Of Cyborgs and Cats: Nonhuman Companionship and the Specter of Humanity in NieR: Automata and Stray

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Abstract

While there are many post-apocalyptic videogames available, few approach the playing of this genre through a post-humanity lens. In this paper, I explore titles which ask the player to take control of nonhuman avatars, as they negotiate post-apocalyptic environments created by an extinct humankind and their bygone dystopias. Such gameplay offers subversive and speculative potential in the vein of Donna Haraway's cyborg (2016a), by constructing future-probing game-spaces which offer "joint kinship with animals and machines" (p. 15). Both NieR: Automata *(2017), in which players control androids, and* Stray *(2022), in which players control a cat lost in a robot city, decenter humans through their nonhuman avatar construction and an absenting of human characters in-game. However, humanity is recentered through each game's thematic approach: machine-life's grappling with (and potential pursuit of) what it means to be human. This theme troubles each game's engagement with the posthuman, especially in the way that "being human" comes to equate with "being an effective capitalist subject" through each game's centering and championing of neoliberal individualism. Post-humanity gameplay can additionally fall victim to the cyborg's often critiqued utopian claims, by failing to acknowledge the human exceptionalism buried within cyborgian companionship as it is experienced by the privileged human player via identity tourism (Nakamura, 2002). Such post-humanity, post-apocalyptic identity tourism as taken through the nonhuman avatar may critically allow us human players a valuable exploration of the meaning of humanity under neoliberal capitalism. However, such cyborgian gameplay can also perpetuate capitalist concepts of individuality and "good" lifeforms, at the cost of the planet and all life inhabiting it.*

Author Biography

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Introduction

Nonhuman avatars in videogames may at first seem to allow players posthuman experiences, especially in game worlds in which humanity itself is narratively extinct. Yet, as this article explores, post-humanity nonhuman play is not inherently posthuman play. Today, our digital play of the nonhuman is inevitably bound up in very human grappling with neoliberal capitalism. In games like *NieR: Automata* (2017) and *Stray* (2022), in which players respectively control androids and cats, humanity's capitalist value system continues to haunt our nonhuman avatars in shaping their worlds, their identities, and their connections with fellow nonhumans. Such games are at once a critique of capitalism's destructive and oppressive domination over the world while also being a glorification of the supposedly virtuous individualism and ethics its domination allows humanity (and future nonhumans) to access. Despite the absence of humans from these game worlds, in which humanity is long extinct, the games themselves remain human-centric in their narrative focus, world-building, and characterization, in a way that valorizes specifically neoliberal definitions of "good" human life. Such games, and often the characters they feature, are driven by the question: "What does it mean to be human?". Yet the answers presented by nonhuman gameplay perpetuate not *innately human* values but constructed *neoliberal* values. Such gameplay therefore asks the nonhuman to grapple with and revive the very neoliberal capitalist values which mark them as lesser than humans, while physically grappling with hostile post-apocalyptic environments inherited from humanity's failures to contain capitalist exploitation. In this ostensibly playful relation, we put the burden on nonhumans to better relate to (and deal with the fallout from) humanity's capitalist drives. Instead, posthuman game design might consider putting the burden on humanity to better relate to the consequences (for both nonhumans and humans) of the capitalist Anthropocene's ongoing destruction of the planet.

I position my analysis in the context of Donna Haraway's (2016a) cyborg, which blends the human and the nonhuman, allegedly for the benefit of both. However, I discuss below how nonhuman gameplay reveals the anthropocentrism of the human player's consumption of the cyborg for entertainment. I advance this discussion of cyborgian play (i.e., humanity's virtual playing of the nonhuman) through Lisa Nakamura's (2002) theory of identity tourism. Nakamura's work on virtual identity consumption highlights how, as the human-half of the nonhuman cyborg, we players are engaging the nonhuman in an inevitably human-priv-

ileged tour. This tour distances us from the human-created threats authentically experienced by our nonhuman others. Such unequal power relations are further revealed through the concept of companion species. Human concepts of human-nonhuman companionship (e.g., pets, service animals, wildlife) define our design and play of nonhuman identity tourism. As will be explored, such human definitions of human-nonhuman companionship simultaneously excuse and justify human mastery over the nonhuman. We often consider such unequal power relations with our companion species as mutually beneficial arrangements, rather than arrangements predicated on humanity's domination of the nonhuman other; a domination virtually perpetuated through nonhuman play. While my chosen post-humanity games, and others like them, do provide a chance to explore "the radical interrelatedness that exists between human beings, other living creatures, and the Earth itself" (Condis, 2020, n.p.), they do so not through a posthuman lens but a capitalist lens of human exceptionalism. Capitalism's standards for not only living life but for hierarchically categorizing lifeforms remain in these nonhuman-led, post-apocalyptic worlds. Humanity itself may have ended in these games, but the veneration of humanity and its dominant ideologies lives on in the player-guided nonhuman pursuit of (in the words of *Automata*'s androids) "glory to mankind."

Cyborgian Play & Nonhuman Tours

Nonhuman gameplay may at first appear to offer subversive and speculative potential in the vein of Haraway's cyborg. In the 1980s, Haraway used the metaphor of the cyborg to suggest ways of being-in-the-world which reject oppressive social dualisms, embracing instead fluid identities. As Haraway (2016a) proposes, "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (p. 15). The cyborg does not, according to Haraway's definition, prescribe to dualisms such as male > female, white > black, civilization > nature, human > animal, human > machine, and so forth. By rejecting a world built on rigid binaries, the cyborg "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway, 2016a, p. 67). Cyborgs may therefore allow for more open and empathetic ways of understanding ourselves, each other, and our interactions with the world. The cyborgian worldview, in promoting interrelatedness, is ecocritical in asking how and why we allow ourselves to perpetuate oppressive and human-centric "antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends)" (Haraway, 2016a, p. 65). By playing as the nonhuman, be it the machine or the animal, we enter a cyborgian relation which invites us to interact with the world as a human-player/nonhuman-avatar cyborg.

However, cyborgian play in the capitalist-driven Anthropocene inevitably inherits neoliberal capitalist subjecthood through both the human aspect of the cyborg as well as through the very technology making cyborgian play possible. Although cyborgian gameplay, through human enmeshment with the nonhuman, allows us to feel sympathy towards nonhuman lifeforms, the cyborg as a critical practice is still accessed through the capitalist entertainment

system (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009), by players enmeshed in neoliberal rationality (Brown, 2015). While Haraway (2016a) insists that the cyborg is the "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism" (p. 9), as Dennis Jansen (2020) highlights, the cyborg as embraced through technology today is very much the *legitimate* offspring of these forces. While scholarship tends to view the cyborg as a utopian figure with unifying potential, it must be noted that "[p]lay-as-cyborgization is not a way of learning through videogames to coexist with all contemporary technologies but rather only with those which, like videogames and cyborgs, can be traced back to the American military-entertainment complex" (Jansen, 2020, p. 37). Following Jansen, I evoke the cyborg metaphor in framing my videogame analysis to highlight how, even when playing as and with the nonhuman other, gameplay as cyborg (combining human and nonhuman experiences) is inevitably influenced by and undertaken through humanity and its current exploitative capitalist power dynamics. Even in game worlds rendered apocalyptic by capitalist-driven exploitation, our nonhuman avatars continue to narratively venerate and mechanically chase after humanity's neoliberal value system. We see this especially in how the design of post-apocalyptic nonhuman avatars and the cyborgian gameplay they provide players maintains more-so than challenges capitalist concepts of individuality.

The cyborg, while seemingly posthuman in its nonhuman aspects, remains linked in its human aspects to neoliberal capitalist subjectivity. Neoliberalism, initially conceived as a set of economic principles prioritizing the capitalist free market, has over the decades expanded into a set of principles which organize not just the market but social life in capitalist society (Brown, 2015). As Wendy Brown (2015) articulates, "neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities— even where money is not at issue— and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors" and human capital (p. 31). Yet instead of registering as a constructed rationality, which we choose to socially teach and perform, neoliberal rationality often manifests to many capitalist subjects as "common sense" (Brown, 2015, p. 35). The supposed common sense of the neoliberal rationale puts "competition at the centre of social life" (Wilson, 2018, p. 2). Neoliberalism's emphasis on competition promotes a "self-enclosed individualism" which asks individuals to entirely shoulder their successes and failures, while simultaneously enforcing "hard and fast-dividing lines between self/other and self/world" in the name of competing as human capital (Wilson, 2018, p. 3). Neoliberalism champions individualism as key to (1) personal freedom and expression of the Self – e.g., promoting growth of the Self – and (2) innovation and efficiency for society – e.g., promoting growth of society. However, neoliberal individualism instead assures the sustained dominance and growth of capitalism. Neoliberalism's focus on hyper-individualism, and its villainizing of any modes of thought or life which counteract its definition of individuality, creates a social world based in exploitative hierarchies and vast precarity. In such a neoliberal *milieu*, poverty, social oppression, and environmental devastation are acceptable losses for the expansion of capitalism (Nixon, 2011; Wilson, 2018).

Cyborgian gameplay, however liberatory and critical in some respects, cannot emancipate

from capitalism so long as nonhuman identity construction is undertaken and valorised through neoliberal individualism. Indeed, the nonhumans of our post-humanity game worlds who pursue neoliberal celebrations of individuality are positioned as sympathetic and "good" to players. Meanwhile, nonhumans who either eschew or threaten neoliberal rationality are presented as threat and must be eradicated by the cyborgian player. The main argument of my forthcoming analysis is therefore that the narrative situating of neoliberal rationale within many post-humanity game worlds *perpetuates rather than challenges* capitalism's exploitative, oppressive, and environmentally catastrophic ways of being-in-the-world and being with each other. While Haraway promoted interconnectedness and togetherness through the cyborg, as a venue for mutual understanding and appreciation of difference, capitalism reprograms the cyborg to market togetherness as a commodity for the cyborgian player. Such marketized togetherness only values surface differences between lifeforms and vilifies ways of life and types of life that do not conform to neoliberal rationale. Capitalism's cyborgian play reiterates that any life – human or nonhuman – which threatens capitalism's definitions of what makes life worth living does not deserve to have life at all.

Nonhuman Identity Tourism

Interpreting nonhuman avatar engagement as cyborgian play allows us to see how the cyborg's unifying and boundary-blurring potential is appropriated by capitalism to provide the human player with nonhuman identity tourism. As with capitalism's other types of tourism, identity tourism provides a secure, pleasurable, and sanitized vacation into the commodified other (whether that other is a foreign country or a virtual avatar). Nakamura (2002) developed the concept "identity tourism" following her observations in online chat communities, in which users adopted racialized and gendered personae – which did not match their real-world identities – in such ways that reproduced marginalizing stereotypes. Nakamura coined the term to highlight how cyberidentity play, be it in chat rooms or gaming, largely fails to honour diversity. Instead, identity tourism uses "race and gender as amusing prostheses to be donned and shed without 'real life' consequences" (Nakamura, 2002, pp. 13-14). Here, Nakamura (2002) alludes to how cyberspace caters, especially in videogames, to white male players, who can enjoy their cyber-tours in diverse underprivileged identities "without any of the risks associated with being a racial [or gendered] minority in real life" (p. 40). The player may assume an identity in-game which holds less privileges than the player in real life society, without the very material threats and fears those underprivileged identities must face.

However, as Nakamura and other scholars acknowledge, stepping into the cyber-lives of minority identities different from one's own is not always an exclusively marginalizing and stereotype-reproducing play experience. For example, Adrienne Shaw's (2014) study of player engagement with and design of avatars across gaming reveals that "playing as a character who was ostensibly 'other' to [the player] (in terms of gender, race, or sexuality) was not necessarily or always oppressive, transgressive, or even perspective altering, especially in

offline gaming" (p. 139). Meanwhile, Souvik Mukherjee's (2018) review of postcolonial play indicates how playing as an avatar directly subjugated by colonialism allows the player identity tourism which "both writes and writes back" against colonialism, offering "the simultaneous possibilities of subalternity, protest, elitism, and hegemony" (p. 518). The player, here, is not simply perpetuating the oppression of the colonial subject by engaging in a risk-free tour of that identity, but also engaging themselves in a critical tour of postcolonial possibility through an avatar struggling against colonial subjugation, allowing the player "a deeper understanding and experience of the postcolonial" (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 518). Yet whether the identity tourist uses their tour to reiterate stereotypes and privilege, question these dynamics, or ignore them and their avatar's identity signifiers altogether, the player nonetheless experiences the identity tour as a manageable tour and not an enforced reality.

The player as tourist does not, and indeed cannot, take on the lived-realities and lived-threats of the identities with which they mesh for a (limited) cyborgian tour, whether that tour is taken as a racialized other, gendered other, or a nonhuman other. The nonhuman other, indeed, remains implicated in very human power structures when the player (from a place of human privilege) takes an identity tour in its otherness. Such identity tours can often be mistakenly praised as unifying for players, in their capacity to remove racialized, gendered, or otherwise marginalized identity signifiers from an avatar's nonhuman body (Chien, 2017). As Irene Chien (2017) shows, through an analysis of *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), nonhuman avatars can both maintain signifiers of humanity's marginalization of other humans as well as indulge humanity's "pervasive cultural fantasy of escaping the burdens of embodied difference in our globally networked online spaces" (Chien, 2017, p. 143). Identity tourism of the nonhuman avatar reiterates human privilege over both othered human identities and nonhuman others. As Nakamura (2002) surmises, "identity tourists perform a version of their ideal other that conforms to familiar stereotypes and does not ask questions or raise difficult, so-called divisive issues like racism" (p. 57), sexism, or human exceptionalism – all of which, pointedly, are hierarchical and oppressive systems for regulating both human and nonhuman life on our planet, and all of which have variously served and continue to serve capitalist exploitation of the other.

Companion Avatars

Capitalist exploitation of the other is routinely justified by narratives of protection, be it protection against a threat to "humanity" (where humanity is inevitably a stand-in for "capitalist social order"), which requires policing the other, or through the allegation that "humanity" must indeed *protect the other*; that we make life better for the other. We see how capitalist human subjects colonize the nonhuman in this ostensibly caring way through the concept of companion species, and how human-nonhuman companionship creates a cyborgian link for humanity's benefit. In Haraway's later work (2016b), she identifies the cyborg as part of the "family of companion species" (p. 102), to which she also assigns all organic life which functions as "companion" to human existence, from sheep to vegetables to pet dogs (or for

the purposes of analyzing *Stray*, pet cats). As Haraway (2016b) observes, "cyborgs raise all the questions of histories, politics, and ethics that dogs require. Care, flourishing, differences in power, scales of time" (p. 113). Other scholars echo this language of companionship in discussing the cyborg, especially as it relates to gaming. For example, Frank Fetzer (2019) describes how the player's interrelatedness with both their nonhuman avatars in-game as well as the game console or computer in the real world renders the player "no longer entirely human, but an inseparable mixture of technological and bodily relations with the game-world. A cyborg, if you like" (p. 123). It is the companionship between the player and avatar, as developed throughout gameplay, which produces a cyborg relationship between the two, as they become not only cooperative but codependent on each other to exist within the game world.

Notable in Haraway and other scholars' articulation of interspecies companions it that the human is routinely prioritized in these relationships, as the companionship is initiated by and chiefly for the benefit of the human subject. As Hana Porkertová (2019) highlights, current concepts of interspecies companionship are generally "asymmetric relationship[s]" which favor the human companion through a "humanistic perspective [which], in either its superior or protectionist form, ascribes agency only to people, and the animal is dependent on human decisions and kindness" (p. 193). In arguing for this stance, Porkertová (2019) offers that our interspecies relationships should be more akin to that of the guide dog and its human dependent, who allegedly come to act as equals and rely on each other during training, learning to trust each other's decision-making skills in a supposedly non- or at least less-dualistic relationship.

Yet, as Joanna Zylinska (2012) highlights, any interspecies companionship initiated by the human must consider the humanism at play in the very "desire to train, and hence master another being" (p. 217). According to Zylinska (2012), romanticizing our relationships with companion species, especially companion animals, can obscure how we continue to centre the human worldview in human-nonhuman relationships, thereby maintaining belief in – even while supposedly subverting – human exceptionalism. As Zylinska (2012) warns, in caring for or playing with (or as) animals, we humans might:

> *believe that we have been co-constituted together—while in fact we have only constituted this "animal" in our own image (of "us" or "them"). The ethical recognition of this difference between human and animal does not therefore amount to knowing its nature once and for all. Indeed, any attempt to cognitively master it will [...] be another technical prosthesis—alongside flint tools, hammers and computers—that shapes our systemic co-emergence in and with the world.* (p. 215)

Here, Zylinska (2012) ties us back to an idea Haraway (2016a) developed in her articulation of the cyborg: the cyborg helps us break down the human superiority we feel over what (or who) we use as tools to advance capitalist society. Tools may be a hammer or flint, or they

may be a machine or a pet, but anything that can be considered a tool is inevitably shaped as "tool" by humans to fit a human-centric world. A cyborg relation with our nonhuman tools, however much we love some of these tools, should not obscure the fact that our conceptions of all entities entering the cyborg relation are shaped through human-centric interpretations of the world. Humanity trains humans to act in the human world, just as humanity trains dogs to act in the human world, just as it trains AI to act in the human world. The cyborg combines different parts, both human and nonhuman, but all prior to that combination – and certainly during the combination process – have today been shaped by and for the benefit of humanity under capitalism.

While some scholarship may therefore attest to a posthuman, post-Anthropocene potential through cyborgian interaction with our various companion species, cyborgian play is inevitably produced in the capitalist Anthropocene. As Zylinska (2012) highlights, engagement with and analysis of nonhuman relationships must therefore reflect on both the human "trainer's desire to make the universe supple, to have it bend under their command," and how our posthuman companionship fantasies can cover "over the violence involved in making the world and in making meanings in the world with and via [the nonhuman]" (p. 218). We must recognize that, as human-players engaging with human-products, our cyborgian play and nonhuman companionships are "always inevitably suspended between anthropocentrism and violence," and that the inevitability of these influences does not absolve us of "ethical responsibility to work out better ways of living-with—with humans, other animals, and machines" (Zylinska, p. 218). Post-apocalyptic, post-humanity gameplay undertaken through the nonhuman is therefore still potent grounds for ethical engagement with humanity's violence against itself, nonhumans, and the environment. Yet it is simultaneously an act of capitalist human exceptionalism, in articulating the surviving nonhuman identities as relevant only to the degree to which they mimic and memorialize neoliberalism's dominant definitions of individuality, humanization, and (human) being in the world.

Nonhuman Companionship: Automata & Stray

Both *Automata* and *Stray* use neoliberal notions of individuality and companionship to designate who and what is worth fighting for in the post-humanity post-apocalypse. We see this in how the player as nonhuman avatar is situated to either bond and work together with or fight and feel threatened by: the avatar's companions (characters who accompany the avatar in combat and form a cyborgian relationship with the avatar/player), the secondary non-player characters (NPCs) (including allies, antagonists, and neutral characterized parties), and the enemies in each game world (parties that function exclusively as combat enemy and are never characterized). In each case, we see neoliberal rationality at work, as it positions companionship between individuals – as defined by popular conceptions of individual consciousness and self-awareness – as "good" and less destructive than the solidarity that could be claimed by nonhuman hiveminds and/or networks. The pursuit of neoliberal individualism, in each nonhuman avatars' interactions with other nonhumans, narratively

saves them from a loss of self-awareness that is framed as being worse than death. Prior to unpacking these neoliberal, human-centric nonhuman relations, however, it is necessary to properly introduce the narrative and mechanical context of each game's nonhuman avatars and post-humanity game worlds.

Selected Titles

Automata follows the proxy-war between the YoRHA force of humanoid androids, fighting on humanity's behalf, and machine lifeforms that have invaded Earth from outer space. The player is asked to control several androids throughout the game, beginning with 2B, a female combat android, followed by 9S, a male reconnaissance android. As the war progresses, the player and their android avatars discover the machines are not pure antagonists, nor are the androids fighting for a real cause. Humanity has been long-extinct, but YoRHA covered this up to give the androids something for which to keep fighting. This revelation does not lead to peace, however, and instead, the fallout of the war sees androids and machines alike infected by a virus which destroys their consciousness. The virus first leads to the death of 2B, and later both 9S and the player's third and final android avatar, A2. The war ends with the player's avatars and many of the game's NPCs dead or void of their sense of self. Provided the player explores each possible avatar-perspective in the game, however, which requires multiple playthroughs, they will eventually unlock the game's "true" ending, Ending E, which sees their avatar androids reconstructed with their identities intact, promising a potentially better future.

While *Automata* asks the player to engage with different types of robotic nonhuman life and their relationships, and only engages nonhuman animals peripherally (e.g., riding a boar, fishing), *Stray* asks the player to consider how nonhuman animals and nonhuman machines may interact post-humanity. In *Stray*, the player takes control of a cat who has been separated from its pack and is trapped in the ruins of an underground city. With the help of a sentient drone, the *Stray* must find its way through the deteriorating city and back to the "Outside." On the way, the player-as-*Stray* gets to interact with a variety of anthropomorphic robots, who the drone refers to as "companions" and who mimic human customs and culture. The *Stray*, drone, and companions ultimately work together to open what is revealed to be a locked bunker city, freeing the nonhuman remnants of humanity, and destroying the threats humanity left behind: the Zurks, gnat-like creatures which eat both organic material and metal, and the unconscious Sentinels, security drones which oppressively police and imprison their conscious robot counterparts. Like the surviving nonhumans of *Automata*, there is a somewhat hopeful future for the nonhumans of *Stray*, because they have worked together through humanity's neoliberal definitions of companionship and individuality to overcome humanity's apocalypses.

Analysis

In these post-humanity games, companionship and overall survival are achieved by the player's nonhuman avatar and other nonhuman lifeforms by adopting humanity's neoliberal rationale. We see this capitalism-sustaining dynamic in how each game articulates the following nonhuman-to-nonhuman relationships between the player's avatar and other entities in the game world. Such relationships include those between the player's nonhuman-avatar(s) and 1) companions (humanized); 2) non-player characters (humanized); 3) enemies (dehumanized):

Companions (humanized). Both *Automata* and *Stray* provide the player's nonhuman avatars with nonhuman companions to assist narratively and mechanically throughout each game. In *Automata*, the player's android avatars are each followed by small flying robot companions called "Pods." These Pods assist in combat, firing at enemies on the player's command, but they are also used to relay transmissions from other NPCs to the avatar and provide the avatar advice throughout the game. As *Automata* progresses, it becomes clear that the Pods are themselves individual characters, with suggested personalities, who form bonds with the androids to which they are assigned. Indeed, at the end of *Automata*, after all the androids have been killed, it is the Pods who save the player's avatars. Having been humanized through neoliberal individualism (i.e., learning to care in a distinctly human way about other individualized beings), the Pods decide to override their own programming, which otherwise demands they destroy the androids' backup memories, as the war has ended, and the androids serve no further purpose. Instead, the Pods admit to having begun to feel emotions and express their desire for the androids to live on as the individuals they once were. Pending a final combat sequence, the game performs a fourth wall break in asking the player to give the Pod permission to hack its own deletion protocols and save the androids. In reaching beyond the game to address the player directly, and additionally in requiring the assistance of other human players to complete a final hacking bullet-hell combat sequence, the game explicitly positions its human players as saviors of the posthuman game world. The game ends here on the hopeful possibility of the androids getting a new chance at life, as facilitated through their Pods' adoptions of human emotions and concepts of love, and as directly attributed to humanity's perseverance beyond the game world itself.

As previously mentioned, *Stray* likewise includes a nonhuman companion for the player's avatar, the AI drone B-12. Like the Pods, B-12 provides narrative exposition and gameplay tips. B-12 becomes a companion and helper not only for the *Stray* but for the human player, as he translates the robots' language narratively for the former and mechanically for the latter's benefit. B-12 also hacks computers and digital locks and acts as a weapon for a portion of the game. While B-12, like the Pods, is a robot aide to the player, in much a cyborgian fashion as we humans tend to use our electronics (tools for communication, work, advice, etc.), B-12 is also humanized via neoliberal individualism and saves the nonhuman entities of *Stray*'s post-apocalyptic world by virtue of this individualization. However, unlike the Pods, B-12 does not *learn* how to be human but *remembers* how to be human. Later in game, it is revealed that B-12 is not an AI programmed from scratch, but a human who –

upon catching the illness that wiped out humanity – uploaded his consciousness into his computer. B-12 fulfils the idea of Haraway's cyborg here in a literal sense, as the last human who has only survived by entangling himself entirely with the machine. What is more, B-12 throughout the game exhibits desires to understand and peacefully co-exist with the legitimately nonhuman robots in the game, and immediately develops a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with the *Stray*. Through these narrative relationships, B-12 seemingly indicates that the cyborgian human would indeed be able to exist in peaceful utopian solidarity with its nonhuman fellows.

B-12's human backstory further facilitates this fantasy of there being inherently beneficial aspects of humanity to the nonhuman, through B-12's depiction as a "good" human oppressed – like the *Stray* and robots – by the "bad" humans, who are truly at fault for humanity's apocalypse. B-12 conveys to the *Stray*, over the course of the game, a markedly capitalist and authoritarian human history at fault for the city's collapse, as both the greed of corporations and threat of the police state led to classist oppression, squalor, and eventually plague. Within this narrative, B-12 becomes an intelligent lower-class human rebel, living in the Slums and attempting to find a way for himself and his impoverished loved ones to escape their oppressive city. The city's history, as told through B-12's personal history, revels both in the destructive qualities of the "bad" humans in charge, and the empathetic and revolutionary qualities of the "good" humans who fought against that destruction. This absolves not only B-12 but the player – who, presumably, is more likely to relate to a lower- or middle-class subjecthood – of combatting human capitalist exploitation of the planet, as it infers 1) that only humans with the most power over society are responsible for such exploitation; and 2) humans without that power are themselves too exploited by human power-brokers to make sustainable change for the planet and nonhumans. Except, perhaps, at the limited personal level of caring for the nonhumans we choose to bring into our individual lives as companion species.

B-12 reiterates the "goodness" of the disempowered human towards the companion nonhuman in a show of human-centric heroism at the end of the game. B-12 "sacrifices" himself to override the city's control room, frying his small drone body as he hacks the city open for the *Stray* and companion robots, knowing he himself will die in the process. Although he and the *Stray* have worked together to open the city, he is the one who does so at the greatest cost, again absolving humanity for its violence against the nonhuman, by illustrating that "good" humans would, if given the opportunity, certainly sacrifice everything to right the wrongs of the "bad" humans. In a similar vein, in *Automata*, it is the human emotions that the Pods adopt which lead them to risk their own existence in what is projected to be a suicide hacking mission to override their own programming and save the androids; to, in a sense, become less "mindless" command-oriented robot and more agentic individualized human subject.

The Pods' final existential observations reiterate the supposedly inherent value and superior

agency of individualism. As they begin reassembling the androids at the end of *Automata*, the Pods wonder if, by restoring the androids as they were, with the same memories and personalities, they may simply restart the destructive cycle that preoccupied the game. Yet as one of the Pods conclude, "the possibility of a different future also exists. A future is not given to you. It is something you must take for yourself." Such a statement, which echoes sentiments likewise expressed and embodied by B-12, may seem hopeful in the idea that we may choose to eschew our destructive tendencies of the past and create a new future. However, this statement also reiterates contemporary neoliberal belief that it is worth risking further destruction of the self, the other, and the planet if it means one gets to live life through the venerated concepts of individualistic choice and growth which, more-so than sustaining humanity, sustain capitalism.

Non-player characters (Humanized). Alongside humanized/individualized combat companions, each title features a range of NPCs who strive to emulate or venerate the lost humanity. *Automata*, being a far longer game (around 37 hours), has various detailed examples. For instance, while the player's android-avatars grapple with human emotion and desires to explore human culture, the secondary NPC androids with which they interact likewise undergo such struggles. 2B's operator android, who communicates orders to 2B through her Pod, emulates stereotypes of a young, lovestruck girl, who feels her entire world will end when her crush rejects her. Meanwhile, 9S's operator is presented as a more mature woman, who struggles with loneliness and longs for a family, and repeatedly treats 9S as though he is a child (either her son or younger brother). There are also "twin" androids in the game, Devola and Popola, who are so closely bonded as sisters that they would rather die together than have one live on without the other. Despite being android "models," inferring there are other sets of the twins in existence, the Popola encountered by the player states: "As far as I'm concerned, there's only one Devola. And for her, there's only me. No one can take the other's place." The twins' express individualism in insisting they are unique individuals despite other identical android models, through the very human concept of unique and unbreakable sibling bonds.

The machine-lifeforms the androids fight likewise seek more "human" individual identities and relationships. The player eventually encounters a village of peaceful machines, lead by the pacifist machine Pascal. Pascal reads Nietzsche in his spare time and wants nothing more than to care for young machines and teach them the value of (human) emotions. Other machine lifeforms, neutral and antagonistic alike, show an inherent desire to understand and achieve very human concepts of emotion, family, and consciousness. There is, for example, a machine boss later in the game – pointedly named "Beauvoir" – who is hostile not because she is part of an unconscious machine network, but because she has gone mad in her pursuit of beauty and her failure to win a male machine's affections. Meanwhile, the two main antagonists of the first half of the game encapsulate the machines' desire to understand and replicate humanity. The stereotypically robotic-looking machine lifeforms, encountered by the player in-game, come together to "birth" two machines that look like

androids/humans. Adam, the first of these machines, becomes obsessed with humanity and seeks to understand everything about them. While Adam reflects humanity's obsession with the meaning of and contradictions behind its own existence, his brother Eve reflects humanity's capacity to cave to emotional outbursts. Following Adam's death, Eve flies into a self- and other-destroying rage which nearly ends the machines and androids both.

Stray, being much shorter in length (about 5 hours), still offers various examples of machine memorialization and pursuit of humanity's neoliberal individualism. The game's robots, despite having been created as tools to make human life run more smoothly, have come to view their human creators as ancestors, partially deifying them, partially aspiring to be like them. They adopt human naming and clothing conventions, to the best of their abilities, as well as human value systems, including organization into family units for some (e.g., Doc and his "son," Seamus), imitating human jobs (e.g., hairdressers, tailors, DJs, bartenders), and even the creation of their own food culture. Of this latter cultural adoption, B-12 observes, "[the robots'] original design didn't have a digestive system. Maybe they somehow evolved by mimicking humans? Do you think I should try some of it? I do not want to be disrespectful of their ways." The robots, here, carry on contemporary iterations of neoliberal human culture, values, and concepts of love and community, revering humanity in the process and showing them gratitude for their creation by making human ways their nonhuman ways. As in *Automata*, this adoption of humanity's neoliberal individualism makes NPCs more sympathetic, engaging, and worthy of companionship to the player as nonhuman identity tourist. That humanized/individualized nonhuman NPCs are "good" and worthy of aid by the player's nonhuman-avatar is made narratively explicit, in that each game asks the player to save these humanized NPCs, at the expense of dehumanized NPCs/enemies.

Enemies (Dehumanized). While many NPCs are humanized in both games, including various antagonists and bosses from *Automata*, each game also features many nonhuman enemies who only ever function just as that: narratively mindless enemy units for the player and their nonhuman avatars to evade or destroy. Notably, the nonhumans in each game which are presented simply as enemies are all inferred as having lost or as never having had self-awareness. For example, it is the humanization of Pascal and other machine-lifeforms in *Automata* that convinces the player, androids, and Pods of the futility of the war and the potential for interspecies nonhuman-companionship among androids and machines. Yet this potential for a ceasefire to the war is complicated by a dehumanizing virus that infects androids and machines alike, robbing them of their self-awareness and neoliberal individualization and rendering them part of a hivemind-like network, which strives to erase their individuality and assimilate all remaining nonhuman individuals into itself.

The loss of individuality here is presented as worse than death, as seen when the player's first avatar, 2B, asks the player's future avatar, A2, to kill her after she has been infected by the virus. 2B would rather die than lose this version of herself to the virus. This choice is framed as narratively correct when 2B is later rewarded for her sacrifice, with the resur-

rection of herself as individual, all memories intact, by the individualized Pods. Notable as well is that the virus is ultimately defeated when the Pods download into the virus' system a "self-evolution program," which causes the virus to fracture into separate, combative consciousnesses and destroy each other/itself. This progression is relevant to the game's very neoliberal capitalist triumph of individuality, in that it infers individualism is an evolution of the self, and that by extension human self-consciousness is superior to a supposed lack of self-consciousness in other, nonhuman entities. *Automata*, here, suggests it is *individuality –* how humanity defines and venerates individuality under neoliberal capitalism – that is worth fighting, destroying, and dying for, rather than life itself.

Stray puts forth a similar view of neoliberal human exceptionalism, through the veneration of human self-consciousness, by virtue of its two main enemy types. First, we have the Zurks, who the player discovers grew out of human experiments on bacteria designed to consume garbage. The Zurks evolved and seem to operate as one entity, chasing anything on which they can feed, and moving in large swarms. The Zurks as hivemind is further cemented when the player, later in game, discovers a strange fleshy bacterium covering the tunnels beneath the city. In some places this growth even sprouts giant eyeballs, which blink and watch the *Stray*. B-12 observes of this phenomenon, "This substance grows in all places where there are Zurks. [...] It seems to pulse as though alive. Do you think we're inside a giant organism?". B-12 goes on to highlight how this concept of a giant organism, made from and potentially controlling the Zurks, is a type of nonhuman lifeform not to be extended companionship but to be treated as unnatural, horrifying, and abject, when he remarks, "It's... frame-chilling."

Stray's positioning of the Zurks as nonhuman lifeforms incapable of individualization and therefore worthy of destruction by "conscious" nonhumans recalls a point made by Zylinska (2012), who asks why discussions of nonhuman companionship and humanity's alleged responsibility towards other lifeforms seem so often to revolve around "[w]hat does my pet want?" without also considering "[a]nd what if a bacteria responded?" (p. 221). Indeed, when we consider the interspecies benefits of human and nonhuman companionship, we ought to question why we value certain types of nonhumans "worthy" of companionship and others dispensable, repulsive, and inferior. The cat and the AI as worthy companions and the bacteria as trash-disposal turned enemy, that must be eradicated, maintains a very neoliberal capitalist hierarchy of what lifeforms are valuable to the human-centric world. The Zurks are humanity's mistake because they feed off conscious lifeforms, whereas the "companion" robots, also created by humans, are worth protecting and defending against and at the expense of the Zurks because they have evolved into human-like consciousness. The bacteria, like the virus, when mutated to disrupt capitalist human order, becomes a nonhuman entity that must be destroyed rather than protected.

We see this preference for human consciousness and capitalist order at play as well in *Stray*'s Sentinels. Not only have the Sentinels not acquired neoliberal individuality, but they

threaten the robots who have, and additionally inconvenience the human player and its companions. At one point, while fleeing from the Sentinels, the *Stray* and B-12 come across a robot "corpse" which is not in fact dead, but which has instead been stripped of its individual consciousness by the Sentinels as punishment for transgressing the city's rules. Of this companion shell, B-12 remarks, "[t]hat's what I feared. They have completely erased him. No more emotions, no more self-awareness, no more memories," before turning to the *Stray* and adding, "Please, let's not get caught." The loss of life's *individualized meaning*, in both *Automata* and *Stray*, is narratively framed as being worse than the loss of life itself. Human exceptionalism here dictates who is worth keeping alive and justifies who and what can be exploited or eradicated to preserve humanity's neoliberal capitalist meaning of life and the superior individuality it promises.

Conclusion

Despite their disparate avatars, both *Automata* and *Stray* engage the player in cyborgian play through nonhuman avatars in post-apocalyptic and post-humanity game worlds which recentre human exceptionalism through neoliberal individualism. Such games may allow us to explore what it means to be human, and what it means to be human in relation to non-human life, but they do so as an engaging and persuasive tour of neoliberal capitalist ethics, culture, and individuality. Our nonhuman avatars are put in peril because of humanity's attachment to capitalism, but also derive meaning from their struggles, build strong inter-personal and interspecies bonds, and collectively grow past that peril, because they follow in humanity's neoliberal footsteps. In each of these games, and games which likewise afford post-humanity play of the nonhuman, capitalism continues to loom large in how it makes, breaks, and provides the tools for nonhumans to remake the world and themselves within it – a remaking which produces a nonhuman subject suspiciously akin to neoliberalism's venerated image of the ideal capitalist human subject.

While both *Automata* and *Stray* provide valuable, reflective play of humanity and identity, they do so without questioning why we readily accept human-centric individualism as more valuable than life itself. If we are to engage nonhuman companions as avatars, a posthuman game design which challenges both capitalism and the Anthropocene might consider how we narratively and mechanically encourage value judgments on different ways of life. The vilifying of nonhumans portrayed as hiveminds or as lacking individuality (e.g., *Automata*'s virus; *Stray*'s Zurks and Sentinels), who additionally hold the power of de-individualization, recalls ideological fearmongering from the Cold War onwards, in which capitalism presents not only communism but other ideological alternatives as inevitably leading to authoritarianism and loss of one's most cherished (and marketable) individuality. To be clear, this paper does not argue that individuality itself is bad for society. The issue is capitalism's death grip on how individuality is constructed and maintained in much of the global North today, alongside neoliberal rationale's ability to convince us that we must eschew equality, equity, and community when it gets in the way of individuality-sustaining competition. *Automata*,

Stray, and other videogames which offer nonhuman avatars, hold the post-humanity potential to explore worlds in which human players do not have to fear the loss of their individuality at the hands of a collective of lifeforms who exist in less- or non-individuated states. That these games instead adhere to anti-collective conflicts indicates not a cyborgian play free of capitalism's power dynamics, but game design still deeply enmeshed in neoliberal capitalism.

These nonhuman tours we take privilege us human players by continuing to elevate neoliberal individuality as something inherently worth emulating and preserving, even beyond the existence of humanity itself, and even despite the fact it is humanity who is intent on assuring the end to our – and the planet's – sustainable existence through neoliberal capitalism (Nixon, 2011). Yet these tours of the post-humanity post-apocalypse, taken as surviving nonhumans who thrive by following the "best" inclinations of humanity, assure us that no matter how much humans consume, abuse, and destroy each other, nonhumans, and ecosystems, the post-Anthropocene could play out as not only surviving humanity but as memorializing our more "positive" impacts on the world. We get to play here with futures in which something *does* survive the capitalist Anthropocene, where there is indeed the promise of a "post-," an "after" – a post-humanity, post-Anthropocene, post-apocalypse – rather than an impending future which aborts a "post-" through humanity's capitalist-driven pursuit of environmental and interspecies oblivion. In other words, our nonhuman tours allow us to play out the hopeful possibility of *Stray* androids, *Stray* robots, and *Stray* cats finding each other and recovering from the Anthropocene. Yet this recovery is undertaken through narrative and mechanical design which inevitably justifies the capitalist Anthropocene and sanitizes – for the human tourist – the reality that our exploitative human exceptionalism may mean there will not be a post- for any of us; human, nonhuman, or cyborg.

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