Eternal sunshine and the "Gestaltized" mind: the broken promise of the post-human in NieR Replicant ver.1.22474487139

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Abstract

Taking the 2021 remaster of the action role-playing game NieR Replicant *as its object of study, this article asks how* NieR*'s story and characters simultaneously enact the fantasies of a posthumanist futurism beyond apocalypse and, in their very reflexivity, exposes those fantasies as an impossibility.* NieR Replicant ver.1.22 *places at the forefront of its strange post-apocalypse a series of posthumanist queries that challenge the binaries between the human and the non-human, the natural and the artificial, and the physical and the virtual. By drawing upon Rosi Braidotti's formulation of critical posthumanism, I explore how the story of* NieR*, particularly in its depictions of Shades and Replicants and the fact that these strange beings live, fight, and die beneath a sun that never sets, appears at first to accord with the "estrangement and a radical repositioning" that contours Braidotti's thesis (2013, pp. 88-89). Additionally, I consider how the tidal-locked Earth and the perpetual sunlight as key heliotropic signifiers—what Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues are conceptual constellations related to the "fully enlightened earth" (2011, p. 241)— frame how* NieR*'s Replicant bodies and broken cities, lost souls, and immobile suns offer a case study of the potential of failure within video games to reckon with transformative modes of resilience and redress within apocalyptic scenarios, to ends and by means that could cultivate posthumanist modes of community and kinship even under the specter of extinction.*

I. "Snow in summer:" Introduction

The year is 2053.

Author Biography

Kaitlin Moore is an Assistant Professor of English at Wake Forest University, specializing in Indigenous studies, the environmental humanities, ecopoetics, science and literature, and new media and game studies. Moore's research and teaching consider how the concept of cosmology, activated within multimodal literary productions, can illuminate the complex interplays between human cultures, entangled ecologies, and the broader cosmos. They have published widely on Indigenous studies, ecopoetics, literary engagements with diverse cosmologies, and game studies. Beyond the classroom, they are an acclaimed amateur astro-photographer; their space photography has been featured by LiveScience, Space.com, and the Overture Center for the Arts, among other venues.

Snow falls, ash-like, over the city ruins, a concrete carcass the color and texture of bleached bones. A highway overpass, folded by some immense force into accordion pleats, acts as a selvage at the edges of the city block, preventing escape. High-rises lean haphazardly against each other, windowless and pockmarked with craters. The skeletal chassis of cars lay crushed under the overpass or beached upon the sidewalks.

The street terminates at what was once a grocery store, plate-glass gone and shelves empty but, unlike the rest of the city, not wholly abandoned: a little girl named Yonah and her older brother, Nier, huddle for warmth in the lee of the aisles. In the midst of the freezing, ash-choked devastation, Yonah and Nier are to each other hope and salvation and love, but the former is critically ill, and the latter is running out of food and medicine and, ever more perilously, time.

NieR Replicant ver.1.22474487139 (2021, Square Enix; hereafter referred to as *NieR* or *NieR Replicant*), directed by Saki Ito and Yoko Taro, is unflinching in its depiction of two children suffering in the wake of a great calamity. Making matters far worse for Yonah and Nier, the shelter is besieged by Shades, hostile creatures of shadow and energy—"Monsters," affirms Yonah. With the help of a mysterious grimoire, a book that grants its reader magical abilities, Nier succeeds in driving off the Shades, but not before Yonah appears to succumb to her illness, leaving her devastated brother to scream, unheard, into the desolation, until...

The game jumps forward in time 1,412 years.

Nier and Yonah now live at the edge of a humble agrarian village. Beyond the village, wide fields of green grass and gorse stretch to the base of the mountains, the hillsides dotted with boulders and peopled by herds of feral sheep and goats. Only a handful of traces remain of the long-ago disaster: the ruins dotting the verdant plains, those of rust-blistered factories and stone aqueducts; the ubiquitous Shades; and, perhaps most strangely, the perpetual daylight of a Planet Earth now tidal-locked, the sun neither rising nor setting.

The story and characters of *NieR Replicant* place at the forefront of this strange post-apocalypse a series of posthumanist critiques that trouble the distinctions between the human and the non-human, the natural and the artificial, and the physical and the virtual. There is a wealth of scholarly work that explores how video games and interactive technologies influence the basic reference points for human and posthuman identity as well as the emergence of new and fluid forms of embodiment and autonomy facilitated by gaming software and hardware, the "transitivity of agency" (Ruffino, 2018, pg. 38).[1] The present article follows from the work of scholars like O'Riordan and Boulter, whose respective analyses concern both various posthuman characters across multiple video game titles as well as the "parables of posthuman subjectivity" emergent from the interface between gaming, the game object, and the player, the latter proposal also taken up by Solberg in the next section (Boulter, 2015, pg. 15). Additionally, both O'Riordan and Braidotti, the former from the field of game studies and the later within analytic posthumanism, dovetail in their considerations of subjectivity as an iterative process conditional upon both technologically-mediated embodiment and the fluid parameters between virtual and physical space.

The aim of this article is threefold: first, to draw upon Rosi Braidotti's formulation of critical posthumanism to read how the story of *NieR*, particularly in its depictions of Shades and Replicants and the fact that these strange beings live, fight, and die beneath a sun that never sets, appears at first to accord with the "estrangement and a radical repositioning" that contours Braidotti's thesis (2013, pp. 88-89). Next, I will take the tidal-locked Earth and the perpetual sunlight as key heliotropic signifiers—what Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues are conceptual constellations related to the "fully enlightened earth" (2011, p. 241)—to negotiate how the premise of Project Gestalt, responsible for the creation of Shades and Replicants, reaffirms the technologically-mediated hierarchization and dualistic humanism against which rails Braidotti's posthumanist thought. Finally, I want to reframe the affective stakes of Project Gestalt's breakdown to examine how its failure, rather than being an irrevocable cause for despair and defeat, can instead create radical opportunities for posthumanist modes of community and kinship.

II. "Gods bound by rules:" Ludonarration in the *NieR* universe

The opening cinematic of *NieR* takes place fifty years after a series of unprecedented global crises. In 2003, a dimensional rift caused Earth's axial rotation to stall, rendering the planet tidal-locked with the sun; strange particulate matter rained through the rift, triggering the outbreak of a fatal disease called White Chlorination Syndrome. World powers attempted, to no avail, to first partition then nuke ground zero of the contagion. Rather than killing those already infected, however, uptake and retention of the particle vector by nuclear fallout spread the disease all over the world. Desperate, a united front of Earth governments-initiated Project Gestalt, whose aim was to isolate the soul, a Gestalt, and later introduce it to an immune host body, called a Replicant. However, the Replicants developed sentience and self-determination independent of their corresponding Gestalts, imperiling the reunification

and jeopardizing Project Gestalt.

The most significant revelation of the game comes when Nier learns that the Shades whom he blames for his sister's illness, whom he (and therefore the player) has been ruthlessly slaughtering, are in fact the shattered, howling remnants of the Gestalts: a human race on the brink of extinction. The Nier and Yonah from the opening cinematic are the original humans. The Nier and Yonah living 1,412 years in the future are instead their Replicant copies (Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011). All characters in the game, both NPCs and playable, named ones, are revealed to be Replicants, each possessing their own emergent sentience. This extends to Nier, who, despite having many of the same motivations and personality traits as the Nier from the prologue, is an entirely distinct individual with his own individual consciousness.

The narrative of *NieR Replicant* reckons with a tension between the premise and the consequences of Project Gestalt, arguably the watershed event in the NieR universe. This article will trace this tension across the game's estranging entities, environments, reference frames, and even the game itself.

A domain where posthumanist philosophy might enter into play, quite literally, is in the ludic structure of *NieR* itself, within the subsystems and conditional statements that constitute the underlying structure of the game system, most notably in *NieR*'s multiple endings. This is not a wholly new avenue of investigation: games and digital culture scholar Ragnhild Solberg, for example, notes how the multiple endings in *NieR:Automata*, *NieR*'s sequel, exploit humor and incongruity as a means of challenging the humanist fantasy of absolute control and autonomy so often exalted by the ludic mechanics of video games. For example, the ending caused by removing one's operating system chip from the character inventory, in full awareness of the fact that the characters in question *are androids*, exhibits a player-character-ludic system "interrogating itself, and in that, the traditionally imagined boundaries between player, digital game system, fictional environment, narrative, and whatever else we want to separate by lines of demarcation are shown to be permeable" (Solberg, 2021).

While possessing a mere five alternative endings in contrast to *NieR:Automata*'s 26, *NieR*'s timeline realizes a posthumanist interpretation of the player-game interface similar to that mapped by Solberg within the context of Automata. NieR's five different endings are as follows: in Ending A, Replicant Nier kills his own Shade/Gestalt, is reunited with Yonah, and returns to his village. In Ending B, Replicant Nier appears to kill his Shade/Gestalt, but after the act the player is catapulted back to the abandoned grocery store, watching the original Nier and Yonah relive their trauma endlessly. In Ending C, Nier's companion Kainé transforms into a Shade, forcing Nier to fight her. Ending C gives Nier the choice of either killing Kainé or sacrificing his own life to save her, the latter of which leads to Ending D. If Nier chooses to sacrifice himself, *the player's save data is also erased*. In the final Ending, E, three years after Nier defeats his Shade/Gestalt, and sacrifices himself for Kainé, Kainé destroys

the entire Project Gestalt and Replicant database system, in effect dooming humanity to extinction, before recovering Nier and, consequently, the player's save data.

Braidotti defines the "critical posthuman subject" as a "relational subject *constituted in and by multiplicity* [emphasis added]" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 49). By this token, the multiple endings of *NieR* present a timeline mediated by posthumanist multiplicity, a series of dynamic and complex narrative processes where each subsequent "conclusion" to the game builds upon the previous one, overwriting the sequence of events from the perspective of multiple characters. The narrative palimpsest works to decenter Nier's own (and thus the player's own) frame of reference. While unlocking endings A and B requires replaying the game from the beginning, endings C and D stack upon their predecessors, creating a narrative structure constituted by multiple perspectival orientations that nonetheless cleave to an ostensibly linear and causative storytelling sequence. However, endings D and E exist in a probabilistic field of potentiality and possibility: Nier and the player's save data, the indelible evidence of the player's presence and impact in this world, both do and do not exist, realizing a narrative in a quantum state of superposition.

The dynamic plurality of endings D and E in particular have the effect of not only disrupting the stratification of endings A-C but also inviting a radical renegotiation of the agency traditionally attributed to the player within the virtual world. The ability for players to overwrite, reload, and accumulate save files underscores the control they possess over the game world. Save files allow for the player to iteratively rectify their errors, revising actions repeatedly until they are content with the outcomes (Moran, 2010). Therefore, the loss of the game's save data on the occasion of Nier's death further emphasizes the permeability Solberg intuits between the game's ludic subsystems, the characters, and the players themselves, a posthumanist gesture "where boundaries between agents are permeable and technical devices are cognitive partners" (2021). While the decision to lose save data is left to the player's discretion, the very fact of our being able to commit this act of self-sacrifice *retroactively* undermines the player's control over the game space. As Moran intimates, without the save data, players cannot replay boss battles to gain experience points, farm for collectibles and items, complete side quests, or revisit any part of the narrative. In sacrificing Nier, we not only destroy the fictional character for all future play, but we also destabilize our own orientation to the game object.

The loss of the player's save data in Ending D of *NieR* accords with what Braidotti terms a critical posthumanism that "requires and is enhanced by *the rejection of self-centered individualism* [emphasis added]" (2013, p. 48). Ending D calls upon the player to sacrifice time, labor, agency, and ultimately, their sense of self: "deleting the save file is as close we get to deleting the player... the player that game cultures have presented for decades, the player that is the master, in control" (Solberg, 2021). *NieR* incorporates and actualizes the perspectives of multiple characters in a manner that is, after Braidotti, simultaneous "and without contradiction" (2013, p. 195). Speaking to the ability of video games in particular to hold "sever-

al positions... in tension," Kate O'Riordan complicates the differentiation between subject (player) and object (fictional character) by arguing that the player, the actively played game object, and the playable character are involved in "a process of interaction," a "transference" that *NieR* actualizes through its opaque differentiation between Nier and the player vis-à-vis the vulnerable save data (2001, pg. 235). But rather than resulting in conflict or paradox, this simultaneity has the consequence of opening towards the configuration of a dynamic, fluid, and eminently posthumanist storytelling mode.

III. "Dispossession:" Asymptotic-apocalypse and a defamiliarizing sun

Much like the superpositive narrative structure, rife with palimpsestic overwriting and radical rejections of player agency, *NieR*'s story and setting thrive on subversion: a conversation between producer Yosuke Saito and director Yoko Taro notes how "[Yoko] put all those different genres into Nier to destroy the concept of preexisting genre limitations" (Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011). From the outset, *NieR*'s opening cinematic traffics in touchstones of apocalypse, a series of signifiers through which the player affectively encounters the catastrophic end of civilization: nuclear winter causing snowfall in high summer, a ruined city, barren store shelves, a little girl wounded and dying, "elements used as shorthand for disaster" (Butler, 2020). *NieR*'s first ten minutes anticipate a particular type of gameplay, with scavenging and violence as the driving engines of the drama. Scrounging food and medicine for a critically ill Yonah and using one's arsenal of weapons and magical powers to keep the Shades from storming the convenience store combine the conventions of a third-person shooter survival game with the mechanics of tower defense.

Suddenly, however, *NieR* subverts the player's generic and narrative expectations with a time skip whose agrarian setting and sunny climate, while never quite losing sight of the danger the Shades and Yonah's illness portend for the protagonist, is a sight far removed from the ruined city. The time skip leaves the player with the impression of having borne witness to a small parcel of humanity whose ancestors survived the nuclear holocaust and who, millennia later, are managing modest but relatively peaceful lives in the aftermath of the disease and war-torn world. The player soon learns that this pastoral tranquility, while a marked contrast to the opening cinematic of ruined cities and dying children, is not indicative of the pastness of apocalypse, but rather its heretofore asymptotically deferred culmination. "People say the world is dying," Nier narrates. He continues, "Populations continue to fall, while plague and disease run rampant. If that wasn't enough, monsters called Shades now roam the land as well, threatening our very lives."

One of the more peculiar and significant indications of Nier's world having experienced and, indeed, continuing to experience the repercussions of the calamity culminating in Project Gestalt is the perpetual daylight. The header text during the sidequest "15 Nightmares" informs the player that the "apocalypse divided the world in two, one that knows not day, and one which has never seen the night." Remarkably, characters seldom acknowledge this

anomaly; a notable exception is when one of the village administrators, Devola, invites Nier to have a drink with her. Nier reminds her that he is not old enough to drink, to which Devola laughs, remarking, "When the sun never sets, what difference does it [age] make?" While none of the games in the *NieR* universe offer any clear insight as to how the dimensional rift, described in *NieR*'s prequel, *Drakengard*, as a "chasm that splits time and space" (Yoko, 2003), caused the sidereal effects experienced in *NieR*, nonetheless the consequence of the event is a gradual slowing of the rotational frequency of the planet, causing it to become tidally locked to its parent star.

Astrophysicists Cody Shakespeare and Jason Steffen describe tidal-locked planets as having "spin rates synchronous with their orbital rate… [creating] a permanent day and night side" (2023, p. 5708). Given the temperature extremes often observed in tidal-locked planets orbiting in close proximity to their stars, the *NieR* developers had the opportunity to leverage tidal locking in their environment design, possibly by creating scorching hot conditions in sunny areas and chilling cold in nocturnal regions. But Nier's village exists in a temperate zone, without the temperature dichotomies associated with the real life tidal locking studied by astronomers and astrophysicists. Since the Shades steer clear of the sun when they can, overcast days may result a slight increase in their numbers and resilience; however, the overall effect is minimal, and the constant daylight doesn't significantly impact gameplay. Moreover, within the game universe, the constant sunlight doesn't affect how Nier and his companions interact with the world, especially when compared to the more immediate threats of disease and Shade attacks. So, what is the true significance of this tidal-locked planet?

Rather than it being an environmental hazard, I argue the perpetual daylight functions chiefly as a solar metaphor, a heliotrope, shedding literal and figurative light on the promises and pitfalls of a posthumanist futurity. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, among others, has argued that "the sun and its emissary rays" (2011, p. 235) have long figured in material and metaphysical reckonings with human and posthuman relationships to nature and technology.[2] A play on the language of illumination as it pertains to "Enlightenment discourse of instrumental rationality" (DeLoughrey, 2011, p. 242) the heliotrope places the sun's deific extensions, the knowledge and comprehension of the cosmos science and rationality enable, squarely within the provinces of human comprehension and control. "Each time that there is the sun," writes Derrida, "metaphor has begun" (1974, p. 53).

The objectives of Project Gestalt, the use of technology to transcend the physical bodies of and thereby save the lives of a select few individuals (something discussed in more detail over the next few sections) accord with Enlightenment thinking. But rather than the heliotrope of a tidal-locked sun vouchsafing the soundness and success of Project Gestalt, enlightenment quite literally realized to extremes, the tidal-locked sun in NieR perhaps best holds with the Derridean formulation of the heliotrope: to wit, a metaphor that buckles under its own weight. According to Derrida, the fact of the sun's capacity for analogization resides in the fact that it is a "sensible" object given to disappearing, moving between "day and night,

visible and invisible, present and absent" (p. 52). But Nier's world has no night: the sensibility of the heliotrope has been rendered brilliant and bright to the point of disfiguration, like an overexposed photograph.

NieR's sun—never dimming, never setting—has the effect of estranging the player from otherwise familiar environments whilst simultaneously illuminating the manner in which the Shades and the Replicants, these "transversal, relational nomadic assemblages," constitute radically posthumanist relational subjects (Braidotti, 2016, p. 103). After Derrida, the heliotrope obscures—in *NieR*'s case, through defamiliarization. The day-night cycle, something atavistically familiar to the player, has been suspended. Consequently, conceptions of sidereal time as measured by the apparent motion of the Earth against the distant stars lacks any frame of reference. Tidal-locked planets have no seasonal variations, and as a result, Nier's agrarian village lacks the seasonal cues typically linked to major temporal milestones such as planting and harvesting (Shakespeare and Steffen, 2023, p. 5716).

Braidotti proposes that an essential initial action to "pave[ing] the way for creative alternatives" in the critical posthumanist project requires relinquishing familiar habits of representation, which include normative conceptions of time as linear and causal and space as vectorized and compartmentalized (2013, p. 89). The game is on several occasions self-aware of and self-indulgent in its own efforts at defamiliarization. As well as the estrangement evidenced by the generic and ludic subversions of the gameplay and in addition to the planetary and solar anomalies, the narrative zeroes in on particular locations as sites for engaging in exercises in alienation. For example, in the Forest of Myth, Nier shares a dream with a villager wherein they visit a cluster of sculptures: "Each sculpture was formed from roughly the same shape—a tall rectangle that stretched up toward the sky... Miracles of artistry were everywhere. Great iron crates with wheels sat silent on steel rails. Beautifully carved works with lights of red, amber, and green dangled over every street." While the player might identify in Nier's description the shapes of skyscrapers, cars, and traffic lights, when filtered through Nier's perspective, a commonplace twenty-first century city takes on the character of an avant-garde work of art, with Nier, in-game, being "unable to find a theme or purpose to the abstract works." This defamiliarization is especially ironic given that, in the opening cinematic, the player quite clearly remembers Nier *living in a twenty-first century city*. The player is not the only one to make the connection: one character muses, "I am positive I have seen that place [the city] before," while the mayor of the Forest of Myth notes to Nier: "Long ago, I saw a version of you that was not yourself"—foreshadowing the revelation that the Nier of 2053 and the Nier of the far future are, perhaps, not the same person. Rather than gaslight the player into questioning their own memory or perception, the defamiliarizing incongruity opens towards a posthumanist consideration of a narrative populated by multiple Niers, multiple protagonists, and multiple subjectivities, prompting the question of what estrangement and dis-identification make possible as regards the potential for alternative life forms and kinship arrangements.

IV. "The Wretched Automatons:" Gestalts/Shades and Replicants

According to Braidotti, "de-familiarization *shifts the relationship to the nonhuman others* [emphasis added] and requires disidentification from century-old habits of anthropocentric thought" (2013, p. 168). Populating *NieR*'s estranging asymptotic apocalypse, with a sun arrested in the sky and a spacetime staggered across singularity and infinity, are two groups of creatures who thoroughly unsettle traditional criteria for human delineation: the Replicants and the Shades, or the Gestalts. The Gestalts appear at first to be deeply engaged in what Braidotti terms the "ontological categorical divides" between the human and the nonhuman (p. 68), not only reinforcing the normative binary of in-group versus out-group, but replicating the video game trope of generic, monstrous NPC that the player is expected to hunt and kill. Termed "Shades" in the English-language version of the game, and "Monsters" (or "マモ ノ") in the original Japanese, the Gestalts/Shades are from the game's outset portrayed as instantiations of "anomaly, deviance, monstrosity and bestiality" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 68). They stalk Yonah at the grocery store, and later prey on Nier's village. Of course, only after several long hours of Nier and the player both treating the Shades as mindless monsters hellbent on destruction are they revealed to be the last vestiges of *Homo sapiens*, the products of Project Gestalt and a last-ditch attempt to survive White Chlorination Syndrome.[3]

The revelation compels a retrospective reexamination of the behaviors of the Shades, one which evidences complex motivations and sophisticated subjectivities. Considering the central conceit at the heart of the *NieR* storyline—a separation of human minds and bodies— scholars like Rachael Hutchinson might contend that Japanese bioethics primes the player, from the outset, to be suspicious of the pervasive dehumanization of and revulsion towards the Shades. As Hutchinson explains in her bioethical readings of various game franchises, in Japan, particularly within the Shinto faith, brain death is not widely regarded as a criterion of human death (Hutchinson, 2019, p. 170). The disgust shown by Nier and his fellow villagers towards the Shades due to the latter's lack of higher cognitive function aligns with the "abhorrence" and "anxiety" Hutchinson notes among many Japanese video game players when encountering characters in comas or persistent vegetative states, the "ultimate indignity" (p. 170). At the same time, Nier's uncompromising assertion, even to the point of indiscriminate violence, that the Shades are "not people" is in direct conflict with the Shinto belief in the animacy and personhood of the deceased. This detail signals to the player that the Shades may well be sophisticated, nuanced people in their own regard, a possibility to which Nier's hatred and trauma have blinded him.

Noteworthy in a posthumanist interpretation of the Shades/Gestalts, and key to understanding their sophisticated frameworks of consciousness, are their multiplicity of forms and the complexity of their kin-making practices. Some Shades, like Louise, appear anatomically indistinct from the Replicants. Others possess or inhabit other objects rather than assume forms all their own: the twin Shades Hansel and Gretel possess suits of armor while the Shade Shahriyar animates a matrix of sandstone cubes. The young Shade Kalil, meanwhile,

acts through the robot P-33. Some Shades resemble animals: a Shade named Goose re-
sembles a giant boar, and his porcine appearance belies the fact that he is a hive entity, an
"extended self" born from the fusion of multiple Gestalts (Braidotti, 2013, p. 65). Yet others
resist classification or description: the Shade Hook is lizard-like in appearance, but with
mammary sacs on his throat and a fifth hand on the end of his tail.

Gestalts who are humanoid in appearance are, therefore, the exception rather than the rule.
But not all Gestalts in *NieR* come from humans: Roc the wolf is perhaps the most uncon-
ventional Shade. While Goose and Hook, despite their animal appearances, are hive entities
comprised of multiple human Gestalts, akin to a fungal mycorrhizal network, Roc is *the
Gestalt of a dog*. During the implementation of Project Gestalt, Roc underwent the Gestalt
process in place of his human owner, whom Roc regarded as his "father" (Grimoire Nier
Companion Project, 2011). Due to his fond memories of his owner, Roc at first attempts
to avoid conflict with the humanoid Replicants, an effort complicated when the Replicants
destroy Roc's home and begin to kill members of his pack.

Roc is the only example of a nonhuman Gestalt, and unlike many "relapsed" Shades who are
incapable of conversing with Replicants, Roc is both capable of communication and in pos-
session of cognitive faculties that surpass those of many other Shades as well as a majority of
Replicants. As will be discussed more in the next section, the premise of Project Gestalt sug-
gests that the process of Gestaltization works only on humans—"in which souls are removed
from human bodies" (Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011). Therefore, the Shade Roc
stages a neo-Derridean challenge to the dichotomy that distinguishes humans from other
animals species on the foundation of the latter's capacity for complex thought or language
(Derrida, 2008, pp. 27-28). Derrida suggests, after Jeremy Bentham, that in vulnerability and
anguish reside our ability to empathize with animals (2008, pp. 27-28). Therefore, Roc's loss
of his father, his body, his pack, his home, and finally his life constitutes what Camille Nurka
terms a "rejection of stable dichotomous arrangements of man/woman, human/animal," a
rejection conditional upon suffering (Nurka, 2015, p. 216).

The novel configurations of the Shades/Gestalts as well as their complex forms of kin-mak-
ing realize an enormous diversity of posthuman forms that transverse categories of gender
and species and shape, troubling the impermeable perimeters of individual bodies and up-
setting the dialectical position of the monolithic, monstrous "other" to which the game had
seemingly consigned them. The colony Shades like Goose are especially provocative for their
capacity to enact Donna Haraway's "gently defamiliarizing" conception of "kinds-as-assem-
blages" (2016, pp. 102-103), cultivating kinship not through direct contact with other individ-
uals but by radically dissolving the very perimeters of the individual. Beings like Goose exist
fluidly and dynamically with the similarly deliquesced entities that comprise their intercon-
nected bodies.

Nier learns the truth about the Gestalts/Shades when Devola and Popola, the overseers of

Project Gestalt, reveal to Nier that he is himself not a human, but a Replicant. The Replicants are artificial humans genetically engineered with immunity to the White Chlorination Syndrome and possessed of the same biological functions as their human templates (Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011). The Replicants at first blush appear to map onto the technical other critiqued by Braidotti—quite literally the reduction of "humans to the status of manufactured": detailed in Marxist critiques of dehumanization realized through "profit-driven technologically mediated objects" (2013, pp. 105-107). The Replicants are engineered by the administrators of Project Gestalt to resemble their human counterparts in every detail, only without sentience, self-will, and subjectivity, in order that they might one day act as pliant, passive hosts for the disembodied Gestalts. In an interview, NieR's principal writer Yoko Taro describes the Replicants as *yorishiro* (依り代), empty vessels positioned to harbor a spirit entity (Yoko Taro qtd. in Grimoire Nier Companion project, 2011).

Complications in Project Gestalt emerge when, contrary to all expectations, the Replicants defy their programming. "For reasons unknown—Yoko offers only that 'nothing really went according to plan'"(Yoko Taro qtd. in Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011)—the Replicants evolved consciousnesses entirely independent of those of their Gestalts. Crucially, the Replicants don't simply replicate or mimic their human counterparts; instead, they evolve into autonomous entities with entirely original personalities and memories, thus making *NieR Replicant* one of many titles in Japanese popular media that, in the words of Hutchinson, "questions the 'soulless' nature of engineered cyborgs based on human organic material" (2019, 152). The scale and degree of the Replicants' posthumanist "dislocation" (Nurka, 2015, p. 210) from their human templates are perhaps best evidenced by the Replicant Kainé. One of Nier's companions, Kainé is an intersex swordswoman with an extremely guarded, abrasive personality. She is forced to fuse with a Shade named Tyrann after she suffers a life-threatening injury. Kainé's human template is, in marked contrast, an endosex woman and wealthy society newcomer (Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011). In asserting her own subjectivity quite literally "post-the-human" version of herself, Replicant Kainé's existence realizes a profoundly queer posthumanist condition, two strains of critical thought that, according to scholars such as Camille Nurka (2015) and Bo Ruberg (2022), are intimately entangled in resisting gender binaries as defining preconditions to the anthropocentric metaphysics and modes of thought against which Braidotti orients her posthumanist critique.

Queerness is intimately interwoven into the world of *NieR*; I am deeply enamored of Trevor Richardson's description of *NieR* as "a messy story of a foul-mouthed intersex swordswoman; a gay skeletal mage whose kindness outpaces his fear; a condescending, yet caring talking book; a man who would give everything for them; and the family they would give the world to protect" (2017). However, Replicant Kainé's queerness includes but also transcends her intersex body: Kainé's hybridity—a Replicant body fused with a Shade consciousness—negotiates fluid slippages between beings embodied and disembodied and Replicant/Gestalt relationality. Moreover, the porous borders where Kainé ends and Tyrann begins is contin-

uously in flux. Throughout the game, the player notes the emergence and disappearance of Tyrann's shadowy appendages whenever Kainé uses magic, and during "Kainé's Dreams," a four-part collection of memory fragments found during the second playthrough of *NieR*, the player learns that Kainé's left arm and leg are in fact Tyrann's, with the Shade "hanging out in this piece of meat you [Kainé] call a heart."

Kainé is a case of the "subject as a dynamic non-unitary entity" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 164) making explicit a queer posthuman relationality between scientific and technological production. In other words, between the cloned Replicants and the kin-making, assemblage-building Shades, subject to the technological processes of Replicantization and Gestaltization, respectively (Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011). Kainé discloses the structure of Replicant bodies as open and dynamic natural-technological-cultural entities (Braidotti, 2013, p. 164). Therefore, NieR's deeply estranging planetary and cosmological ecologies, its not-quite-apocalypse, hyper-illuminates what at first appear to be two entirely distinct interpretations of the posthumanist condition, two means of "envision[ing] other, non-human ways of being because the human world as we know is quickly coming to an end" (Ruberg, 2022, p. 418). These two interpretations are, I argue, mutually entangled assemblages realized through continuous processes of reconstitution and reconfiguration.

V. "Song of the Ancients:" Heliotropic checks on a posthumanist fantasy, and Kainé's final battle

Yet, while *NieR* revels in subverting gaming norms and frames a narrative foregrounding characters and creatures who seemingly embody posthuman ideals, the watershed moment of the *NieR* universe, Project Gestalt, defies the posthumanist project in one key respect. In brief, the mechanisms behind Gestaltization reinforce ideas of dualistic, transcendent humanism in a manner as extreme as a solar metaphor sketched by a never-setting sun. The heliotrope of the tidal-locked Earth renders in sharp relief the manner in which Project Gestalt not only fails to live up to the full potential of a fully "post-anthropocentric posthumanism" (Braidotti, 2016, p. 92) but in fact reinscribes, vis-à-vis technological apparatuses, the idea of transcendental consciousnesses in dialectical opposition to which Braidotti positions her post-anthropocentric posthumanist thesis.

As previously alluded to in the case of the Shade Roc, the administrators of Project Gestalt intended the process of Gestaltization to be applicable only to human beings, capitalizing on the idea that, as explained by *NieR* lead writer Yoko Taro, a "person's mentality dwells in a *yorishiro* [empty vessel]" (Yoko Taro qtd. in Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011). In this regard, Project Gestalt revolves around a dualistic understanding of mind and body as differentiated entities, an obvious rearticulation of Descartes' mind-body distinction. This dualism, in the *NieR* universe, is attributable to both humans and animals (Roc), but the parameters of Project Gestalt intimate that human beings are alone guaranteed their Gestalt's longevity and self-sustainability on the occasion of being separated from their bodies.

Despite the fact that the triggering event of the dimensional rift caused a planetary tidal-lock, which influenced incalculable numbers of animal species as well as photosynthesizing plant species, including the bacteria and algae that convert bicarbonates into organic molecules, and despite the fact that the atomic weapons intended to eliminate the carriers of White Chlorination Syndrome cause a prolonged nuclear winter, further jeopardizing the stability of numerous planetary ecosystems, at no juncture do the administrators of Project Gestalt consider the preservation of anything or anyone else save *Homo sapiens* (Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011).

Further, at Project Gestalt's inception, only the extraordinarily wealthy can afford to undergo Gestaltization—Nier and Yonah undergo Gestaltization purely by happenstance, triggered by their interaction with a key piece of technology (the Grimoire) soon after the events of the game's prologue. Restricting access to the procedure, billed as the exclusive means of averting human extinction, to the super rich significantly divides and deteriorates socioeconomic relations (Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011). The administrators Project Gestalt over-invest in exclusion and extermination over mitigation, a policy evident not only in the capital poured into the Gestaltization process, but in their refusal to allocate resources to find cures for White Chlorination Syndrome, preferring instead to use the military to eliminate the afflicted. Project Gestalt realizes a self-reflexive technological imaginary in which the human capacity to damage the environment and other humans, and the human capacity to manage, restrict, and sell back to the privileged few the mechanisms necessary to overcome the damage, legitimate one another. Gestaltization, organized around capital and exclusion as much as survivance, removes sentient Gestalts from human bodies, allows the bodies to die, and reinserts the Gestalts into passive Replicant hosts, thus propagating (select members of) the human species. More, in terms of its broader philosophical implications, Project Gestalt suggests that the category of agential humanity turns upon the exclusion of the sick, the poor, the racialized, and other historically marginalized groups. Under the hyper-illumination of the sun, the watershed moment that opens towards the possibility building ostensibly posthuman assemblages of self reinscribes "a systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 26).

What becomes evident after having achieved *NieR Replicant*'s multiple endings, only then having the chance to look back at the game holistically, is a disjunction between the core mechanics of the game object itself and the story to which such mechanics facilitate access. As detailed by Solberg and others, *NieR Replicant* radically blurs the distinction between physical and virtual play spaces, allowing for novel forms of embodiment in which the subjectivity of the player is redistributed during gameplay into a fluid entanglement of human and digital agents. The game's multiple, superpositive endings, including one that results in the deletion of the player's save data—interpreted as a symbolic erasure of the player themselves—presents a profoundly subversive, radically decentralized understanding of the human player as an active agent respective to the digital space. In this regard, *NieR Replicant*

provides an exceptionally compelling case study for reconsidering the anthropocentric biases that are often assumed to underpin the ludic nature of gaming. NieR offers the chance to delve into the posthuman possibilities of video games within the player and game interface, a point of contact often overshadowed by the prevailing narrative of the capacity of video games "to offer players agency and to place humans in control" (Ruberg, 2022, p. 415) one which prefigures the human player as the sole source of dictatorial power, with the digital apparatuses merely supporting and facilitating the player's decision-making. In the company of such titles as *Undertale, Doki Doki Literature Club!*, and *The Stanley Parable, NieR Replicant* invites scholars to consider the posthuman potential innate in play mechanics built upon frameworks in which, in the words of Ruberg, "dominant norms are upended, control is relinquished, agency becomes unknowable" (2022, p. 428).

This is to say that the paradoxical subversion of *NieR Replicant*'s own posthumanist argument is primarily rooted in its narrative rather than its gameplay. The racism, ableism, and class hierarchization innate in Project Gestalt, particularly in light of its branding as the only means of preventing human extinction, illuminates in perpetual daylight a vision of the posthuman born from a technologically-mediated transcendental vision of the human subject framed and sustained by what Mel Y. Chen terms a desire to "eugenically 'better' the population" (2012, p. 134). Therefore, given the exclusionary rhetorics and mechanisms of hierarchization unpinning Project Gestalt, the possibilities that emerge following the breakdown of Project Gestalt—the Shades's dynamic colony behavior and the Replicants' iterative processes of auto-poesis—may offer sites for crafting more expansive frameworks for negotiating personhood. Liberated from the boundaries of humanity established by the authoritarian, eugenics-influenced doctrines of Project Gestalt, radical networks of relationality and kin-making become key to realizing a posthumanist subjectivity utterly divorced from anthropocentrism.

However, *NieR Replicant* portrays the downfall of Project Gestalt and the consequent extinction of humanity as intensely disturbing affirmations of failure. In Ending E, upon Kainé's discovery of the Project Gestalt and Replicant database system, the final overseer deems the world of Replicants and Gestalts "a failure" and triggers the program to forcibly merge them all, thereby completing Project Gestalt. Kainé defeats the overseer and destroys the recombination program; she is so determined to save Nier (who was erased in Ending D), as well as her memories, her friendships, and her own auto-poetic subjectivity, that she affirms over and over again during the battle: "I must, I must, I must get it back! I'll get it back no matter what price I have to pay!" Then, "I get to do whatever I want with my own life!" In one respect, Kainé's battle serves as an affirmation that only in the aftermath of Project Gestalt's collapse can her own queer posthumanist hybrid body find sanctuary, love, and validation, and it is solely through the bonds she has forged with her Replicant companions that this validation can be consistently vouchsafed. On the other hand, the narrative stakes of the game affectively frame the failure of Project Gestalt not as a site of posthumanist possibility for beings like Kainé, but rather as an indictment of Kainé's apparent self-centeredness given

the consequences of her actions. Interviews with the developers of the Nier franchise frame Kainé's decision as "tragic" (Grimoire Nier Companion Project, 2011). While the writers stop just short of outright condemning Kainé's actions, the pervasive sense of failure forwarded by Ending E endures into the game's sequel, *NieR:Automata*, whose devastating plot twist regarding the function of the android protagonists hinges entirely on the horror of humanity's extinction some ten thousand years prior.

As this article has detailed, the Gestaltization procedure was not "successful" according to the parameters established by Project Gestalt. Instead of the narrative recognizing these errors as potential avenues for realizing alternative modes of living and community formation in a deeply estranging apocalypse, *NieR* depicts extinction as zero-sum game. The game portrays the diverse, fluid assemblages practiced by the Shades/Gestalts and Replicants as incompatible with survival, rather than as innovative and radical means of building resilience in a world where, at last, queer bodies, entangled bodies, other-than-human bodies may know joy and companionship. Rather than suggest that the posthumanist promise of *NieR Replicant*'s asymptotic-apocalypse is irrevocably foreclosed by the premise of Project Gestalt, I want to invoke the work of scholars such as Bo Ruberg and Jack Halberstam and entertain an affective shift in the manner in which *NieR Replicant* frames extinction as failure.

While Trevor Richardson observes that Kainé's actions, her arguably selfish yearning for queer posthumanist belonging, can "be read as inherently threatening to the survival of all of humanity" (2017), it is essential to recognize that, from the very beginning, the parameters of Project Gestalt were conditional upon abjection, on the purposeful refusal to account for "*all of humanity* [emphasis added]" (Richardson, 2017). Apocalyptic video games like *NieR* bear the potential for portraying failure—for example, the extinction of (a select few of) humanity—as evidence of having dismantled racist, hierarchical, and classist structures like those behind Project Gestalt, structures that otherwise would have prevented the Shades and Replicants from ever asserting their own posthumanist subjectivity. Ruberg, for example, argues for the place of failure as "a spectacular, masochistic mode of resistance that disassembles normative expectations in and out of the game world" (2017, p. 198). Kainé, in particular, embodies (quite literally) the very essence of Halberstam's call "to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate" (2011, p. 110) as a means of challenging deeply rooted biases and binary paradigms, such as those distinguishing Shade and Replicant, masculinity and femininity, animate and inanimate, humanity and non-humanity. In effect, failure may offer a means for video games to reckon with, portray, and negotiate transformative modes of resilience and redress, community and kin-making, within apocalyptic scenarios.

The fraught estrangement of the world and characters of *NieR Replicant* ver.1.22 simultaneously enact the fantasies of a posthumanist futurism beyond apocalypse and, in their very premise, exposes them as impossibilities: heliotropic enlightenment illuminating its own failure. But in the infinite curvature allowed by failure, an asymptotic slide towards apoca-

lypse, the Shades and the Replicants become the architects of radical possibilities for fostering heretofore unimaginable and powerfully defiant forms of kinship and love, instantiating a manner of posthumanist necropolitics. Ultimately, the posthumanist potential of Project Gestalt resides in its own brokenness, its disassemblages, its failures. Where, in the rubble, beneath the unblinking eye of the sun, the product, and the promise, of one such failure may proclaim: "I get to do whatever I want with my own life."

Endnotes

1   See O'Riordan (2001), Boulter (2015), Ruffino (2018), Ruberg (2022), and others.

2   See Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), Derrida (1974) Banco 2016, DeLoughrey (2009), (2011), (2019), Diamanti (2020) and others.

3   There are actually two distinct contagions in the game: the White Chlorination Syndrome, and the Black Scrawl, which Replicants (including Yonah) contract following the destruction of their corresponding Gestalts. Given that the fundamental combat imperative of the game centers on killing Shades, the very Gestalts in question, the implications are staggering. The revelation forces the player to consider the likelihood that in cutting through hordes of Shades in an effort to heal Yonah, Nier is dooming countless other Replicants to the very same contagion.

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