faces. However, *Watch Dogs 2* avoids this narrative by highlighting the disparities African Americans face in the technology industry and American society.

In video games, there is a clear disparity between how white and black protagonists are portrayed. A 2011 study examining video game cover portrayals of minorities found that “minority males were more than twice as likely as White males to be portrayed as athletic” and “computer and technology use was almost exclusively limited to White males with White males being more than twice as likely as Black males to be depicted using technology” (Burgess et al., 297). In this context, technology is synonymous with whiteness while the physical features and athleticism of black males are emphasized. In addition, technology grants advancement and benefits to a select few. Minorities are subjected to extra surveillance in real life and video games, especially in Marcus’s case. His computer skills make him a prime suspect in a high-tech robbery, and he is persecuted on unsubstantial evidence. The gameplay’s emphasis on using technology to progress through the story creates empowerment for Marcus and by extension, black players. Both the character and players are taking back control and agency with gadgets that are designed to further oppress African Americans. For example, players can hack into surveillance cameras and divert enemy attention from them. The gameplay mechanic challenges the real-life occurrence of security scrutinizing black bodies in public spheres. The player is in control of the camera lens, and they determine what is being seen.

Furthermore, the study also found that minorities represented in games “are more likely to be engaged in violence that is not socially sanctioned” compared to their white counterparts who were depicted as men who “fight in fantasy realms or defend their country in heroic war

settings” (Burgess et al., 303-304). It creates a double standard concerning the use of violence in games. Using violence to save the world is considered righteous, and once again whiteness is associated with positive traits. Meanwhile, illicit activities are associated with minorities and their violence harms others within the realm of the game. *Watch Dogs 2*'s box cover partially subverts the violent black man stereotype. Marcus holds a pistol in one hand and a smartphone that controls a drone in the other one. He inhabits a fictionalized San Francisco, and he uses his intellect—with sprinkles of violence—to benefit the people. The presence of a smartphone is a minute, yet powerful statement; it is a ubiquitous item by today's standards. However, smartphones can be personalized to the user's style. From its wallpaper to applications, a person's device can be tailored to them. For minorities, this customization is especially significant. It gives Marcus autonomy over a device that in some cases is used to criminalize minorities. The smartphone's portability increases Marcus's hacking mobility, and it also covers his movements. With a versatile device, he can evade suspicion and the authorities.

Watch Dogs 2's gameplay defies the need of brute force to progress through the game. Players can choose to use lethal force (i.e. guns) or do a pacifist run (with stun guns, remote controlled drones and cars, and smartphone hacking). This gameplay contrasts with the typical image of black masculinity presented in games like *GTA* where violent behavior is encouraged to progress the story. Horatio, another DedSec member and black tech employee, also subverts the reliance of violence through his actions in the story. *Watch Dogs 2* presents “an alternative black masculinity in both Marcus and Horatio [that] emanates through their relationship to computers, their intellect, and their presence in Silicon Valley” (Leonard, “Virtual Anti-Racism”, 118). This alternate black masculinity creates multifaceted characters who are not defined by their

perceived inclination towards violence and crime. Marcus and Horatio are defined by their tech savviness and charisma.

The game's narrative further emphasizes black tech employees' outsider status in the game mission Limp Nudle. In the mission, Marcus assists another black DedSec member named Horatio, who also works at Nudle, a parody of Google. The mission reflects the lack of diversity in Silicon Valley, which is viewed as a hub of technological innovation, but the locale has racial disparities in the workplace. According to Richard Thompson Ford, "only 7% of Apple's employees in tech jobs are black, only 11% are Hispanic, and only 30% are women" (155). The average Silicon Valley leader is a young, white male. Horatio points out this fact when he says, "you haven't experienced corporate life until you're the only brother in a meeting and have to represent all of blackdom", and his co-workers call him well-spoken as a compliment. Tokenism is a shallow inclusion that fails to properly integrate African Americans into the workplace. Despite Horatio proving his capabilities by working at a revered tech company, his coworkers do not believe in his intelligence until he presents himself in a professional manner.

Correspondingly, the tokenism in and exclusion from Silicon Valley of black tech workers contributes to their involvement in hacktivism. *Watch Dogs 2* shows the catalyst for black tech workers in a conversation between Horatio and his white coworker. The co-worker confronts Horatio in a passive aggressive manner by saying, "you know, you could just tell us what you've been up to. Where you've been looking. Who you've been talking to." He also threatens to report Horatio to HR. This interaction illustrates the microaggressions these workers face. Horatio's coworkers' innate suspicion of him overshadows his technical abilities. Thus, hacktivism allows his deeds and abilities to be center stage. His race is not used as a factor to critique him or define his capabilities. In addition, hacktivism gives a voice to Black tech

workers because they can enact accountability from the elite without their livelihoods being threatened. Therefore, Marcus's role as a hacker challenges the assumption that white video game protagonists benefit from technology. Marcus reclaims technology and uses his intellect to solve problems. In addition, Horatio's intellect shows how that aspect can be undermined in a corporate setting. Hacktivism serves as an outlet for black tech workers abilities to be recognized.

Hacking Ethos Mission: Power to the Sheeple

The game's hacktivist ethos is best highlighted in the mission: "Power to the Sheeple." In the mission, DecSec exposes the corrupt politician, Mark Thruss, before an election. Thruss and his team rig the election in their favor through iNvite (pronounced as N-vite), an in game social media site. The site influences the election through biased advertising that favors Thruss. Like other missions, "Power to the Sheeple" alludes to real life events; in this case, the United States 2016 election where Facebook's ads were accused of influencing the outcome of the election. At first glance, the mission's name seems to belittle the people of San Francisco by referring to them as "sheeple." The term refers to people as unintelligent and gullible. However, the game does not disparage them. Instead, it criticizes iNvite's manipulative algorithm that heavily promotes Thruss. Social media's visual presentation is used against the userbase to prop a candidate who would benefit corporate America. In addition, DedSec's insistence to expose the truth for the people opposes Thruss and iNvite. Dedsec believes that the people can make their own choices while Thruss thinks they are mindless. The sheeple are not beyond saving, and they

are not inherently unintelligent. It is the media who gives them a skewed perspective about a candidate.

The mission's gameplay mechanics incorporates both the trickster and hacktivist aspects of a hacker. One of the first objectives of the mission involves Marcus graffitiing Thruss's billboard by painting poop stains and a thumbs down on it. However, "the [trickster's] spirit of rebellion and derision can also detract from constructive work" (Nikitina, 142). The trickster's actions do not result in lasting impact for a cause; their disruption is a fleeting spectacle for the public's amusement and the target's annoyance. However, DedSec's graffiti utilizes trickery to build momentum for their hacktivism. Later in the mission, Marcus infiltrates iNvite's headquarters to install a backdoor—software that allows easy access to a person's information on their device—on their servers. To do this task, the player completes an environmental puzzle to hack into the servers. Marcus and the player are using intellect to traverse the environment and outsmart enemies.

Furthermore, Dedsec's subsequent actions in the mission subverts certain trickster characteristics. Their intervention in the election goes against the image of "trickster gods [who] are not generally seen as a democratizing force" (Nikitina, 140). However, the mission subverts this assumption about the trickster. Marcus grants freewill to the people by destroying the voting machine, allowing the people to rethink their decision. An alternate ending to the mission would have DedSec rigging the election in Thruss' opponent's favor. If DedSec resorted to this tactic, they would perpetuate the same manipulation as their opposition. Instead, the group places their trust in the sheeple to make the best decision for themselves after learning the truth. Autonomy and true democracy are given back to the people.

In the ending segment of the mission, the game utilizes the song *Fortunate Son* by Creedence Clearwater Revival to draw a parallel to Marcus destroying the voting machines. The song critiques the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, specifically the class divide on who participates in the war. The singer remarks throughout the song that “I ain’t no senator’s son” and “I ain’t no millionaire’s son” (“Creedence Clearwater Revival – Fortunate Son”). The sons of the rich are granted immunity from fighting. Meanwhile, the sons of the poor fight in a war, and they bear the mental and physical expense of their service. This message mirrors how the voting population (the everyday people) votes strengthen the power that the elite possess. Both the song and mission illustrate actions that oppose the U.S. ideals of patriotism and democracy on the surface. However, both works show how these actions illuminate the flaws and hypocrisy in these American ideals. Bombing the machines seems like an attack on democracy, but the radical action preserves it. A San Francisco with Thruss means that the people will not have the freedom of choice; their choice will be influenced by skewed algorithms.

“Power to the Sheeple” reinforces the hacktivist ethos by reinstating democracy for the people. The mission does not admonish the people for their ignorance of being manipulated. Instead, the game places blame on social media and the candidate. DedSec utilizes the trickster and hacktivist elements of hacking to expose Thruss’s corruption. The use of hacktivism and trickster methods shows that they can work in tandem to produce change. More specifically, the trickster aspect attracts attention while hacktivism builds upon this attention through productive actions. The mission’s use of *Fortunate Son* illuminates Marcus’s destruction of the voting polls. Both works destroy the pedestal that American patriotism and democracy is placed on.

Conclusion

Watch Dogs 2's portrayal of the racialized hacker mostly subverts the stereotypical depictions of black characters. The game utilizes staple gameplay elements such as stealth combat and hacking to depict the multifaceted personality of Marcus Holloway. However, the game does not succumb to Kishonna Gray's concept of the mediated portrayal of blackness when it concerns Marcus. Marcus's experiences as a former black tech worker are addressed throughout the story, but it does not dilute the other facets of his character. Missions such as Limp Nudle depict the racial inequality in the predominately white spheres of technology companies. In addition, Marcus and DedSec uses the trickster aspect of hackers to advance their hacktivist agenda. *Power to the Sheeple* shows that the trickster and hacktivist aspects work in tandem to grant democracy to the people. Technology affects groups in different ways; it is used to further oppress groups such as African Americans. Marcus reclaims technology to help him maneuver the world. In the end, the trickster becomes an identity of empowerment for the marginalized.

Chapter 3

The Gender Non-Conforming Individual

Video games are often viewed as a male power fantasy where women are sexualized, and the characterization of a male character follows heteronormative standards. This male centric view in video games is evident when only about 17% of platform game characters are female (Leonard, “Not a Hater, Just Keepin’ it Real”, 84). Older depictions of female characters were rooted in objectification and stereotypes. These dated portrayals are due to games being developed and written from a male’s perspective. Today, female characters in media such as TV shows and movies are more often written by female writers, which results in authentic portrayals of these characters. The lack of female representation “create[s] a cycle that retains the masculinity of video game culture, the games themselves, and those who consume them” (Vysotsky and Allaway, 101). A male centered view of gender and sexuality permeates throughout gaming culture.

However, in the last decade, the portrayal of female characters and LGBT characters has drastically changed. For instance, the 1990s and 2000s depictions of Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series emphasized her sex appeal through revealing outfits and suggestive camera angles over her archeological intellect. The Crystal Dynamics 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot overhauls Croft’s previously sexualized design for a modest tank top with cargo pants and combat boots. Unlike the earlier games in the franchise, her knowledge is a pivotal aspect of her character, and she is portrayed as a flawed individual. Players were receptive to this reimagined Croft and the success of the reboot spawned the 2015 sequel *Rise of the Tomb Raider* and 2018’s *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*. The shift in portrayals can be attributed to the growing diversity in gaming, especially with developers of indie games. In recent years, games with LGBT and/or leading

female characters have become breakthrough successes such as 2015's *Life is Strange*. The game centers around Max Caulfield, a teenager who gains time travel powers and uses said powers to solve a missing person's case alongside her love interest Chloe Price. The game was a success, and it sold over a million copies and amassed a large LGBT fanbase. Its success spawned the prequel *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* and the sequels *Life is Strange 2* and *Life is Strange: True Colors*. In addition, Naughty Dog's 2013 video game *The Last of Us* features a lesbian protagonist named Ellie. The game is set in a post-apocalyptic future where a fungal infection turns humans into zombies. The Fireflies are a rebel militia who believes Ellie's immunity holds the key to a vaccine that can end the outbreak. Joel, a middle-aged man, is tasked with escorting Ellie to the Fireflies across a post-apocalyptic America. Her portrayal was praised for being a LGBT character with a complex characterization. As a result, Ellie's popularity resulted in her leading role in the 2020 sequel *The Last of Us Part II*.

Persona 4's depiction of gender and sexuality predates the progressive depictions of these subjects in video games. Naoto Shirogane and Kanji Tatsumi struggle with their gender identity and sexuality, respectively. Naoto initially presents herself to the player and characters as a male detective. Later in the game, it is revealed to both parties that Naoto is a girl, and she assumed the identity of a boy to avoid facing sexism in the Japanese police force. Meanwhile, Kanji is a delinquent who has an interest in sewing. This interest attracts the ire of his peers—especially female students. His sexuality comes into question when he talks to Naoto (in her male guise) and appears to develop feelings for her. Naoto and Kanji's character arcs revolve around them discovering their true selves by facing their inner conflicts. Ironically, a game encouraging the characters to face truth and accept themselves does not accept the otherness of Kanji and Naoto. Instead, the game suggests that Naoto and Kanji should suppress their desires

of expression to conform to a collective idea of gender and sexuality. By expression, I refer to the ability of these characters to freely convey their identity and sexuality.

In terms of genre, the *Persona* series is a long running series of Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs). JRPGs involve the player assuming the role of a character in a fantasy world or a fictionalized version of the real world. The genre has three distinct features: “set stories, character development elements, and anime-style characters” (WADA, 144). It was a niche genre in the United States until the release of the 1997 Square Soft (now Square Enix) game *Final Fantasy VII* on the PlayStation. The game launched the then Square Soft and *Final Fantasy* into a household name in the gaming community. As for gameplay, turn based combat was the dominant mechanic in JRPGs until the last decade. The aforementioned *Final Fantasy* series shifted from this combat style to an action type of gameplay. The *Persona* series is one of the few RPG series that still utilize turn based combat today.

Persona 4 starts with a recent high school transfer student named Yu Narukami who moves to the fictional town of Inaba to live with his uncle and cousin. Shortly after arriving, murders start to occur around town. These murders are linked to the Midnight Channel, a TV world where shadows (creatures who represent negative emotions) inhabit. At midnight, victims are shown on the TV before they are reported missing the next day. The main characters acquire personas—“physical embodiments of an individual’s personality or, respectively, psyche”—by confronting their shadow selves (Dwulecki, 104). The shadow versions of the characters are manifestations of their repressed emotions and thoughts; the character’s dungeon design also reflects their inner turmoil. For example, Yukiko Amagi’s dungeon takes the form of a castle where she is a damsel in distress, which mirrors her situation of feeling trapped in Inaba. With

their personas, the main characters save victims in the TV world while trying to find who is the culprit behind the incidents.

Persona 4 divides gameplay between a social simulator and turn based combat. Turn based combat involves turns rotating between player and enemy action. The game incentivizes players to have the first turn by ambushing enemies; if the opposite happens to players, the enemy will act first in battle. Yu Narukami and his companions (the Investigation Team) fight using their personas and weapons. Their persona abilities include magical attacks (ice, electricity, wind, fire, curse [dark magic], bless [light magic]), physical attacks, and healing skills. Players navigate procedurally generated dungeons—also known as dungeon crawling—where they battle shadows. As for the social simulation, the game operates on a calendar system where days are divided between school, dungeon crawling, and social links. Social links are a bond mechanic that allows players to strengthen their personas by playing through a character's personal storyline. Each social link's character is tied to a tarot arcana that reflects their personality and internal struggles. For instance, Yosuke Hanamura's social link centers around him coming to terms with his feelings of loneliness. Upon completing the link, the player can fuse stronger personas related to that arcana, and the character's persona evolves into a stronger version of itself.

Jordan Youngblood's commentary on *Persona 4*'s critiques the game's portrayal of queerness. The game employs a "construction, deployment, and control of Naoto and Kanji's bodies as a meta-commentary on the means by which the idealized vision of queer utopia within the digital is disrupted by the player's engagement in the game's encoded processes" (Youngblood). In other words, the player interferes with the acceptance of their bodies through the gameplay mechanics. However, the player and game work in tandem through dialogue and

character interaction to present this conflicting portrayal of the acceptance of queer bodies.

Youngblood also presents a paradox of video games providing the liberation and restriction of queer bodies. The ability to play as different sexes and body types allows players to experience a life that they would not live in the real world. On the other hand, a video game's "cybernetic interface between player and machine which *fuses* rather than liberates the body" causes an issue (Youngblood). The mechanical nature of games makes it adhere to a set idea of queerness, and the player must adhere to these ideas to progress through the game.

Regarding Kanji Tatsumi, *Persona 4* presents the contradictory message: be true to yourself while fitting into society's expectation of masculinity and acceptable sexuality. On the surface, Kanji is portrayed as an aggressive delinquent. However, underneath his rough exterior he likes sewing—a hobby that the game presents as feminine. His social link revolves around him accepting the fact that he enjoys these interests and disregarding what others think of him. Kanji's "feminine" interests also brings his sexuality into question within and outside the game. In an early scene with Naoto Shirogane (who is assumed to be a male at this point), he questions his sexuality after a misinterpreted interaction with Naoto. Naoto questions Kanji about the murder case, but he misinterprets the exchange as romantic. Kanji says, "D-Did he say he was interested...? He's a guy... and I'm a guy... But... he's interested in me...?" His dialogue expresses confusion about this forbidden romantic interest. Even after Naoto is revealed to be female, he still shows hints of attraction to her. Naoto's gender reveal validates his attraction her, yet the game still views him as gay, which excludes the possibility of him being bisexual. As a result, *Persona 4's* insistence on heteronormativity shuts down the consideration of other sexual identities. The game only considers homosexuality and heterosexuality as possible sexualities. In addition, Kanji's implied homosexuality is shunned by other characters and is subject to jokes.

An instance of this shunning is when the Investigation Team go on a school camping trip. Yu and Yosuke share a tent with Kanji for the night, and Yosuke expresses skepticism towards Kanji. He says “A-Are you really... you know...? What I mean is, uh... Are we gonna be safe alone with you?” Yosuke’s assumptions suggests that homosexuality is deviant and predatory. After this exchange, Yosuke goads Kanji to prove he is interested in girls, and Kanji proposes to sneak into the girl’s tent. The scene also creates two additional problems: sexism and misogyny. Women are viewed as tools to assert a man’s masculinity and heterosexuality. The spaces of women are being invaded without consideration for their discomfort.

Kanji’s dungeon and shadow self reflect his struggle with his sexuality. The dungeon’s layout takes the form of a steamy bathhouse, and his shadow is a flamboyant version of himself with stereotypical gay mannerisms (i.e. exaggerated speech and movement). This layout reflects “the larger confusion of Kanji’s sexual needs: objects appear and disappear, bodies are harder to locate” (Youngblood). The appearing and disappearing of bodies and objects illustrates Kanji’s repression and confusion with his sexuality. Each floor is a maze-like layout that the player fights through, which reflects Kanji’s inner conflict within himself. His facade as a troublemaking delinquent allows him to navigate everyday life without attracting attention to his queerness. However, he is not willing to acknowledge and accept his sexual desires by navigating this maze. His uncertainty also results in the player themselves questioning if he is gay. As the player fights through the steam, they encounter phallic and macho looking enemies such as the Daring Gigas and Wondrous Magus (Youngblood). The Daring Gigas resembles a muscular wrestler wearing silver trucks and boots. The Wondrous Magus is a tall rock with a mask and magician hat. The Daring Gigas hints at his attraction to the muscular male body, but it is also a masculine physique he wants to imitate. As for the Wondrous Magus, it represents his

sexual desires and arousal. These enemies provide a visual indicator that Kanji may in fact be gay.

In addition, the Midnight Channel encourages voyeurism and fascination with taboo ideas. The realm allows the viewer a glimpse into the undesirable aspects that a person may hide. Shadow Kanji's proposed show "invokes the voyeuristic pleasure of viewing a forbidden desire" (Youngblood). This voyeurism is not pleasure derived from seeing others in sexual situations; rather, it is a forbidden fascination with homosexuality. Voyeurism does not accept homosexuality but instead it is used as a spectacle for both the characters and players. They are witnessing a part of Kanji that he wants to hide. In addition, the bathhouse setting encourages this forbidden voyeurism. Bathing is a private activity; however, the bathing house removes this layer of privacy. Bathers are exposed to strangers, which mirrors how Kanji is exposed to the player and characters. By agreeing to save Kanji, the player invades his space to view his sexually illicit acts. While the steamy bathhouse may reveal his true self, the steam acts as a thin shield from scrutiny as it partially covers up sexual acts. The player navigates through the steam to peek on Kanji's show. In a way, the player and characters use each other to satiate their curiosity about homosexuality.

Shadow Kanji's boss battle suggests that both voyeurism and the fascination with homosexuality culminate in violence. The boss form of the shadow takes the shape of a muscular figure holding two golden mars symbols, adorned with a bouquet of roses. This juxtaposition between masculine and feminine traits mirrors Kanji's struggle to fully embrace one of these characteristics. The only option for Kanji to come to terms with his inner conflict is by the player defeating his shadow. Shadow Kanji's exclamations of "'You don't accept me! You'll never accept me,' further stresses the threat these queer bodies represent to the larger social order—and

subsequently, the bodies are knocked out of existence by the player” (Youngblood). The use of combat suggests that it is necessary to eradicate queerness; violence is a tool used to reason with queerness. This eradication is further illustrated after the conclusion of the battle. Kanji does not accept the fact that his forbidden desires are okay. Rather, he attributes his insecurities to the fear of being rejected. As a result, violence becomes a method to repress queerness. The explicit violence does not allow for an understanding about the intricacies of queerness and Kanji himself. The game’s main theme of uncovering one’s true self is undermined by its combat.

As for Naoto, she presents herself as a young male detective when introduced. Later in the game, she is revealed both to players and other characters to be a young woman cross dressing as a male. Her cross-dressing stems from the sexism that women face in the police force, and her desire to gain respect from her male colleagues. Japan’s views on gender incorporates the concept of Confucianism. The concept “stresses a hierarchical societal structure, which assumes subordinates’ obedience to superiors and men’s dominance over women and children” (Sugihara and Katsurada, 444). These traditional ideals promote a strict adherence to gender norms. By deviating from these norms, an individual risks jeopardizing their career. In addition, Japan’s gender attitudes result in a male-dominated workplace where high ranking women are virtually nonexistent; they are not given the same positions as their male counterparts. Naoto’s dungeon reflects her response to these rigid expectations. The dungeon takes the form of a secret laboratory, and her shadow appears as a surgeon who plans to perform “a forbidden yet wonderful bodily alteration process!” She claims that this procedure will allow her to walk a new path in life. When the Investigation Team reaches Naoto in her dungeon, she is in a room with a saw and laser on an operating table. The table draws parallels to a gender

reassignment surgery, and Naoto's perceived desire to become a man. It illustrates Naoto's hope that a gender transition will make society truly accept her as a man.

Naoto's dungeon design suggests that gender reassignment surgery grants an individual acceptance into a heteronormative and cisgender society, which is a transphobic viewpoint. The player is tasked with saving Naoto from this transformation. Her "bodily transformation is not an act to be desired, but a terrifying, disruptive process" (Youngblood). Reassignment disrupts the binary gender, and by allowing this operation, disorder is permitted. This disorder refers to the clear boundary between genders being challenged. A saw and laser sit on the operating table, which paints the surgery as a grotesque process that mutilates the patient's body. Judith Butler critiques the sentiment "that society should engage in coercive surgery to remake the body in the social image of that gender" (63). When Naoto confronts her shadow self, they lament about the sexism she faces, and how she dreamed of being "strong" and "cool" like the male characters in detective fiction. Naoto's desire to become a man is not a result of gender dysphoria, but rather a consequence of her wish to overcome gender inequality and misogyny. If Naoto becomes a man, the sexism she faces would stop. She would be granted the same privileges as men such as respect for her work and accepting her intellect without question. However, the game implies that Naoto should adhere to the gender construct.

In addition, *Persona 4's* portrayal of gender reassignment implies the idea that this surgery cures gender dysphoria, which has harmful implications. Gender dysphoria is defined as an "incongruence between an individual's gender identity and assigned gender with associated distress or impairment" (Cooper et al., 1). Dysphoria's categorization as a mental disorder perpetuates the idea that transgender individuals are mentally ill. The argument for reassignment surgery is that they "are necessary because of the severity of the mental disorder they effectively

treat” (Heyes and Latham, 179). This viewpoint frames reassignment as a way to cure a transgender individual’s “apparent” neurodivergence. The game’s inclusion of a saw and laser implies how mutilation must be done to cure dysphoria. Therefore, it suggests that transgender individuals should be “cured” through violent means. Also, the experiment equipment implies that transgender persons are not deserving of ethical medical treatments. The laboratory setting insinuates that transgender individuals’ bodies are valuable for inhumane experiments. Similar to the voyeurism Kanji experiences, the operation with which Naoto is threatened with does not benefit or humanize her. Instead, it reduces her body to an experiment to be acted upon. Heyes and Latham also point out “in this model, gender is understood as essential, stable, predetermined, and beyond the control or choice of the individual” (180). Ironically, gender reassignment reinforces the binary gender. To be a “real” man or woman, an individual must possess the appropriate genitalia. Reassignment surgery does not necessarily equate to free gender expression; it reduces gender expression to a binary decision that must adhere to society’s expectations of gender.

Similar to Kanji’s steam creating a disorienting experience, Naoto’s dungeon is a descent to the boss rather than an ascent. The level design makes “the player moves spatially deeper into the mystery of Naoto’s identity, and is forced to obtain and locate a series of keys that ‘identify’ them as able to pass into further restricted areas” (Youngblood). The player invades Naoto’s safe space of confidentiality. The game’s objective and the player’s actions work in tandem to disrupt Naoto’s autonomy over her body. By entering the boss’s floor, the player becomes privy to Naoto’s inner conflict about her gender. Heyes and Latham states “that a key marker of GD is suffering of a specific and identifiable kind” (181). Suffering “defines” the life of a transgender person. This pain helps the onlooker (the player and audience) understand and sympathize with

Naoto. However, the association of pain and trans-ness amplifies the idea that trans persons only deserve adequate treatment if they are in distress.

However, aspects of Naoto's social link conflicts with the game's assertion that her desire to become a man stems from society's favoritism towards the masculine gender. In social links with female characters, players can choose to pursue a romance with them, and Naoto is no exception. After the player romances a female party member, they have the option of inviting them to Yu's room. If Yu pursues a romance with a female character, he can invite her to his room where she confesses their feelings to him. In the process, their personas evolve. When Naoto is invited to Yu's room, she asks "do you find the pitch of my voice strange?" One of the answer choices allows the player to say that they prefer a higher voice. It forces Naoto into a heteronormative standard for male pleasure. The mechanic is meant to encourage building bonds between the player and allies, but it also perpetuates flawed ideas of female characters. They become docile individuals for the male player to desire. In addition, the game "foreclose[s] the utopic possibilities of change with the conservative sanctity of the unified flesh" (Youngblood). In other words, the idea of Naoto transitioning is not entertained because it disrupts the order of adhering to biological sex and gender. Naoto is not granted the same opportunity as the player to change the form of their digital bodies with every game they play.

To conclude, *Persona 4* renounces the queer outsider and forces them to conform to established gender roles and sexualities. The game insinuate that Kanji and Naoto are gay and transgender, respectively. However, it attributes these inner conflicts of sexuality and gender to the expectations of masculinity and women wanting the privileges of a man. The player inadvertently becomes an enforcer of traditional ideas of gender and sexuality. By fighting Kanji and Naoto's shadows, they are enacting violence to uphold these traditional ideas. In the end,

Kanji and Naoto are not pursuing their true selves. They are pursuing the perfect mask to hide themselves.

Chapter 4

The Android

“The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.” -Donna Haraway

Androids blur the line between human and machine. Their human like appearance has made them a popular subject to explore humanity and personal purpose in science fiction media. Films such as *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell* question the boundary between humans and machine. Androids and cyborgs in these works also question their designated purpose and identity. These works explore these blurred boundaries by asking the question: what does it mean to be human? *NieR: Automata* presents its own portrayal of these ideas of purpose and identity through its gameplay and unconventional storytelling presentation. *Automata*, like numerous video games, takes inspiration from Donna Haraway’s essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” Haraway explores the blurring of boundaries between cyborgs and humans and applies it to women’s rights. *Automata* explores the lack of boundaries between androids and humans. Despite video game’s fascination with cyborgs, Haraway criticizes the medium as an “individual competition and extraterrestrial warfare” (43). In other words, they amount to a power fantasy driven by violence. *Automata* challenges Haraway’s assertion through its multiple point of view narrative that incorporates replayability to find purpose in the form of personal goals. The game does not present its story as a power fantasy about androids fighting a glamorized war; war is placed at the forefront to present the existential crisis of the android. While *Watch Dogs 2* and *Persona 4* depict their outsider figures in a populated society, *Automata* focuses on how the outsider makes sense of human life on a post-apocalyptic earth. *Automata*’s amalgamation of gameplay styles involving

text adventure, on the rails shoot em ups, and hack and slash combat allows players to partake in a disorienting experience of finding purpose through repeated playthroughs.

Automata's plot centers on three androids named 2B, 9S, and A2 who are involved in a war against machines (non-humanoid robots made from leftover industrial metals) in a dystopian future. Their names denote their purpose. For instance, 2B is a battle android; 9S is a scanner; and A2 is a prototype attacker model. 2B and 9S are members of YoRHa, an android military organization tasked with eradicating machines to restore Earth to humanity. Unlike other games where there is one linear storyline, *Automata* encourages players to replay the game in order to achieve five main endings. With every new playthrough, players assume the role of a different android, and they discover new perspectives on previous events. For example, in 2B's route, players fight Simone—a machine named after the French philosopher Simone Beauvoir. In 9S's route, the backstory of this enemy is fleshed out through cut scenes—short video sequences—and archival lore. In Route A, Simone is portrayed as an enemy who needs to be defeated while Route B depicts Simone in a humanizing light. As a result, this storytelling style recontextualizes an enemy as a sympathetic figure.

In terms of gameplay, *Automata* is an action role playing game that incorporates shoot 'em up and text adventure gameplay. Shoot 'em up combat involves shooting at enemy mobs, as well as dodging projectiles from them, while text adventures incorporate player choice through typed inputs to determine the outcome of the story. The game primarily uses hack-and-slash combat in which weapons are used and combinations of button presses are rewarded with maximum destructive effect. The combat also incorporates shoot 'em up elements with the flying robot assistant called pods, and 9S's combat style, which uses hacking to fight enemies. 9S's hacking involves inflicting damage and defeating enemies by playing a shoot 'em up minigame.

If the projectiles inflict too much damage to the player, 9S will be booted out the minigame and take damage. Players traverse the open world where side missions are available; non-player characters (NPCs) or in this case non-player machines (NPMs) populate the world. Chips (also known as computer chips) play a pivotal role in the gameplay as accessories that modify the player character's abilities and power levels. This mechanic allows players to customize their playstyle, strengthen their character's abilities and attacks, and manipulate the HUD (heads up display). A HUD displays information such as the health bar and mini map.

The game utilizes the concept of defamiliarization to present its narrative, themes, and poetic gameplay. Poetic gameplay refers to “gameplay that is deliberately made strange, or defamiliarized, to create a poetic effect, drawing attention to the form of the work as a way to encourage reflection” (Mitchell et al.). This type of gameplay causes the player to pay attention to their actions. Yoko Taro's writing style compliments this gameplay because it allows “both the game's devices and narrative work towards building a textual environment in which his authorship has been revoked” (Gerrish). In other words, the player cultivates their own text through gameplay and how the narrative presents itself. The nonlinear story structure will spark the questions: Why is replaying the game necessary? And what *purpose* does it serve? Taro places players into a disorienting experience where they must parse through the information they are given and create new interpretations of events and characters. He also uses narrative techniques to defamiliarize. Replaying mirrors rereading. You not only notice missed details, but you create a new interpretation of previous events. Taro exploits the audience's need for a definitive ending by encouraging them to replay the story from different perspectives. He also defies this expectation using title cards. Title cards are used in films to denote the beginning, middle, and end or provide written context for scenes. In *Automata*, title cards “provide

structural indicators for the game's 'death of the author'" (Gerrish). Taro relinquishes his authority to structure the narrative, and he transfers the responsibility to the player. Each route features new scenes that further flesh out and recontextualizes earlier events in the game. As a result, the player uses their own intuition to create a narrative out of the gameplay. One notable usage of the title card is when "the Bunker, YoRHa's base of operations and home to the power structure that 'authors' 2B and 9S' identities, is destroyed" (Gerrish). The Bunker serves as a hub for missions and instructions to the androids and the player. Without this pivotal location, the androids are left without direction, but the player finds direction through the cutscene and the shifting perspectives of each route. The Bunker's destruction also symbolizes the death of the author. Yoko Taro gave meaning to this location, and its destruction signifies that loss of meaning. Thus, the player's search for an objective depends on their desire to continue the game.

YoRHa indoctrinates the androids and the player into cyborgization. Cyborgization refers to "the physical process of becoming (or becoming like) a (metaphorical) cybernetic organism" (Jansen, 39). In terms of video games, the player becomes cyborgized through the game's objectives; they are given a specific task (i.e. go to the castle and defeat the boss), complete it, and the game progresses. They "*give themselves* to the game, have faith in it, trust it and accepting what it offers" (Cassone and Thibault, 79). The innate fantastical elements of a video game cause the player to suspend their belief beyond the start screen. Cyborgization encourages players to relinquish their free will to the game, which transforms them into a cyborg of sorts. The player forms a feedback loopback between the controller and screen; they use the controller to complete objectives, and if their efforts are sufficed, the game will allow them to progress. *NieR: Automata* complies with the idea of cyborgization for a fraction of the narrative. The opening mission involves 2B fighting machines in a factory, and the player is told that they are

doing this to eradicate the machines. After the mission, the player is greeted with the mantra “Glory to mankind” from the Commander. This mantra encapsulates the android characters and players belief that their actions will restore Earth for humans. However, the revelation that humans are extinct challenges cyborgization and forces the player and characters to *find* purpose. By purpose, I mean the personal goals and ethical purpose that the androids wish to achieve. *Automata* leaves this decision to continue this journey to the player by choosing to play other routes. The power of choice is a human aspect. They are no longer a spectator. They are a human on a journey.

Automata's journey of purpose connects the players and androids through affinity and not identity. Donna Haraway defines “affinity” as “related not by blood but by choice, the appeal of one chemical nuclear group for another, avidity” (16). She believes that identity divides rather than unite because of its origins from patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. By choosing to continue the story after learning the truth, players view the androids as people rather than an avatar. The player is not playing to accomplish the goal of saving the world; they are playing to understand these “inhuman” figures. Similar to how the distinction between human and cyborg is blurred, *Automata*'s story structure further blurs the line between player and avatar. The avatar is the character the player controls in a game, and this digital figure allows players to interact with the game's world and characters. The player and avatar experience a loop together; they encounter the same events, but with an altered viewpoint based on the previous routes.

Furthermore, the search for identity causes inner conflict for the protagonists. 2B displays the most aversion towards emotions; however, as the story progresses, she ends up showing and acting in an explicit manner on her emotions. For example, in the opening mission, 9S expresses happiness that 2B is working with him. She responds with “emotions are

prohibited,” making her more mission-oriented than 9S. However, near the end of the mission, when 9S is injured by a machine attack, 2B instructs her pod to bring healing supplies. Pod says 9S cannot be repaired in this state, and she lets out a frustrated “shut up.” She is, as Donna Haraway might say, “exceedingly unfaithful to [her] origins” and her father (the human creators) “are inessential” (10). Haraway’s assertion about the cyborg’s unfaithfulness illustrates their capacity for autonomy, and their ability to defy their programmed purpose. Cyborgs do not need their fathers—their creators—to dictate their actions. For instance, 2B’s original or programmed purpose is to fight a war in the name of humankind, and as an android, emotions hamper her purpose, as it might lead to questioning human authority. This deviation suggest she has freewill to break from her programming, and humans are not essential to function. However, Haraway characterizes the cyborg as a figure that blurs the line between biological and mechanical. *Automata* initially establishes the difference between humans and androids. Emotions and free will defines humans in this world. The androids are supposedly “emotionless” war machines. However, the boundary between android and human becomes blurred like the cyborg. 2B herself can break the cycle of cyborgization; her cyborgization involves being an execution unit tasked with killing 9S every time he finds out the truth about humans. However, her genuine care for 9S during the different routes shows that she can be autonomous—and humane. Humane in this context means the ability to show compassion.

The androids combat purpose illuminates their transactional relationship with humans. Their bodies are used as weapons to preserve humanity. When the story reveals that humans are extinct, the android’s presence highlights human desire for life, and their fear of death. The idea of “death is not something to which we must acquiesce”, and it “should be ‘combated’ with the weaponry of modern technology” (Mitchell, 14). This fear of death means resorting to a

militaristic solution in the form of androids. Mankind relies on androids for the sake of preservation, but at the cost of relegating androids to expendable tools. The protagonists develop out of their militaristic mindset when interacting with machines. Haraway states that “the cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family” (9). In other words, androids do not desire to integrate themselves into human society. However, the androids and machine lifeforms desire the characteristics of humans. For instance, machines are initially portrayed as enemies. As players explore the world, it is evident that machines desire humanity; they desire to reproduce, create their own religion, and have loved ones. Their adaptation of human customs shows a longing for a concrete and acceptable identity. By achieving humanism, machines will not be plagued by the conflict of identity.

Ursula K. Heise’s “The Android and Animal” talks about the relationship between aliens, androids, and animals. Aliens are portrayed as an allegory for oppressed groups based on their “class, racial, ethnic, national, or religious difference” (Heise, 504). The androids and players relentlessly attack machines throughout Route A. In addition, the androids such as 2B and A2 act prejudicial towards machines before coming to an understanding with them. The machines desire for peace is also impeded by a cycle of hatred and violence. *Automata* presents a grey area between the androids and machines; both sides are pawns in a war. The game illustrates the effect of that this cycle. For instance, Route B opens with a machine (controlled by the player) bringing oil to its dying brother. If the machine trips over the debris, the player has to collect the oil again. This repetition illustrates how their wish to live as humans is futile due to a never-ending war; it also humanizes a race that is portrayed as villains. In this case, the machines are the aliens in the narrative. They represent otherness that humans (the player) understand through repetition. This repetition invokes empathy in the player. Like the machine, the player repeats

this futile cycle with each new playthrough. They learn new information at the expense of the machine's continued suffering. The machines are not just mindless drones who kill. They are beings with heart. In other words, they possess the emotions to care, love, and feel sorrow.

The narrative's repetition disrupts the player's control of time. Video games' interactivity allows direct control over time through "saving and reloading, dying and respawning, speedrunning or cheating; slowing it down, speeding it up, [and] replaying it" (Mitchell, 16). *Automata* uses its protagonists as devices to impede player interaction with these gaming staples. For instance, in Route C, 2B, 9S, and A2 are affected by the Logic Virus—a condition where the affected becomes berserk. An android with the virus will have glowing eyes and attack their fellow companions on sight. The Bunker—YoRHa's headquarters and where new bodies are made—is defunct, and deaths are an instant game over. Prior to this point, their new bodies would respawn from a vending machine, but in this case a player's progress could be erased because of one miniscule mistake. Like the characters, the player loses control of time—and cannot defy death. Usually in video games, time favors the player "*in the service of mapping and mastering digital worlds*" (Mitchell, 16). Mapping and mastering refer to the player familiarizing themselves with the gameplay system. They manipulate these digital worlds through practice and trial and error. In *Automata*'s case, the opening mission switches between various gameplay styles including shooting minigames, hack and slash, and side scrolling platformer. Those familiar with Platinum Games's previous work such as *Bayonetta* would expect a hack-and-slash game that requires precise timing and execution of moves. However, the different gameplay disrupts the mastering process, which reflects the android's ability to be malleable according to the situation. Humans—the androids' creators—expects their tools to be durable in order to prolong this war.

In addition, *Automata*'s replayability defies the magic circle. The magic circle refers to "the 'reality' of a game [and] the relationship between the artificial world of the game and the 'real life' contexts that it intersects" (Salen and Zimmerman, 172). In other words, the circle is a boundary between the game world and real life. The magic circle acts as an immersion technique for the player to accept the game world's rules and end goal at face value. Players are under the impression that killing machines will result in an ending where peace will be achieved. *Automata* breaks the magic circle with its replayable and repetitive narrative, which creates a circular movement of time (Mitchell et al.). An example is in Route C where A2 kills 2B who is affected by the Logic Virus, and 9S witnesses the action. Unlike 9S, the player knows A2's action is not ill-intentioned because they *witnessed* the effects of the Logic Virus on 2B. The HUD and audio become distorted for both her and the player. By experiencing this scene and witnessing its aftermath through different perspectives, the magic circle is broken. *Automata*'s replayability destroys the "safe havens of imagination and experimentation that are separated from 'real' or 'ordinary' life" (Copier, 165). The magic circle offers an escape and prevents players from critically engaging with a game concerning its gameplay and narrative, but *Automata*'s repetitive narrative forces the player to actively engage with its story.

To conclude, *Automata*'s use of defamiliarization through its gameplay mechanics and narrative presentation emulates the complexity of the journey of self-discovery and purpose. It also breaks the boundary between player and android. *Automata* illustrates that the death of the author forces the players and characters to find their own objectives, which challenges cyborgization. The feedback loop between player, controller, and screen is changed to a relationship where the machine is not dictating the player's actions. The player does not obey the game's directions without second thought. Instead, they question the purpose of their actions,

and the effect it will have on the story and gameplay experience. With each new route and perspective, players *reflect* on the plot and the character's actions rather than completing objectives to progress. Through this presentation, the players witness the growth of androids from emotionless beings to humans. At *Automata's* conclusion, the player has not only mastered the mechanics, but they also mastered their journey of purpose.

Unlike *Watch Dogs 2* and *Persona 4*, the outsider (the androids and machines) in *Automata* is contingent. Androids and machines start as traditional outsiders. They do not possess the characteristics that define humans: flesh and emotions. However, through each new route, these figures gain emotion and identity, suggesting the complexity of the cyborg as a social figure. The cyborg and human are similar in that their characteristics change over the course of their lives. This contingency of characteristics challenges the notion that in every society there must be an outsider. As Haraway mentions, identity further divides groups. It also forces individuals to fit into a predetermined category, and the hierarchy of the worthiness of certain identities is created. The android's existence signifies a new beginning where appearance and characteristics do not divide but rather unite the population. Labels are no longer used, and affinity creates relations between people.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The differing gameplays and genres of *Watch Dogs 2*, *Persona 4* and *NieR: Automata* depict the outsider in various ways. *Watch Dogs 2* utilizes the ability to hack into technology in an open world, which empowers its players—especially black players. *NieR: Automata* incorporates disorienting gameplay mechanics that mirrors the android's conflict of purpose. The game's circular movement of time helps players understand humanity through the lens of the android. While *Watch Dogs 2* and *NieR: Automata* portray the outsider through progressive means, *Persona 4* downplays Kanji and Naoto's obstruction of the status quo. Their character arcs conclude with them embracing society's traditional gender and sexuality constructs. Thanks to video games' integration of gameplay and story, players can understand the outsider through immersive means—for better or worse. By immersion, I refer to the gameplay mechanics and narrative structure that a game uses to get the player's attention for the duration of the playtime.

Watch Dogs 2 implements immersion as an outsider by allowing players to play solely as Marcus. Marcus is an avatar that the player acts through, but also understands. For example, Marcus's interactions with Horatio does not make him fall into the mediated portrayal of blackness. His role as the protagonist is not interchangeable with a white protagonist. A white protagonist cannot articulate the same experiences of racial profiling that Marcus himself addresses. However, the gameplay combines his playful personality to provide players—especially black players—a powerful experience. The black protagonist is the hero, and he fights the system through evasive means.

Persona 4's immersion techniques interfere with the autonomy of queer bodies.

Compared to the two other games where the player plays as the outsider, *Persona 4* makes the player an observer to the outsider. The player traverses through dungeons to beat bosses.

However, when the player navigates a queer space in the case of Kanji and Naoto's dungeons, they enforce heterosexuality and cisgender norms through violence. The boss in these dungeons are not simply Shadow Kanji and Shadow Naoto. Rather, the player fights against the threat of dismantling the gender and sexuality status quo. The game's subsequent treatment of these characters either play up their sexuality for laughs or force them into the role of love interest. The player does not come to understand Naoto and Kanji. Thus, by the end of the game, they are still the outsiders.

NieR: Automata's immersion techniques *disrupt* the player. From the changing gameplay styles to the different POVs in each route, the player's complacency with familiar game mechanics and narrative beats is challenged. The game also challenges cyborgization—an immersion technique. A player immerses themselves in a game by creating a feedback loop between the screen, controller, and themselves. But the reveal about the humans breaks the immersion, and it forces the player to piece together their own immersion. With the "death" of Yoko Taro, the player picks up the pen, metaphorically, and they create their own narrative of discovering purpose. At the conclusion of their journey, the player realizes that the androids are the humans.

Automata's immersion and interactivity transforms what constitutes an outsider. The android's transformation into and subsequent acceptance of their newfound humanity shows that the identity of the human is a superfluous label. The absence of a normal identity removes the need for categories and division. *Automata* shows that it is possible for society to cease labeling

and ostracizing the outsider. By disregarding the identities that are by default considered superior, a new normal is established. A new normal where there is no division between identities, and an outsider's social category is not used to discriminate them.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Theresa Morris

Education

The Pennsylvania State University

Bachelor of Arts in English, Minor in Business and the Liberal Arts

University Park, PA

December 2021

Relevant Experience

English Department at Pennsylvania State University

Undergraduate Research Intern

University Park, PA

August 2020-December 2020

- Researched about trauma and Native American voting rights using academic databases
- Concluded that there are still barriers for Native American voting and how trauma is passed through generations varies
- Wrote 14 annotated bibliographies detailing research findings
- Collaborated with a research assistant to solidify deadlines and how to tackle objectives

Volunteer Experience

ServeState

Member

University Park, PA

January 2020-Present

- Provides service and philanthropy to the State College community
- Engages in community cleaning activities including furniture cleaning at Schlow Centre Region Library and sanitation at Beaver Stadium
- Participates in baking food for students in need

The Book Fairies

Book Sorter

Freeport, NY

July 2021-August 2021

- Organized used books for schools, libraries, and children in low-income communities
- Packed and sorted about 20 boxes of children's books for local book fairs and donations overseas
- Collaborated with other volunteers to ensure books were distributed accordingly

Publications

Klio

Contributing Author

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December 2019

- "Starlight Realization" in *Klio*, an online student magazine that showcases works of writing, music and art at Penn State

Honors and Awards

- Dean's List (Fall 2018-Spring 2021)
- Paterno Fellows
- Schreyer Honors College

Skills

- Wix, Google Docs and Slides, iMovie, Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, and WordPress