NieR (De)Automata: Defamiliarization and the Poetic Revolution of *NieR: Automata*

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ABSTRACT

This paper employs the 2017 game *NieR: Automata* as a case study to explore how Russian Formalist poetics, particularly the concept of "defamiliarization," can operate as a mode of subversion in games. By focusing on the technical devices available to the genre, and the unique ways those devices can be manipulated and subverted for "poetic" effect, this paper also demonstrates how defamiliarization challenges the boundaries that attempt to define the genre's textual and narrative capabilities, and in doing so, promotes its ongoing evolution. As such, this framework is innately useful to the field of digital game study, as it diverges from the common practice of searching for concrete definitions of the genre, and instead focuses on the generative analysis of its formal elements, and the mutable potential of what games can achieve.

Keywords

Defamiliarization, Russian Formalism, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, "form-content correlation"

INTRODUCTION

When we think of subversion and violence in video games, we are perhaps contemplating one of the most controversial and well-discussed aspects of the industry. Especially today, with revitalized attempts to link school shootings and virtual playtime, it may seem difficult to imagine that video game violence could accomplish anything artistic or generative. Yet, if we reinvent our understanding of "violence," we can see how video game subversion can also beget a different kind of violence—one that constructs a game not as a mindless killing simulation, but a digital playground for the poetic.

The call for collaboration between digital game study and poetics is not a unique one, though scholars often carve out niche areas within the poetological sphere, and many have focused on defining a separate, digital poetics altogether. The impetus for this seems to be a perceived need to separate from the humanities by emphasizing the technological, scientific elements of digital games research, but these technical elements— as well as the need to analyze how they operate—are exactly what solidifies the genre's place within the realm of poetics. This claim coincides with the work of Holger Pötzsch, who asserts that Russian Formalist poetics in particular, with an emphasis on their concept of defamiliarization, is an innately useful theoretical basis for game study (2017).

The Russian Formalists were a group of literary scholars who began their work in the early 20th century, however, their interest in literature itself was secondary. Instead, they were chiefly concerned with "literariness" (Tomashevsky 2012, 84), a phenomenon they sought to understand by identifying the formal elements of a text as the building blocks of genre, and analyzing how they could be manipulated for poetic or "literary" effect. This act of subversion, which I will refer to as "defamiliarization" or "deautomatization," is a kind of poetic violence against the boundaries of convention, and both the

mechanism by which genres evolve and the driving force behind what creates poetic language itself. The definition of "poetic" in this case is not "the language of poetry," but language that has been foregrounded, "laid bare" (Tomashevsky 2012, 86), or arranged in such a way that makes the reader conscious of it. For example, when the poet Carl Sandburg describes how "The fog comes / on little cat feet" he suggests an unorthodox way of visualizing the fog (like a cat). This forces the reader to pause and confront the unfamiliarity of what was previously familiar (the fog), and in doing so, gain a new, revitalized understanding of it and its movement. If this image is used to the point of becoming familiar, then the poet must create new defamiliarized language to take its place. Thus we can conceptualize this as a cycle of three interlinking phenomena: defamiliarization of the device, a slowing down on the part of the reader, and a resulting renewal of perception. This is the mechanic by which not only poetry, but the boundaries of what poetry "is" as a genre, is subjected to constant mutation.

All mediums undergo this process; the devices unique to a poem or video game might differ, but they are both subject to these two levels of defamiliarization: first, in the unorthodox usage of basic linguistic or visual elements, and second, in how those defamiliarized elements encourage a structural reimagining of the genre they belong to. Although Pötzsch is primarily concerned with exploring this process of poetic subversion as a lens for game study, he disagrees with popular opinion on the manner in which it operates. While David Myers claims that the physical controls in a game are poetic in that the player must have a prerequisite "literacy" of gaming skill to access its content, Pötzsch aptly discerns that they instead serve as "specific devices that can be employed in a 'poetic' or in a 'natural' manner," thus serving as agents of "poetic experiences of enstrangement" (2017). In other words, knowledge of movement mechanics may parallel literacy, but the mechanics themselves serve as the potential "little cat feet" which create literariness. Once Pötzsch establishes this insightful foundation, however, he leaves the opportunity for close reading up to consequent scholarship, and so my own project will take up this endeavor. Yet, given that my study uses exclusively early Russian Formalist thought, I must establish one divergence between Pötzsch's framework and my own.

Although Pötzsch cites scholarship which claims that Viktor Shklovsky's early work was "not concerned with the ideological implications of the [literary] device" (2017), the issue is not so straightforward. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, nationalistic propaganda dominated the arts and media, and by calling for a revolution of genre, the Formalists were covertly suggesting that Russians challenge their perception of the government and the media it proliferated. Pötzsch points out the "paradox" of Shklovsky's 1917 seemingly apolitical essay "Art as Technique," which references the distinctly political uses of defamiliarization in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*—but the contradiction dissolves when we consider that Shklovsky was filtering his politics through Tolstoy in order to avoid the wrath of the Marxist regime. Though this may seem like a minor issue, the innate politicality of Shklovsky's work is essential to my project, as I believe that this ideological tightrope is similar to the one navigated by game director Yoko Taro.[1]

For years, Yoko's work has been defined by the constant need to subvert expectations and reimagine the boundaries of the video game genre—however, like the Formalists, he must curtail his subversive content in the interest of maintaining a continued ability to make and distribute such content. Furthermore, the stakes are similarly higher than simply producing books or games as entertainment. In a 2014 presentation, Yoko suggested that "As with film and novels, slices of culture that have matured, perhaps we're also entering a blind alley." In other words, the language of video games has become automatized, limited by what he termed an "invisible wall" (2014) that the industry has constructed between the standardized conventions of the medium and their full potential. Still, games remain relatively in their infancy, making them, as Mikhail Bahktin observed of the similarly developing novel, "as yet uncompleted…The generic skeleton…is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities" (2000, 3). It is this ossifying "generic skeleton" that Yoko seems concerned with, thus making his interest in defamiliarization about more than just innovative gameplay, but also the pursuit of those many plastic

possibilities, and by extension, a crusade for the welfare of the genre. In 2017, he took this battle to the AAA market in the form of *NieR: Automata*, in which he not only experiments with the kinds of fundamental defamiliarization made possible by the medium, but uses the overall structure and narrative to guide the player through the circular process of defamiliarization and its constant, regenerative revolutions.

THE FOG COMES ON LITTLE ANDROID FEET: THE DEVICES AT WORK

The game, set ten thousand years in the future, follows two elite "YoRHa" androids, the female attack model 2B and the male "scanner" 9S, as they fight a war to reclaim the Earth for their human masters, who have retreated to the moon. Their enemies are "machine lifeforms" who have been sent by an invading alien army. However, after encountering machines who are as intelligent and complexly emotional as they are, the two androids begin to question the purpose of the war and the legitimacy of the Council of Humanity. Their self-questioning comes to a head as they discover that not only are the aliens long extinct, but so are the humans, who manufactured the YoRHa units to serve only as disposable morale boosters within a meaningless, perpetual cycle of war.

Already we see narrative themes of cyclicality and political subversion, but given our Russian Formalist lens, we must begin with the most pervasive aspects of game design, the basic "devices" that form the building blocks of the digital game genre. Because of their standardization, these elements are the perfect opportunity to demonstrate subversion, as Jan Mukarovsky points out that, "The more the norm of the standard is stabilized in a given language, the more varied can be its violation, and therefore the more possibilities for poetry in that language" (1967, 18). As such, if combat mechanics and camera perspective are included in the standard "language" of games, we can see multiple "violations" within *Automata*'s prologue alone: the gameplay style shifts between the "bullet-hell" flight unit sequences and the "hack and slash" of ground combat, though these meld together in moments and continue to independently cycle through top-down, side-scrolling, and three-dimensional perspectives. Many critics have seen this as simply a feat of clever level design, an end in and of itself, but as Pötzsch would suggest, these design choices serve as an introduction to the game's poetic "impeded language" (Shklovsky 2012, 22) of video game elements. The player is not only prevented from becoming comfortable with any one style, but also forced to contemplate their expectations for the genre as it evolves during the half hour act. Later sequences feature these style shifts as well, but it is no coincidence that the "opening" of the game, along with its accompanying track "Alien Manifestation"—which can be translated from the Japanese more literally as "that which is unfamiliar is here"—shifts between them so quickly. These elements are some of the most palpable to the wider video game audience, and so the game purposefully begins with a crash-course on how defamiliarization is meant to operate.

These are, of course, not the only kinds of changes in perspective. When the game shifts from 2B to 9S' point of view between sections "A" and "B," the player is given both a new set of combat mechanics and a new narrative framework, as 9S' ability to "hear" the machines' thoughts allows the player to see even the most monstrous of them in a new, sympathetic light. However, though these moments have received much attention, their technical counterparts have been largely underemphasized. Before the player controls 9S, they are given over to Friedrich, a small machine who is retrieving oil in order to revive his clearly irreparable "brother." Despite the fact that the player has been killing machines like Friedrich until this point, the switch from the agile, lightning-fast 2B to the slow, shuffling robot fosters a sympathy for his helplessness, which deepens into an empathetic frustration when, burdened by the bucket, the player inevitably trips over one of the seemingly inconspicuous pipes that litter the ground. The walk back to the oil spout is painstakingly long, forcing the player to slow down and languish in the experience of Friedrich's unfamiliar body.

Although this sequence has no narrative purpose, it's placement at the beginning of section B is essential. Sections A and B are temporally parallel, identical save for the points in the story when 2B and 9S are separated, and yet the inclusion of Friedreich's point of view—along with the insight offered by 9S' Scanner

abilities—challenges what the player believes is true and alerts them to the fact that although the narrative itself is unchanged, the frame of perception with which they should interpret that narrative "cannot continue," in the words of the machines themselves. This, in turn, happens almost completely on the level of the device and the player's interaction with those devices, thus demonstrating how the unique building blocks of the genre can create new, unexpected synergy between mechanics and narration.

This synergy also addresses the function of *Automata*'s other elements, particularly those related to the UI (User Interface). Many of the standard elements of the video game genre are laid bare by the way the game blends their purpose with the rules of the narrative world; for example, when the player saves their game at a YoRHa console, this action is compounded with the androids' need to backup a copy of their consciousness to the Bunker's server. Upon the player's death, the character reemerges from the last console that they saved at, not as though nothing has happened, but with the understanding that the saved "data" has been downloaded into a new, identical body placed there by YoRHa suppliers. These are rather simple ways of incorporating the elements of the genre into the world itself, though other features involve more complicated layers. In many games, the system of upgrades or abilities operate on an extratextual level visible only to the player, but in *Automata*, upgrades exist as "chips" that the characters are aware of and consciously install in the limited space of their hard drives. The player can also "uninstall" UI elements such as the mini-map and health bars, thus foregrounding those elements as not the inert "parts of the game" that we take for granted, but as functional devices that simultaneously distinguish the game genre and do the narrative work of allowing the player to see the world through the eyes of a YoRHa unit. Furthermore, the player can also uninstall the "OS chip," which instantly kills whichever android they are controlling. The technical function of the chip seems to be that it keeps the character alive, though "being alive" is hardly considered a device in the way that a mini-map would be. In this way, by incorporating intra- and metatextual devices into one unified element, the game demonstrates how the boundaries between the player, game mechanics, and narrative—the reader, device, and text—are highly permeable.

We can also think of these moments as defamiliarization fueled by an erosion of what Boris Eichenbaum called the "correlation of form-content" (2002, 9). The Formalists were frustrated by a perceived underemphasis of the device when compared to the content, or a focus on *what* the work is communicating, rather than *the means by which* it is communicating. The answer, they believed, was to free themselves "from the conception of form as an outer cover or as a vessel into which a liquid (the content) is poured" (Eichenbaum 2002, 10)—the idea that the medium of a work serves only as a receptacle for its discursive function. Perhaps the most evocative moment in which the player sees this breakdown at work is during a kind of narrative breakdown, when 2B is infected with a virus and staggers off towards her impending death. There is no need for exposition to communicate the story of her decline: as the "percentage" of "virus contamination" rises, the UI elements are foregrounded once again as the processes of her android body: the display turns monochromatic, the health bar and mini-map become static, her movement becomes increasingly limited, and finally, all audio elements become unintelligible. The UI elements create narrative without narration, delving even deeper than the empathy created while controlling the similarly limited Friedrich. The player does not simply witness her death, but experiences it through a reciprocal cooperation of form and content.

We can also see instances when the UI is used to achieve even more complex modes of defamiliarization. Although the player generally takes the function of the side quest at face value, many of the quests in *Automata* are specifically designed to exploit and subvert the player's expectation. Take for example "Treasure Hunt at the Castle," a quest given to the player by a small, unassuming machine. The player guides 2B and 9S towards the map marker that indicates the location of the "treasure" and kills the guardian at the door, only to find the moss-covered body of the Forest Kingdom's former machine king. The treasure is not money or weapons, but a letter from the denizens of the forest praising the generosity of the king whose grave the player has just defiled and whose faithful crypt-keeper they have just murdered. When the player returns to the first machine, he expresses hatred for the forest's inhabitants and praises the androids

for fulfilling his true quest: "Thanks again for making all them guys extra dead." On the narrative level, the machine has fooled the androids into dispensing his own twisted violence, but the *player* has been tricked by the UI which calls the quest a "treasure hunt," and promises a set of flashy upgrades. This sort of bait and switch happens many times, creating a relationship in which the game design itself collaborates with the NPCs to exact these moments of violence or revenge, and leaves the player to question the reliability of both of the NPCs they encounter, and the menus and information archives that they would normally treat as extratextual material. Like the mini-map and even the use of color, the player is reminded that these elements are not fixed objects, but lenses through which to see how the characters' perceive the world, as well as mutable devices to consider in their own right.

Of course, a crucial aspect of defamiliarization is that it ceases to function if used invariably, and so *Automata* features a few purposefully heartwarming quests that fulfil the conventional need to be heroic or helpful. When the player retrieves medicine for a machine who has dedicated his life to caring for the local animals, the emotional impact is more profound, further amplified by the accompanying song "Voice of No Return" (Studio MONACA 2017). Not only are the soft, French-sounding lyrics heard in only one other track, "Peaceful Sleep," evoking the sense of safety that permeates the Resistance Camp, but attentive players will note that, simply put, the theme isn't used very often. As such, despite the fact that these "uplifting" quests and their signature theme would otherwise be considered the standard function of the side-quest, their infrequency within the work make them defamiliarized in their own right, so that players might re-appreciate the artfulness and impact of what has been automatized—a chance to rediscover, as Shklovsky termed it, that which makes "the stone *stony*" (2012, 12).

The poignant use of "Voice of No Return" is only a minor application of *Automata*'s soundtrack—though music is used to manipulate audience responses in many mediums, its use in *Automata* is unique in that it actively engages with defamiliarization on both the technical and thematic levels. On the first level, the music enacts a kind of defamiliarization of itself, with most tracks switching between "dynamic," "medium," "quiet," and "8-bit" arrangements throughout the game in order to revitalize and encourage new perspectives on certain areas and groups of characters. For example, the track "Wretched Weaponry" (in itself strange due to its combination of industrial anvil-banging and soaring vocals) is used in its "dynamic" form when 2B heroically fights her way through the abandoned factory, but used in its "quiet" version after the mass suicide of Kierkegaard's followers in the same location. Not only does this create a melancholy call-and-response with the dynamic track, reflecting the sudden emptiness of the factory, but it also alters the player's experience of the dynamic version during subsequent playthroughs, imbuing the heroic orchestration with an echo of impending death.

The most common question amongst players, however, concerns which languages the tracks are sung in. According to lyricist Emi Evans, who also provides vocals for much of the soundtrack, each song is sung in what she collectively calls "chaos language," developed through a process of "taking a specific language, respectfully manipulating it, and then aging it a few thousand years" (2010). The idea is not simply to create nonsense words, but to manipulate and deautomatize speech patterns so that they not only sound vaguely familiar to anyone who has ever heard spoken English, German, French, or Gaelic, but also universally alien, as the songs in chaotic "English" or "German" focus on common phonetic patterns rather than meaningful words. Perhaps the visceral response that players and critics have had to these tracks can be best explained by Eichenbaum, who expands on Shklovsky's observation that "words are a human need even apart from meaning." He dubs these meaningless words "transrational language" (2002, 9), citing their euphonic qualities that convey "the pleasure [of] poetry" (2002, 10). As such, we see that even language that has been subjected to 10,000 years of evolution is both unfamiliar and perfectly comprehensible; for as much as we no longer understand its meaning, the emotions it communicates are rather clear. Language is just one more system of mutation; the words may change, but their poetic cadences are so natural that even these mechanical androids can take part in the sacred glossolalia, the "special dance of the organs of speech" (2002, 10).

THE DEATH OF YOKO TARO: DEFAMILIARIZATION IN AN AUTHORIAL VACUUM

This is not to say that any of these devices are singularly unique: the *Metal Gear Solid* series (Konami 1998-2015) is frequently known to make creative use of the console hardware; *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015) features self-referential cycles of replayability; and in *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games 2012), the player must retrace their steps at the end of a level to create a lingering contemplation of their own violence. However, while these devices are used to experiment with player immersion, or as commentaries on simulated violence and morality, the technical elements in *Automata* serve a greater function of not only unsettling the player's expectations, but challenging the player to create new interpretive frameworks in the space vacated by those expectations. Shklovsky writes that a main function of art, through the use of defamiliarization, is "not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object" (2012, 18), and Yoko has similarly commented that the work of a game designer should not be to "impose their ideas on players" but only to "make them think" (2018). To this end, both the game's devices and narrative work towards building a textual environment in which his authorship has been revoked, thus allowing the player to explore the vacuum left by his withdrawal (and perhaps even calling into question the extent to which the "author" or "director" role functions).

Though *Automata*'s "endings" receive a great deal of attention, I have found no discussion of the game's unusual use of title cards, despite how they provide structural indicators for the game's "death of the author." The first appears after the sequence with Friedrich at the beginning of section B, while second appears directly after the Bunker, YoRHa's base of operations and home to the power structure that "authors" 2B and 9S' identities, is destroyed. The former, as I have already suggested, marks the first moment in which the player is called to free themselves from the authorial frameworks that obstruct unique interpretations of the game, while the latter establishes a narrative death of the author, as the characters are finally given the freedom to make meaning for themselves. Not only do both of these moments give the player authority in the face of authorial disempowerment, but they also (in tandem with the game's ultimately cyclical structure) gesture towards how defamiliarization requires a continuous cycle of beginnings, and by extension, adhere to none of the twenty-six "endings." As such, without a definitive beginning, end, or even canon, death comes for Yoko Taro first, then YoRHa, leaving both the player and the androids to their own (literal) devices.

There are, of course, many other moments which enact an erasure of author and origin: the player never learns the meaning of the acronym "YoRHa," and the identity of the "Ancients" in the franchise's continuously rearranged "Song of the Ancients" remains a mystery. Even the cause of humanity's demise is cloudy—within the narrative, their extinction is due to the original game's titular character being literally erased from existence, which mirrors the fact that, metatextually, the obscurity of *NieR: Replicant/Gestalt* (Cavia 2010) leaves the reason unclear to many players who are new to Yoko's work. The game also demonstrates a literal erasure of authorial intent during the story of machine lifeform Simone, whom critics have already thoroughly analyzed concerning her symbolic relationship to real-life author Simone de Beauvoir. This involves the ironic parallel between Simone's pursuit of male affection through ornamentation and de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that a man "desires still more: that his beloved be beautiful," despite the fact that her "corsets [and] hoops" (2010, 211) are a form of subjugation. Yet, a crucial line from Simone's backstory remains overlooked. "But what is 'beauty?'" she asks. "After researching the old world, I finally learned the truth." Simone is not simply a clever reference; according to her memories, she has interacted with *The Second Sex* as a textual artifact and grossly misinterpreted it in the absence of an authorial context. Of course, this is meaningless to not only her and the lifeforms she cannibalizes, but also to the player who must contend with the consequences of her madness. In this way, familiarity with de Beauvoir's work does not reveal any particular "answer" to how these scenes should be interpreted; instead, players are given permission to read the text of *Automata* any way they see fit, and to make their own meaning in the strange, defamiliarized space that the author has unmistakably vacated.

THE "TRAGEDY" OF *NIER: AUTOMATA*: DEFAMILIARIZATION AND STRUCTURE

This cycle of defamiliarization and renewal culminates in the overall structure of the game, which is divided into sections A through E, though most players refer to the game as having five main "endings." At the end of section E, when the destroyed androids are pieced back together by their tactical support pods, Pod 042 confirms that the androids have retained their memories and that the "recovered parts [are] of the same design as the previous ones." This prompts Pod 153 to ask, "Won't that simply lead us to the same conclusion as before?" Not necessarily, they conclude. As the player "fights" the final credits, thus literally destroying the authorial power structure, they receive help from other players whose save files are deleted as their "nodes" are obliterated. When this is finished, they are offered the opportunity to sacrifice their save data for the good of someone else, and if they choose to accept, they watch as the game slowly deletes one menu at a time, creating yet another poetic lingering in which the player is given time to contemplate the consequences of their decision.

However, when player's erased data is interpreted through the lens of the Pods' discussion, we clearly see that it is not an end or a form of destruction, but a gateway to a new beginning that challenges the player to discover a new conclusion. This does not mean they can reach a different narrative outcome through branching plotlines, but rather, the cycle is meant as an avenue for players to construct new perceptions of the otherwise static object. Again, the overarching narrative of *Automata* never changes, but the player is instead given small moments in which to alter their interpretation. Does killing the machines in the Amusement Park change the tone of certain scenes? Does playing 9S and A2's section C sequences in a different order change their meaning? *Automata*'s text can as such be thought of as a poem with five stanzas, which, although their words (or android "parts") go unchanged, encourage the vocal reader to enunciate them with different intonations that change the experience of them. Thus, we clearly see how defamiliarization fuels a revitalization of perception on all levels of the game. Fundamental elements such as the UI and controls are defamiliarized in order to challenge the frameworks with which players perceive the game, which features a narrative in which automatons break the frameworks that control their perception of themselves and the world around them. This in turn operates as a metaphor for how the player is also a blindfolded automaton who should become aware of the cognitive frameworks that confine them, and all three of these occur within a structure that encourages the player to begin again and experience those defamiliarized elements in yet another, revitalized framework.

This reading is in itself a redefinition of what has been concluded about the game. For many, *Automata* is a transhumanist manifesto, calling for players to find small moments of meaning and humanity within the tragic cycle of Friedrich Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. Other critics see the cycle as only a nihilistic commentary on the futility of life, as *The Guardian*'s Aevee Bee suggests that "Repetition is the real tragedy of NieR, the final antagonist no one can escape" (2017). And yet, through the poetic lens of defamiliarization and renewal, we understand that this repetition is constructive, and that the "final antagonist" is instead our automatized perception of games and what they can achieve—and by extension, what *humanity* can achieve. This is even alluded to by the machine lifeform Adam, who claims that "the core of humanity is conflict." 2B is outraged by this, though unduly so; conflict is not only the core of humanity, but the most extraordinary part of it—the pressure under which we create poetry, see beauty in strangeness, and call for revolution in the face of monotony. The cycle of life and death that the narrative and structural devices of the game perform—the violent "killing" and "respawning" of our perception—is a demonstration of the generative power of poetry in the hands of humanity, so that the intonation of the once-automatized phrase "glory to mankind" becomes not the stifling, jingoistic mission statement of YoRHa, but a declaration of our striking beauty and potential: "glory, to mankind!"

REVOLT OR PERISH: WHAT POETIC SUBVERSION CAN DO FOR GAMES

This seemingly benign appreciation for poetry is the mechanism that perpetuates Yoko Taro's revolution—in which we reject the stagnant cycle of war between machines and the Council of Humanity, and instead take up arms against automatism within the poetic cycle of defamiliarization and regeneration. Perhaps this

endeavor is an answer to Ian Bogost's article "Video Games Are Better Without Stories," in which he accuses developers of creating games that fail to explore the devices unique to the medium, and in doing so, touches upon nearly all of the cornerstones of Formalist theory. He points out how many games rely on "environmental storytelling" (2017), in which the story is relegated to collectable documents and audio recordings that exist separately from the games' mechanical walking or shooting. In other words, they do not challenge the form-content correlation in the same way that Friedrich's movement or 2B's death does. Those moments in contrast, insofar as they foreground player controls or UI elements, meet Bogost's demand that a game should "use the materials of games to make those materials visible, operable, and beautiful" (2017). This "palpableness" (Eichenbaum 2002, 12) calls attention to the device, thus priming it to be defamiliarized, or in Bogost's words, "taken apart and put back together again unexpectedly" (2017).

Bogost, Yoko, and the Russian Formalists might agree that this unexpected subversion is the strength of the video game genre, however Bogost diverges from the Formalists in his conclusion. For him, defamiliarization seems to suggest that games should focus on their unique ability to aestheticize digital objects and realize their true purpose of "show[ing] players the unseen uses of ordinary materials" (2017). However, according to the Formalists and as demonstrated by *Automata*, the foregrounding of an object's unseen uses—the defamiliarization that reframes elements in "ghastly new ways" (Bogost 2017)—is not an end in itself. Defamiliarization should not be used as a singular device, but a means through which narrative, devices, structure, and metaphor cooperate symbiotically to achieve a unified design. It would, for example, be less impressive if *Automata* was singularly concerned with defamiliarizing devices, or if it told the story of automatons throwing off their programming without the devices or cyclical structure to demonstrate that process. In this way, although it is true that using games to tell stories is an unambitious goal, using game *devices* to tell stories is an ambitious task indeed.

Ultimately, Bogost and the Formalists disagree on the issue of definitions. Scholars are understandably eager to characterize and define the digital games genre, but the value of a poetological lens resides in its emphasis on analyzing mutable boundaries, rather than creating static classifications. Due to the cyclical mechanics of defamiliarization, the poetological question is never one of identification, but of potentiality— never answering what a genre is, but challenging what it *can be*. This generativity lies at the heart of what poetics can offer digital games study, as it underscores the urgency and vibrancy that is already innate in the field and genre.

For this reason, it would also be wrong to suggest that all games must push against generic boundaries; games, like all media, are indispensably valuable forms of entertainment, and furthermore, there can be no defamiliarization without a norm or standard to subvert. However, it is essential that developers continue to experiment with both the narrative and technical aspects of the genre, as it is important for the future of not only video games, but of content itself. According to Eichenbaum, "New form comes about not in order to express new content but in order to replace an old form that has already lost its artistic viability" (2002, 17). Simply, the "video game" has not arisen out of the need to convey any kind of uniquely 21st century content, but from a development of new cultural norms and technological advancements (just like the novel and film) that have allowed a for a new, reinvigorated, and unfamiliar approach to that same narrative material. It is only out of the need to justify the medium—because, as always, "the old, tradition-oriented group generally denies the artistry of the new literary form" (Tomashevsky 2012, 85)—that we suggest there is some untapped content latent in the genre of video games; rather, we can see that the medium's true value lies in its capacity for generative reevaluation. In this way, *NieR: Automata* is a model to follow, not in that we need more Japanese action games about sword-wielding androids, but because we need games to explore and push the boundaries of what makes up their identity as a genre of text, and to constantly question and re-question the potential of the devices available to it.

This curiosity must further extend to all aspects of life, as Shklovsky warns his readers that automatization "devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (2012, 12). By adhering to a single,

static framework of perception, we rob ourselves of our capacity for love, aesthetic appreciation, and even self-preservation, and so this fight for perceptive revitalization must be the only war we should never fear. Yoko Taro even echoes this warning with his game's title: "nier" is the French verb "to deny" or "negate," and so we are called to negate and reject automatization. If we ignore this call for subversion, the constant poetic violence against convention that is instigated by defamiliarization, we are doomed to confinement in the Bunker, YoRHa's monochromatic "Fortress of Lies." But, if we challenge all that we know is true, we can instead become like automatons who have rejected their programming, and have decided to fight back not with swords or hacking abilities, but with an innately human passion and creativity, and the courage to experience the world anew.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The director styles his name "YOKO TARO" in English, with the surname first. Though other articles vary on this issue, I will be referring to him by his surname, "Yoko."