

FMST 001

Critical Approaches to Media



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Introduction

- Melanie Navarro

Video games are ever evolving and changing as technology improves and as society changes both culturally and socially. Games can now tell advanced and complex stories or create huge open worlds that players can explore. Whether the player is given very little choice or all the choice the game allows, video games create a sense of adventure and freedom not seen in other types of media like Television or movies. It is a new frontier to explore the newest games or even going back to old games and create new things! These blog issues go in depth through all the different aspects of Video games, from level design to character characterization to freedom of choice and much more!

In **“Level Design in *Sonic Mania*,” Emma Harding** goes into the depths of *Sonic Mania*. It is seen as many players’ favorite game in the *Sonic* franchise. Its level design is a combination of older levels and brand new levels. This appeals to both the devoted players who have played other *Sonic* games in the past and new players who don’t know anything of the series. These new and old levels include unique gameplay mechanics for all users. It is not just the level design but also momentum and controls that make the levels playable. Emma showcases two videos to illustrate the beautiful 2D graphics, familiar sound effects, and new game mechanics. She also integrates the article “Area of Analysis 3: Formal Elements” by Clara Fernandez-Vara to explain how level design can teach the player how to play the game without explicitly telling them. These aspects amount to how learning the level design can greatly impact the experience of the game for players.

In **Lane’s essay, “*Jedi: Survivor & Starfield*”**, he explains the conflict that game developers face when creating a single-player game and the level of freedom a game should offer. He explores the debate between open-world freedom and playing along a more linear path. When weighing the balance of freedom of choice vs. a linear narrative, he believes it is important to look at the larger story that the game intends to tell as different stories could warrant varying amounts of freedom. He used two different games, *Jedi: Survivor & Starfield*, in his analysis.

Silas’s essay, “Crossing Fanbases: ROM Hacks and *Digimon Nova Red*” analyzes the way video games have been modified by fans in order to make them more accessible. This has created brand new communities by, for example, bringing together two different fanbases; *Pokémon* and *Digimon*. He takes a look at the act of modding, creating a “ROM hack”, and the ethics involved in modifying video games.

Jimmy Nguyen’s blog post “The Player-Game Relationship: *Nier: Automata* and the Metanarrative” performs a close reading of the 2017 Japanese video game *Nier: Automata* (Square Enix), examining the posthuman themes in its narrative that bleed into its meta-references to tell a story. This video game connects players and games, and humans and technology. He first focuses on the structure of the game and the sequence of events from the perspectives of different characters. He also goes into detail about the camera perspectives and gameplay styles and *their* effects on the player. He concludes about *Nier: Automata* that it creates a meta-narrative about the player, who navigates the confusion to make sense of fragmented experiences.

In **“Not Holding The Player’s Hand: *Elden Ring*” Wasay** uses the popular game, *Elden Ring*, as an example of how developers don’t need to guide the player through the game. *Elden Ring* allows the player to get lost in its world. There is minimal guidance, and after a brief tutorial at the very start, the player is dropped in the region of the game known as Limgrave. As a result, *Elden Ring* uses its

open world and in-depth mechanics to emphasize player discovery. This is showcased in almost all aspects of the game, and combined with the very little guidance the player is given, any discoveries made by the player become all the more enjoyable.

Level Design in Sonic Mania

- Emma Harding

Over the years, Sega's popular *Sonic the Hedgehog* franchise has released numerous well-loved games, including *Sonic Adventures 1 and 2* and *Sonic Unleashed*. Between over thirty games, multiple cartoons, and a number of comics, *Sonic* has successfully captured the hearts of many fans since his debut in 1991, but one game in particular reigns supreme when fans are asked what one of the best games in the franchise is—*Sonic Mania*. Released in 2017, *Sonic Mania* is a 2D side-scrolling game that combines levels from previous *Sonic* 2D titles and brand new ones made just for the game. The game starts out as many *Sonic* games do: the main enemy Dr. Eggman has done away with the chaos emeralds, and it's up to Sonic and friends to stop him. The journey to the end, however, isn't a walk in the park—robots that Dr. Eggman has designed are distributed everywhere throughout the levels to make your voyage harder, and the doctor himself awaits you at the end of every level. Gathering rings, chaos emeralds, and experience with the levels will be the keys that will ultimately lead you to victory over Dr. Eggman.

Sonic Mania is widely loved for its incorporation of beloved *Sonic*-specific game mechanics—momentum, good controls, and challenging (but fair) boss fights—but it is also widely loved for its level design. The levels pulled from older titles are presented in almost the exact same way they were thirty or so years ago—which delighted older fans. The newer stages are also enjoyable, as they employ unique gameplay mechanics (examples: getting beamed up to a different part of the level by a satellite in Studiopolis Zone and fighting to break out of ice in Press Garden Zone) as well as stunning graphics and visuals.



Press Garden Zone Act II will have the player breaking out of ice before enemies can do any damage to them.

Many of these levels—both old and new—incorporate different ways to play the level the more you advance in the game. For example, in Flying Battery Zone, you have to make use of the numerous fans that can blow you around the stage. Some of them will help you, such as helping you get to a higher place, but others will be against you, trying to blow you into spikes or enemy bots strewn throughout the level. Learning how to navigate them is key, for they can make movement a bit more difficult by not giving the player as much control over their movement. In Hydrocity Zone, the first half of the level is completely underwater. You have to make use of the air bubbles that show up on occasion in order to keep from drowning, navigate fans that will blow you toward the surface, and be taken in by large bubbles that will keep enemy attacks from hitting you. This level can be especially challenging when playing as Sonic, as unlike the other playable characters in the game, he can't swim. So when playing as Sonic, players need to really pay attention to the lifelines the level gives. The first act of Mirage Saloon Zone, a completely new level unique to *Sonic Mania*, has players fighting enemies whilst simultaneously trying to balance on top of an airplane motored by one of the other characters. Whether players move backwards or forwards determines which way the plane moves—which can be difficult when trying to avoid or attack enemies.

[Sonic Mania - Hydrocity Zone \(All Acts + Boss\) - YouTube](#)

[Sonic Mania: Mirage Saloon Zone Act 1 \(Sonic\) \[1080 HD\] - YouTube](#)

Though these aspects can be daunting at first, the player can quickly get a hold on how the mechanics of these levels work by experimenting with them. In Clara Fernández-Vara's book *Introduction to Game Analysis*, an interview with game designer Anna Anthropy is included that speaks on how certain cues and experimental actions in the beginning of *Super Mario Bros.* can teach the player how to play the game without explicitly telling them. Similarly in *Sonic Mania*, these prompts make an appearance in the beginning of the game and as new mechanics are introduced in later levels. The game starts out with Sonic transported to the notorious Green Hill Zone (the very first level of the very first game) with him facing the right. When the players move to the right, they come across three floating rings. The only way to reach it is to jump, and as a reward for figuring out this simple mechanic, the player is given rings that will help with their health. Not soon after the first few rings are collected, an enemy appears: a small bug-like robot. A well timed jump will ensure the player destroys it or jumps over it without taking any damage, though another option for destroying it is to spin dash into it—this is when the player rolls into a ball and speeds right into the enemy. This isn't an early game mechanic however, so new players may not be aware of it, but it becomes essential later in game for building up momentum to tackle large loop-de-loops and steep hills. Then later on when the player challenges the end boss, visual cues are what tells them when and where to attack: on the first boss level, two metallic balls on a chain will attack the player. One will turn red and grow spikes, indicating that you shouldn't hit it. Instead, go for the one that is still a normal shade of gray. Once you attack it a number of times, one will fall off and you'll have finished the fight once the last ball is destroyed. This is how the rest of the game proceeds, with the players having to experiment with the controls in order to navigate the levels and beat the bosses.

Another aspect of what makes the levels in this game charming to players is their use of speed and momentum. Throughout each level, there are numerous loop-de-loops, hills, and corkscrews for Sonic and his friends to traverse. If the character doesn't gain enough momentum when trying to go up these obstacles, they will slide right back down to the bottom (or fall off if it's a corkscrew, which is especially tragic considering falling off the map costs you a precious life). Gaining momentum to tackle obstacles can make the character go faster, which is a staple of the *Sonic* gameplay experience—but the game often reminds you that speed isn't always key in certain situations. Trying to go fast right out the gate when you start a level can often land you in trouble—once you reach maximum

speed, there's no easy way of stopping, which can be fatal when coming upon the enemy bots. Going at top speed can often make the level hard to see, which also makes patrolling enemies difficult to spot. Running into one without the proper maneuvers will cost you all the rings you managed to collect, which can be especially frustrating if you have a large quantity. Instead of going into the level guns blazing, taking the time to learn the level by replaying it will give the player an idea of the most efficient route to take to finish the stage in the least amount of time. This is when the speed factor of the game reaches its full potential. Many levels within the game have a large map with numerous routes and paths to go about it. Replayng them and discovering alternate routes that get you to the end faster is how you champion the game.

Level replayability also makes an appearance in the special stages hidden throughout the levels. Giant rings are hidden throughout the levels, and when you find and enter one, it will lead you to a special stage where you chase a UFO to get a chaos emerald. These special stages are the only way players can collect all seven chaos emeralds, which are essential for when you need to turn "Super" to defeat the final boss. In these levels, you have to collect blue spheres in order to gain speed and catch the UFO holding the Chaos Emerald before time runs out. These stages can be especially tricky because when you reach the top speed of Mach 3, controls can become slippery and it can become easier to fall off the course or run into obstacles that will subtract from your time if hit. Replayability is essential to developing a strategy to most efficiently get the Chaos Emerald—the UFO always takes the shortest path on the stage, so memorizing its course for the next challenge can greatly help overtake it. Rings are also distributed throughout the stage that will increase your time if collected, but they are often put on the longer path, which can put some distance between you and the UFO. While some players may find not being able to blow right through the stage immediately to be frustrating (especially due to the fact that once you finish the stage—whether you get the emerald or not—you can't enter the ring you were once in again), failing to get the Chaos Emerald can actually come in handy for when you challenge the level again by finding a different ring. Playing the stage over and over gives you the opportunity to memorize the stage and seek out strategies to achieve the goal, such as taking shortcuts, stocking up on rings on the longer routes before seriously pursuing the UFO on the shorter routes, and simply just following the UFO until you can catch up to it. Mastering these levels can make achieving the goal much easier, as well as much more fun for the player.



Special Stages can be tricky at first but will become easier with enough practice.

To make the levels even more re-playable, the game also gives you the option to play as different

characters that each host different abilities—Sonic lets the players reach top speeds, Tails can be used to fly over certain parts of the level, and Knuckles can climb walls and smash through enemies. Knuckles also has slightly different levels specifically for him—the storyline of the game is a bit different when playing as him, and as such some levels are designed to fit his abilities, such as using the spikes on his gloves to climb up a wall leading to a special stage that isn't present when playing as Sonic or Tails. Through the DLC, you can even access two more playable characters Mighty and Ray, and a new Encore Mode that lets you replay altered levels that have undergone a significant difficulty spike. Replaying as different characters can give players the opportunity to explore and master different levels while utilizing the characters' unique skill sets.



Choose from a line of playable characters to best Eggman's robots.

To any casual or inexperienced players, *Sonic Mania* can be a tough game at first. It really makes you work for your reward, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but can be overwhelming during the first playthrough. But with constant replays and taking the time to learn the game mechanics of the different levels, it can quickly become a more enjoyable experience. From my personal perspective, the beginning of the game was indeed quite frustrating and tricky. I lost many lives drowning, falling off the stage, and losing to the end-level boss fights. But with practice from replaying older levels with a new save file when I wanted a break from the zone I was on, the game became one of my all-time favorites rather quickly. The second time around, replaying older levels was a breeze and collecting Chaos Emeralds became less of a hassle—what used to have me pulling my hair out in frustration from so many failures I bested in two or three tries. These aspects amount to how learning the level design can greatly impact the experience of the game for players.

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Jedi: Survivor & Starfield

- Lane McKoy

One of the balancing acts that any game developer must engage with when creating a single-player, role-playing video game within the narrative genre is striking a good balance between telling a compelling story that the player feels engaged with while also giving the player a sense of freedom and control over their actions. People who prefer a lot of freedom in their video games may feel a claustrophobic sense of tight limitations when playing games with a rigid, preset narrative, while players who are used to playing games that follow a more linear path may feel overwhelmed by the amount of choices or disconnected from the story of a game that allows for large amount of freedom. However, when weighing the balance of freedom of choice vs. a linear narrative it is more important to look at the larger story that the game intends to tell. Although it can come down to personal preference, the ways that games choose to execute this freedom or lack of choice can determine how effective or ineffective it is in achieving its desired effect.

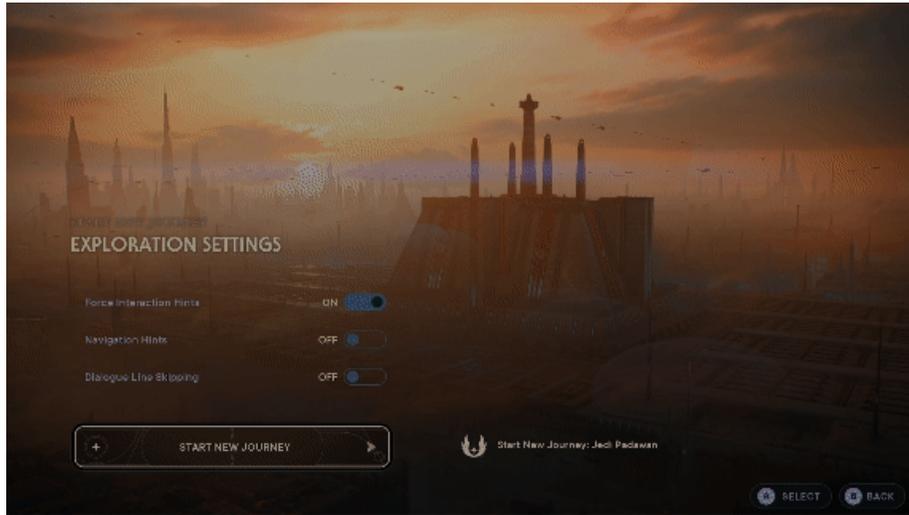
In order to compare and contrast the ways in which video game developers use the elements of their games to either restrict or increase the amount of control that the player has over the narrative (and subsequently the effectiveness of these techniques) I will analyze two games that contain very similar worldbuilding, are both produced by triple-A game studios, and are single-player action RPGs. However, both of these games differ drastically in the amount of choice the player has within the game.

First, some background on both of these games to set up our analysis. *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor* (2023), developed by Respawn Entertainment (*Apex Legends*, *Titanfall*) and published by Electronic Arts (EA), is the sequel to *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* (2019). The game follows the story of Cal Kestis, one of the few survivors of the Jedi Order after they were wiped out when the Empire took control of the galaxy. As Cal travels between planets searching for an ancient artifact that could be the key to finding a place where he and others like him could finally be safe, he reunites with his crew along the way as well as discovering how far he is willing to go to protect those he cares about.

Starfield (2023) was developed by Bethesda Softworks (*Fallout*, *DOOM*, *Skyrim*, *The Elder Scrolls*) and is their first new universe in 25 years. *Starfield* follows the story of an unnamed silent protagonist who discovers a mysterious artifact while working for the Argos Extractors mining company. After touching this artifact, the protagonist experiences strange, unexplainable visions. After a run in with the Crimson Fleet pirate gang, the main character is eventually recruited to a group of explorers called Constellation. With Constellation's resources and a brand new spaceship the protagonist travels the galaxy in hopes of finding answers to the mystery of the strange artifacts. Both of these sci-fi fantasy stories follow a singular main character who explores different planets on a spaceship capable of faster than light travel, however these games take drastically different approaches to the amount of choice the player has in controlling the narrative. Through an analysis of the cutscenes and diegetic integration of gameplay elements and the character customization systems present in the opening scenes of each game, we can evaluate the effectiveness of each's use of control vs. freedom in creating a satisfying, balanced player experience.

The opening/tutorial scenes of any game will always have a special weight to them. An opening scene sets the player's expectations right away for how the rest of the game is going to play out, and how

the non-diegetic elements of the game are incorporated into the diegesis of the game at large. Each game in this analysis begins with a cutscene that introduces the main character, however, the contrast between how they achieve this is remarkable. *Jedi: Survivor*'s opening scene immediately establishes how important it is that the gameplay and the cutscenes flow together well and that the non-diegetic elements of the game are integrated into the player experience. There is even a completely seamless transition between the main menu screen and the first shot of the cutscene, something that blew me away when I first played through the game.



This also establishes the convention of letterboxing in the aspect ratio of the game during the cutscenes to queue the player into the fact that they can sit back and just watch for a moment. From the very beginning we are also introduced to the fact that Cal Kestis is a prisoner in this scene. Somehow, he has been captured, disarmed, and handcuffed. This is a perfect way to start because it allows the game to restrict the players actions temporarily so that they can get used to the controls without it seeming jarring or unexplained (*Skylrim* also starts this way). Once you do get some control over Cal's movement and actions, they are still restricted, but this makes sense within the diegesis of the game because Cal is a prisoner. For example, if you try to walk backwards and slow down the forward progress of the scene, one of the Klatooinian guards will physically force him to keep moving forward.



By limiting the player's control and their ability to choose where they can go, the developers put the

player in Cal's shoes and allow them to connect more deeply with the character and the story as it plays out.

By contrast, *Starfield's* opening scene puts a greater emphasis on practicality and getting straight to the point. *Starfield's* opening cutscene doesn't have any flashy menu-screen transition, but rather the classic Bethesda fade in from black (reminiscent of *Skyrim's* opening cutscene).



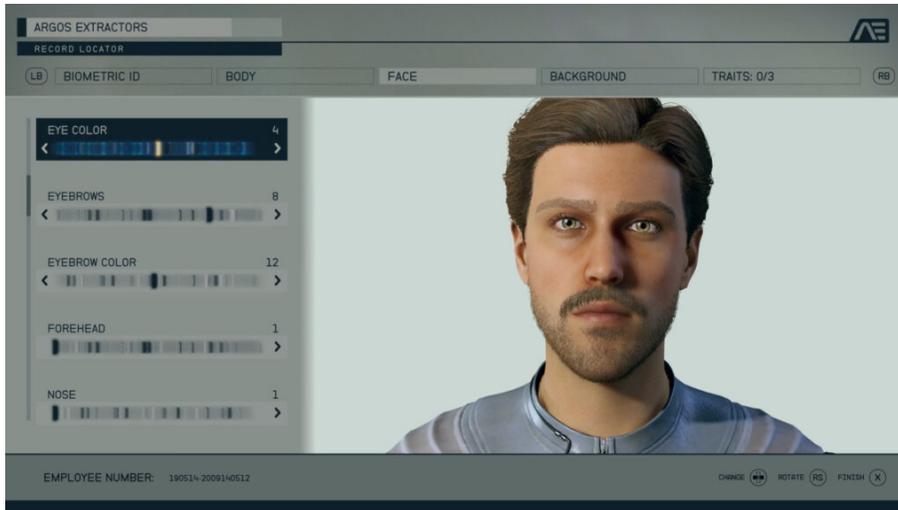
It also very quickly introduces the player to the medium-close up shot that frames nearly every single interaction in the game. It's also important to note that, unlike in *Jedi: Survivor*, *Starfield* starts you out in a first-person view. This is to emphasize the fact that as an unnamed voiceless protagonist you are the character rather than you simply being a player controlling the character. However, there are restrictions still on your ability to look and move around that remain unexplained, a limitation that does not line up with the rest of the game's emphasis on player freedom, although that's not to say that it's non-standard for a tutorial scene of games like this. However, as soon as you leave the mine elevator, you are very quickly given much more control over what you can do than in *Jedi: Survivor*.



No one is forcing you to move forward so you could stay in one spot forever if you wanted. You have

the ability to take objects if you want, mine outcrops of rock, or explore the rest of the cave. The game does still guide you forward to where you are supposed to go, but it does so through more passive means such as dialogue or a slow walkthrough with Lin.

The other aspect that emphasizes the balance between choice and restriction between these two games is character customization. Character customization is a feature that has existed in games since the advent of tabletop roleplaying games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, in which the creation of one's character is an essential part of the experience of the game. *Starfield's* character customization is no exception to this. In *Starfield* you can customize nearly every single aspect of your character's appearance, there are more than 25 different variables that can be changed such as skin tone, eye color, facial scars, body type, walking style, and more. This allows for near infinite combinatory possibilities.



However, besides aesthetic appearance, the player is also given the opportunity to choose a name, pronouns, a background, and even traits about themselves that will directly affect their gameplay, story, and dialogue options in their playthrough. For example, if you select the “bounty hunter” background for your character, it is almost immediately mentioned in the dialogue of the game after you select that option. Your character's pronouns will also be used by other characters in their dialogue options as well. In contrast to this, in *Jedi: Survivor* you can only customize superficial things like Cal's haircut, clothing, or the colors of his droid companion BD-1, this is enough freedom to make the player feel like their experience is personalized, but at the same time it adheres to the fact that Cal himself is a character independent of the player that exists as a fixture of this storyworld.



There are many other formal elements that could be analyzed within these two games to create a much more in depth analysis of the trade offs that developers should consider when balancing the amount of choice or freedom a player has within a game, however these two formal elements are enough to get the idea. The effectiveness ultimately depends on the larger story being told. The most important thing is to not restrict a player's freedom without having a compelling narrative reason or a diegetic explanation for the restriction.

Crossing Fanbases: ROM Hacks and Digimon Nova Red

- Silas Reyes

To create and improve upon inventions is a great part of human nature which lets us not only create something entirely new, but also personalize ideas to fit our specific vision. There is nothing too small or large which can't be changed or improved upon and that includes video games. In this blog post I will first take a look at the act of modding, creating a "ROM hack", and the ethics involved with it. Then, I'll analyze the way these hacks make video games more accessible, fostering an entirely new community, and bridging gaps between two seemingly at war fanbases; *Pokémon* and *Digimon* through the ROM hack *Digimon Nova Red*.

First I'll go over some basic terms which will be used throughout this post.

- **Modding** refers to the modifying or changing of software, hardware, or equipment and in this case, video games, in order to create a personalized result.
- A **Mod** is added or changed content to an existing video game.
- **Dumping** is the act of transferring or copying data from one computer system or file to another.
- **Sprites** are computer graphics, either two dimensional or animated, that play a role in the larger environment
- **NPC** refers to a Non-Playable Character

ROM Hacks

Now I'll define what a ROM hack is; ROM itself stands for Read Only Memory, meaning that users can only read the data already stored on it, and is a form of non-volatile memory meaning that ROM can retain the data without a power source. There are many different types of ROM, some which allow you to make changes to the data and others where it's unchangeable. "Hack" refers to the modification of a ROM file in order to change a certain aspect of the video game. Basically a ROM hack means a video game's files have been dumped onto a cartridge and modded in order to change one or multiple aspects of the game such as dialogue, gameplay, or graphics.

People have been creating ROM hacks for a long time, practically since video games were created, and *Pokémon* ROM hacks in particular have been extremely popular to both create and play since the early *Pokémon* games on the *Gameboy* (1989), *Gameboy Color* (1998), and *Gameboy Advance* (2001) are easy to mod.



ROM hacks are legal in the U.S. so long as the ROM is copied from a pre-owned copy of the video game and then transformed. Let me explain in more detail; mods are a result of, and thrive on, mobile media since they can be played online on computers, laptops, and even phones, thus we can use mods to “examine how lived experiences of social space and time have changed with mobile media technologies” in order to make these video games more accessible (Patti & Mukherjee, 137). Since older *Pokémon* games are available on many devices through ROM hacks, people no longer need to buy a Gameboy or physical copy of the game to play it (which retail around \$150 and \$20 respectively).

However, there are some downsides to making video games accessible through ROM hacks. First, they change the original social space of playing older *Pokémon* games since people would form connections with others who also had handheld consoles (such as Gameboys). With ROM hacks the original video game is changed and no longer requires its hardware, so the fanbase has become more digital. This means fans can easily share their creations “and [foster] a sense of community” online, but this also invites “individualistic competition” through making the best or most popular ROM hack (Patti & Mukherjee, 137-38). Another example of this competition would be randomized nuzlockes where a mod randomizes *Pokémon* encounters to make the games more challenging, and players compete to see who can make it to the end of the game faster with the fewest ‘deaths’.

The second downside to ROM hacks is that while they’re available on multiple platforms, “the technological modernity (...) shaping the mobile media development can lead to furthering social exclusions” (Patti & Mukherjee, 138). Therefore, ROM hacks are limited by the very technology

which makes them accessible since “wireless access or mobile internet is going to be contingent and negotiated and not (...) seamless” (Patti & Mukherjee, 139). Cell tower coverage, internet access, and mobile device quality vary depending on one’s location and price range so ROMs aren’t *fully* accessible to everyone. Thus the growth of the community of ROM hack creators and players is hindered by these base paywalls even if ROMs themselves are free.

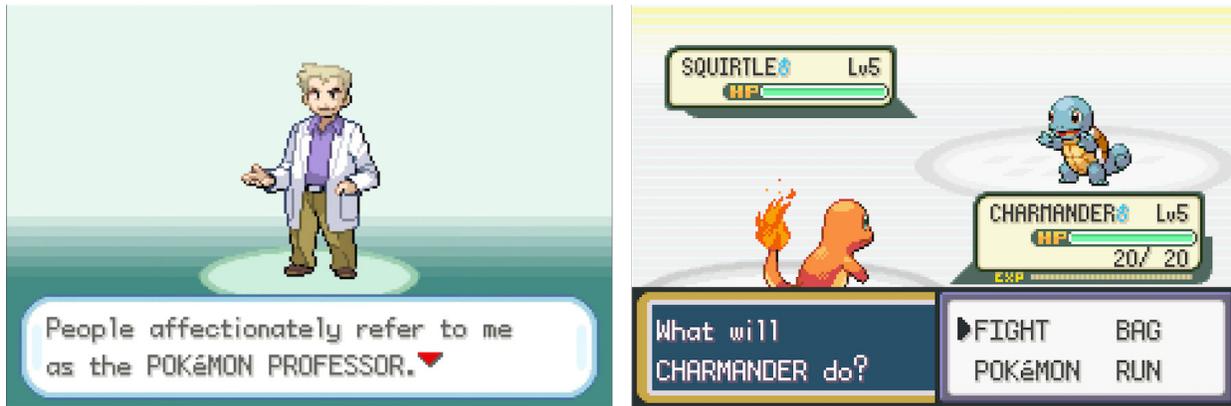
However, looking at the greater picture of accessibility and sharing creations, it’s clear that ROM hacks are a staple of video game communities and make them stronger even if they’re not completely widespread. As I mentioned before, mobile technology and internet quality can hinder access to ROMs, but compared to the video games sold on the market, they still offer an intimate experience with other fans at a lower price. The newest *Pokémon* video game, *Pokémon Legends: Arceus*, retails for \$60 as does the newest *Digimon* game *Digimon Survive*, and both games require newer consoles such as the *Nintendo Switch* to play. Since “these intimacies and expressions have [already] been budgeted, rationed, and calculated,” it is clear that ROM hacks offer a great opportunity to change video games to offer more personalized experiences for those that want to play differently (Patti & Mukherjee, 139).



Pokémon and Digimon

As a fan of both franchises, I have to acknowledge that *Pokémon* and *Digimon* have very different game styles with *Digimon* changing drastically from game to game and *Pokémon* following more of a formula. In order to “situat[e] [myself] as a writer in relation to the game[s]” I have to first put aside my “personal relationship” to them and any lingering favoritism (Patti, Russworm, & Malkowski, 109). To be clear I have played many *Digimon* and *Pokémon* games, and have been working through

Digimon Nova Red by Guizeinbuick, my first *Pokémon* ROM hack, since I am a firm believer in “playing to write” to best give my analysis on it (Patti, Russworm, & Malkowski, 109). I will begin this section by explaining the basic mechanics and storyline of *Pokémon* video games.



The plot of the main *Pokémon* games follows the player as you're given a starter Pokémon from that region's Pokémon professor and set out on a journey to collect Pokémon, battle other Pokémon trainers (including your rival), and defeat the eight gym leaders before challenging the Elite Four in order to become a Champion. You do so by building up your Pokémon team of six, gaining experience (EXP) by battling both wild Pokémon and other trainers in order to level up and evolve them to increase their stats (health, attack, defense, etc.). You're also able to interact with NPCs in the world to heal your Pokémon, buy items, trade, and get information.

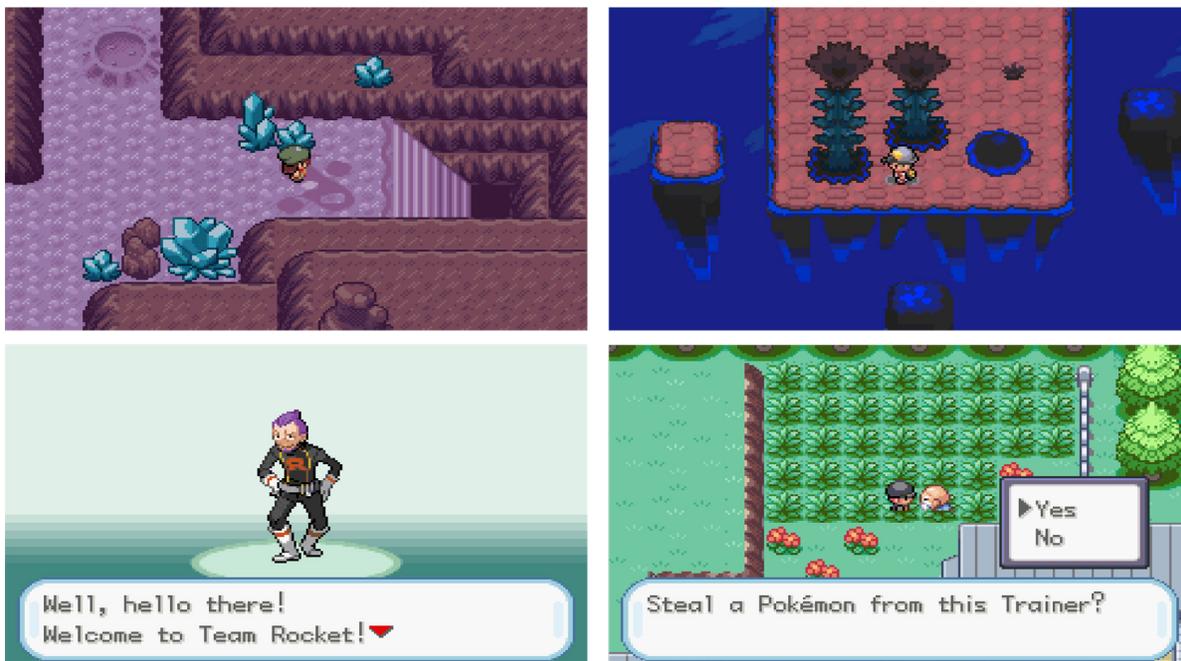


The main storyline throughout the games includes you stopping the antagonists, an evil team or organization, from reaching their goals such as world domination. Some of the objectives to accomplish, other than becoming a Pokémon Champion, is to complete the Pokédex which is a national encyclopedia for the different Pokémon available. You reveal some information by simply encountering a Pokémon, but complete the data by catching it in a Pokéball. Therefore it's difficult to “apply the concepts of a set duration or ending to this game” since it depends on what your goal is (Patti, Russworm, & Malkowski, 110).



A Pokédex Entry from *Pokémon Fire Red*

There's a plethora of *Pokémon* mods out there that add challenges such as “randomizers” which randomize the possible *Pokémon* encountered, or mods with custom sprites for “fakemon” (which are fan made *Pokémon*). There are even restructured *Pokémon* games where players can explore fan made regions and storylines. Some popular ones include *Pokémon Gaia* (2018), *Pokémon Dark Cry* (2009) which is a darker, R-rated version of *Fire Red*, and *Pokémon Fire Red Rocket Edition* (2020) where you play as a Team Rocket grunt (antagonist). Overall the possibilities for mods are never-ending and add interesting twists on an otherwise well-known and classic formula.



Pokémon Fire Red Rocket Edition

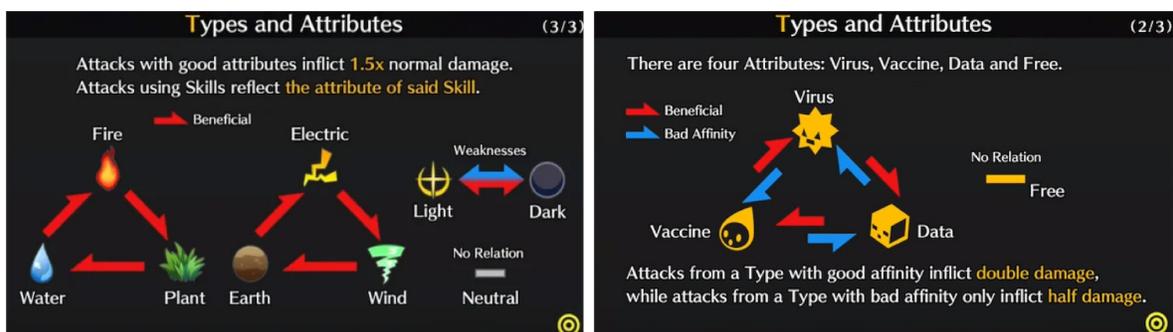


Similar to the aforementioned mods *Digimon Nova Red* is also a mod of *Pokémon Fire Red*, however where it stands out from the others is through the implementation of a completely different franchise. *Digimon Nova Red* “attempts [to create] immersive play on its own terms” by making minor dialogue changes, sprite changes, and interweaving aspects of *Pokémon* to create a well-balanced experience for *Digimon* fans. The mod replaces all *Pokémon* with *Digimon* but the plot remains the same; you pick a starter *Digimon*, build up a team of six, fight trainers and gym leaders, defeat the Elite Four, and complete the Pokédex. This crossover of franchises, while at first glance is a simple change of sprites, is actually more complex in the way different mechanics are combined or excluded from the mod.

The basis of including *Digimon* in a *Pokémon* game is easier to do since the mechanics of *Digimon* games vary greatly. For example both *Pokémon* and *Digimon* have elemental “types” assigned to them, but where *Pokémon* has a set of 18 (i.e. fire, water, grass, normal, electric, ice, fighting etc.) *Digimon* types change from game to game and often have secondary levels. In *Digimon World: Dawn and Dusk* (2007) for example, there are eight “species” Holy, Dragon, Aquatic, Bird, Dark, Beast, Machine, and Insect/Plant that can be combined with the eight attributes of light, shadow, fire, earth, water, steel, wind, and electric. Then again in *Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth* (2015) there are nine types; fire, water, plant, earth, electric, wind, light, dark, and neutral on top of attributes, which are Data, Virus, Vaccine, and Free. Therefore, *Digimon* types and their combinations are more complex and less consistent than *Pokémon*, so in *Digimon Nova Red*, *Pokémon* types are used since they’re more well known and are already programmed into the base game.

Light Fang			Night Claw		
Species	Main Attribute	Weak Attribute	Species	Main Attribute	Weak Attribute
Holy	Light	Shadow	Dark	Shadow	Light
Dragon	Fire	Earth	Beast	Earth	Fire
Aquan	Water	Steel	Machine	Steel	Water
Bird	Wind	Thunder	Insect/Plant	Thunder	Wind

Digimon World: Dawn and Dusk (2007) species and attributes



Digimon Cyber Sleuth (2015)

While the mod may leave game mechanics in place, it also improves on existing gameplay. Where instead of the typical 151 Pokémon available in *Pokémon Fire Red*, we have 250 Digimon to collect with sprites that reflect on the fan community (some original pixel art from DeviantArt) and previous *Digimon* games (mainly *Digimon Adventure 02: D-1 Tamers* (2000) and *Digimon World DS* (2006)). This adds around 100 more creatures to catch and evolve, further extending the game's playability and run time, allowing players to build truly unique teams.



Digimon Adventure 02: D1 Tamers



Digimon World DS (left) and Darcmon Sprite from MOC-7 on DeviantArt (right)

The mod does however have some limitations; for example even though there are nearly 100 more creatures to use in *Digimon Nova Red*, there are no shinies available for capture. Shinies are a characteristic of *Pokémon* games where normal sprites have an alternate “shiny” form which has certain chances of appearing (in *Pokémon Fire Red* the odds are 1 in 8192), so the mod does have less content in terms of being able to hunt shiny sprites. This however is understandable considering the work it would take to make original shiny sprites for 250 Digimon.



Charizard (left) and Shiny Charizard (right)

There are also some graphics and dialogue which aren't changed and break the game's continuity, such as the Pokédex, PC system, and overworld sprites. This includes the sprites in NPC houses and the overworld like the Snorlax that blocks the road; although the dialogue was changed to say "Digimon" it's still Snorlax. Similarly many NPCs have Pokémon sprites at their side, yet refer to them as Digimon such as the Pukumon which is clearly a Poliwhirl.



Although there is some discontinuity, overall the mod does a good job of implementing just enough *Digimon* characteristics to make it an enjoyable experience different from the original. For example the Digimon entries in the Pokédex are each unique and give information on the evolution requirements. This is extremely important since the evolution lines for Digimon tend to branch out unlike the linear path for Pokémon; still they're kept vague in order to instill a sense of discovery. Letting the player know if something can evolve via level-up makes sure that players don't waste their time trying to evolve their final Digimon form. Another interesting addition are Digi-Eggs which can evolve certain Digimon, although their names are slightly changed in the mod (i.e. the DigiEgg of Courage is a Red DigiEgg in the game); these eggs are available for purchase in the Pokémart and are a cool extra mechanic calling back to *Digimon* anime and games.



Additionally, *Digimon Nova Red* includes Digimon specific moves such as “Fish Power” and “Pepper Breath” which are staples of Gomamon and Agumon in the *Digimon* anime. These details therefore add up and make it obvious this mod was thoughtfully made, even adding content from newer *Pokémon* games such as the “Fairy” type (introduced nine years after *Fire Red*) which adds more dimension to type advantages/disadvantages. I did “experience some of the game’s unanticipated... realities” such as feeling overwhelmed by the Digimon available and looking up an evolutionary guide, but that feeling simply encapsulates what the original *Pokémon Fire Red* was about; exploring an unknown world and the different creatures that inhabit it (Patti, Russworm, & Malkowski, 109). Nowadays most *Pokémon* fans are well versed in the original 151 Pokémon and can go through *Fire Red* with their eyes closed, so feeling overwhelmed with possibilities is a great indicator that *Digimon Nova Red* is worth exploring.

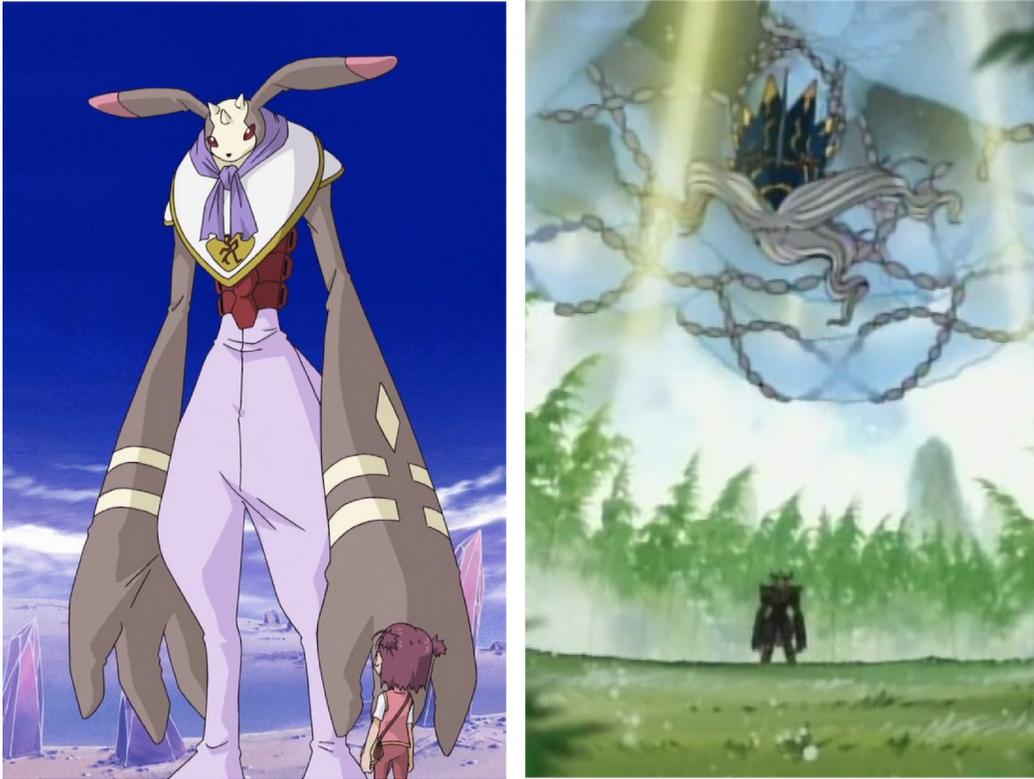
As for the animosity between fanbases, it largely stems from the fact that both franchises have collectable creatures you train and fight against and both came out around the same time (*Pokémon* in 1995 and *Digimon* in 1997). However both their conception and execution differ greatly with *Pokémon* being influenced by Satoshi Tajiri's love of bug collecting and *Digimon* taking inspiration from the Tamagotchi toys. *Pokémon* has always been more about "catching them all" and becoming the best Pokémon trainer whereas Digimon are seen as equals to their human counterparts. Something that portrays this best is the fact that Digimon can talk, and I don't mean repeating their name like Pokémon, I mean fully cognizant thought. This is a crucial characteristic of *Digimon* which remains constant throughout the video games and anime.



Digimon World Dusk (2007)



The scale of Pokémon and Digimon are also very different and can be explained through their names; Pokémon referring to “pocket monsters” and Digimon for “digital monsters”. Pokémon exist in the human world naturally but Digimon originate from a digital world and either go to the real world or players go to theirs. This also means Digimon have more potential to be larger in scale and more intricate in their designs since Pokémon are closer to wild animals where Digimon are more fantastical. This doesn't make *Digimon* “better” than *Pokémon*, it just means they're trying to evoke different feelings.



Larger Digimon, shown in their own world



Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth



Digimon Nova Red

In summation, the creativity and execution of implementing Digimon in a *Pokémon* game goes to show that “video games... remain a site of pure fun” (Patti, Russworm, & Malkowski, 111). At the end of the day, *Digimon Nova Red* is a melding of two cherished pieces of media, and it’s fun to see well-known Digimon in the *Pokémon* setting. Mods are made not only to customize video games but also “to generate critiques about technology and society”, and although it may not be an intricate critique, *Digimon Nova Red* inherently goes against the stereotype that *Digimon* and *Pokémon* are rival franchises and instead brings beloved Digimon to the world of *Pokémon* for a unique experience for fans of either (Patti, Hudson, & Zimmermann, 131).

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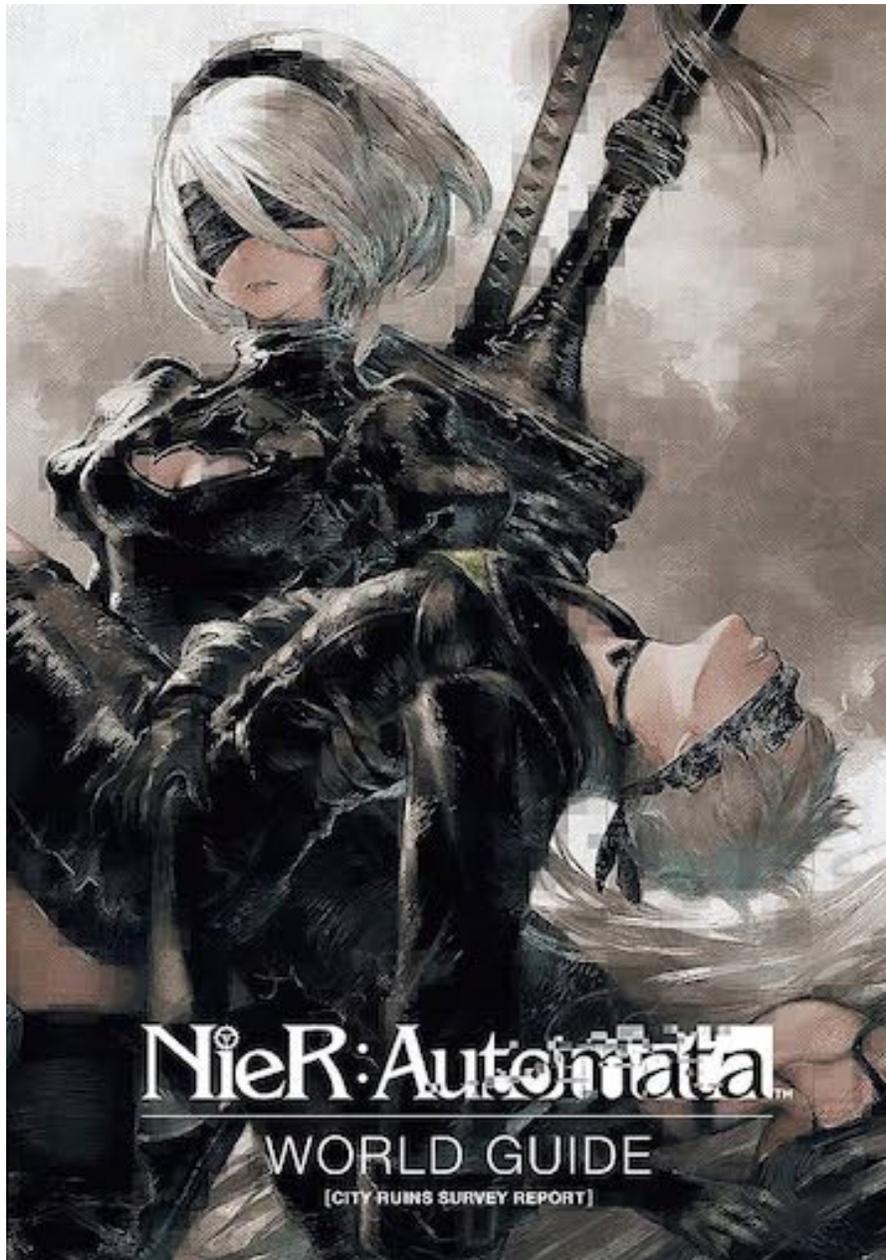
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The Player-Game Relationship: Nier:Automata and the Metanarrative

- Jimmy Nguyen



Abstract:

During a portion of the 2010s, a vigorous public discourse unfolded concerning the storytelling capabilities of video games. Concurrently, there was a surge in meta games, wherein the game's narrative directly references video game conventions and gameplay mechanics, blurring the distinction between storyline and programming. This thesis posits a central argument that rejects the existence of a clear boundary – contending that video games embody both technology infused with narrative and code laden with ideology.

Through a meticulous analysis of the 2017 Japanese video game *Nier: Automata* (Square Enix) using Russworm and Malkowski's game analysis framework where I will consider "the computational nature of video games, which usually have all of the familiar elements – plots, characters, themes, dialogue, cinematography, sound, editing – and also player actions, machine actions, game mechanics, controller configurations, informational interfaces, code, and so on." (Russworm and Malkowski 111) This study explores how the posthuman themes within its narrative intertwine with meta-references, weaving a tale about how affect binds players and games, as well as humans and technology.

The initial focus is on the game's structure, employing the narrative technique of focalization to present the same events from various character perspectives. Accompanied by shifting camera angles and gameplay styles, this intentionally creates a destabilizing experience for players. The outcome is a meta-narrative concerning the player, navigating through confusion to make sense of fragmented experiences. This integration of players into the game's story underscores the temporary merging of players and games during play.

This close interconnection between players and games, established through the game's structure, is then extrapolated onto the theoretical framework of the posthuman. The ensuing exploration delves into what remains of the self when technology challenges the conventional notion of a stable, singular, and self-evident identity. The game's response suggests that affect is the origin of subjectivity, serving as the force that unites disparate bodies and consciousnesses. Communicated through gameplay, structure, art, and writing, this elucidates how affect manifests in a video game – a technological creation – and intricately involves the player.

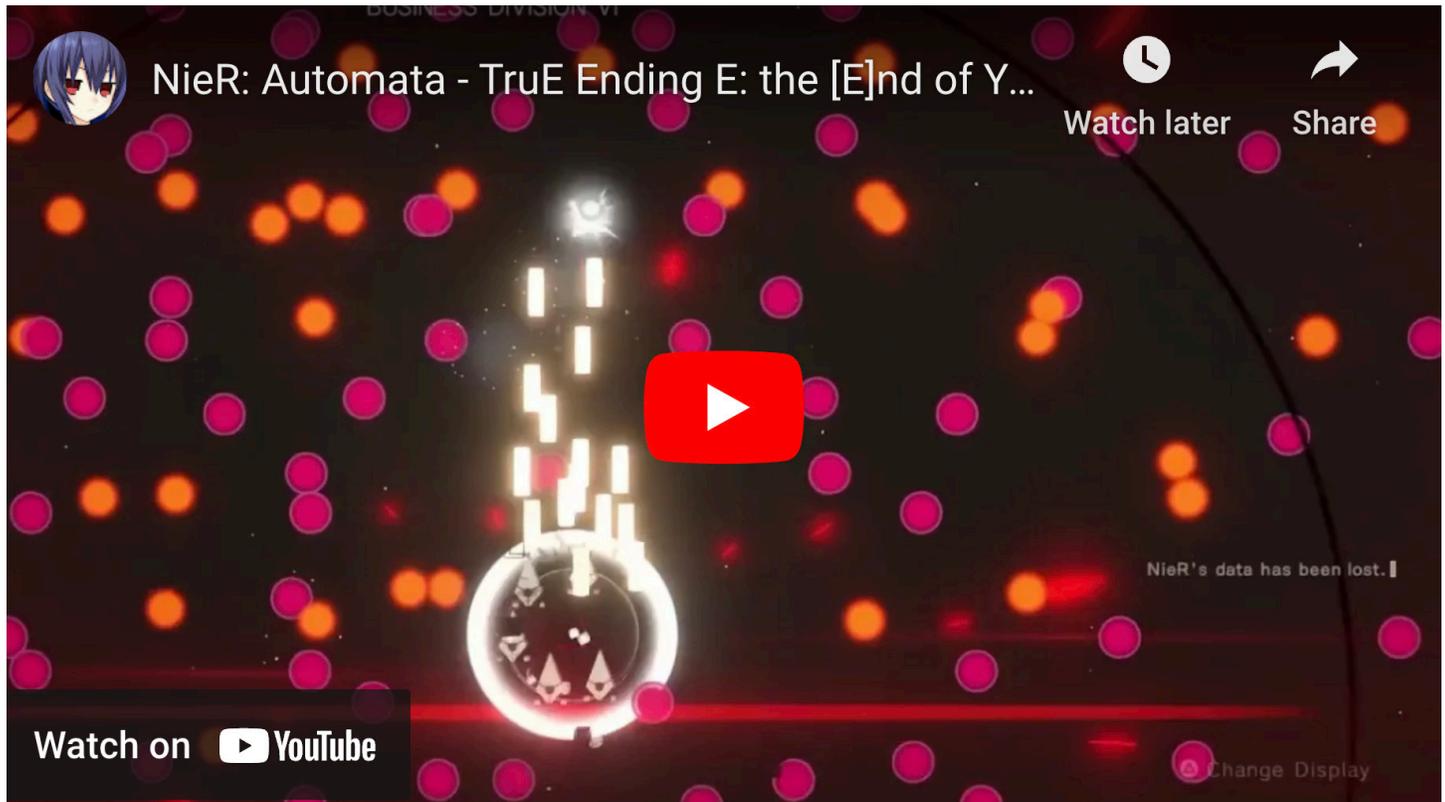
The Question of "Why" Videogames.

In 2014, three years prior to the debut of *Automata*, game director Yokō Tarō delivered a public talk at the Game Developers Conference. During this presentation, Yokō discussed his approaches to game design, detailing methods, processes, and objectives. He outlined his aspirations for the games he oversees, expressing a keen interest in exploring the uncharted territory beyond the well-established realms of entertaining narratives and enjoyable game systems existing in the world. Yokō emphasized his curiosity about the "gray zone," that space untouched by others, stating, "I want to see what's beyond that wall... It's the space where no one has entered yet" (41:25 - 42:15). In challenging established norms, especially those pertaining to AAA games, Yokō questioned the conventional expectations of what a video game should embody. He envisioned future games transcending the limitations imposed by these conventions, expanding the potential of video games beyond the confines of the existing restrictive wall.

While Yokō Tarō did not explicitly reference *Automata* in connection with his visionary perspective, examining the initial statement of the game in light of this context reveals a resonance with Tarō's sentiments from his 2014 presentation. In the opening moments of *Automata*, 2B, the primary protagonist, speaks against a white backdrop: "Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death... I often think about the god who blessed us with this cryptic puzzle... and wonder if we'll ever get the chance to kill him." This statement incorporates layers of self-reflective references. The concept of the "never-ending spiral of life and death" mirrors the destinies of the android soldiers as they perish on the battlefield, only to have their data "reborn" into new bodies. It also parallels the game-like pattern of a player character dying in a video game and being "revived" upon reloading a saved game. Additionally, the narrative captures the cycles inherent in conventional video game development and release. The intertwining themes of dissent, rebellion, and meta-awareness in *Automata* suggest a departure towards new

possibilities in video games while remaining cognizant of the medium's historical trajectory.

After 2B initially contemplates the notion of confronting her god at the start of the game, the “gods” within the world of *Automata* meet their demise in the game's epilogue. The concluding credit sequence adopts the format of a modified version of the “hacking minigame.” Players are assigned the task of shooting down each credit entry, engaging with the game's designers, writers, and marketers. This symbolic battle is vividly depicted as an individual's struggle against a formidable, overarching force, with the player's small triangular ship besieged on all sides by names and titles.



The ending of *Nier: Automata*

What took me by surprise even more was the series of inquiries posed to the player each time they face defeat, including questions like: “Is it all pointless?” “Do you concede there is no meaning to this world?” The one that left the most profound impact on me was: “Do you think games are silly little things?” This particular question directly addresses the player and their connection to games, prompting them to make a value judgment – are games mere frivolities, or do they carry deeper significance? In response to each of these questions, players can opt for a “yes” or “no” answer, with selecting “yes” resulting in an immediate end to the game. Refusing to succumb to these nihilistic queries prompts encouraging messages from other real players to appear on screen. This is where Yang's concept of the “media artifact” and “media event” intersect (Yang 128). By subverting conventional game norms, the artifact and event coalesce into one, as the artifact itself presents its events directly to the player. While the specific messages I encountered are now lost to time, in general, they acknowledged the difficulty of the battle, encouraged perseverance, and assured me of that victory was possible based on their shared experiences.

The indescribable rush of emotion I experienced upon encountering these messages was overwhelming. In that moment, it was challenging not to sense a connection to the usernames on the screen, interpreting the messages as if they were specifically intended for me. However, it couldn't be

further from the truth that these couldn't have been crafted for Jimmy, the boy spending his summer between high school and college with his grandparents on the coast of Vietnam. Nevertheless, I envision that they were, in fact, crafted for someone sat in front of their screen, grasping a controller or mouse, fighting their way through a challenging battle while resolutely **refusing** to dismiss games as mere frivolities. Employing Hudson and Zimmermann's concepts from "Writing about Digital and Interactive Media," I contextualize the game "within [its] cultural, historical, political, and social contexts" (Hudson and Zimmermann 136) to elucidate precisely why this moment holds such profound significance. Against the backdrop of the loneliness epidemic in America and the *hikikomori* phenomenon in Japan, where people are experiencing heightened levels of isolation, the question emerges: what role do video games play in addressing this issue, and why video games? Through elements like the music, thought-provoking questions, and the deliberate blurring of the boundary between player and game, as established throughout the rest of the game — addressing the "who" and "what" — players collectively undergo a shared affective experience. This shared experience is then harnessed to advocate for selfless action, answering the "why."



Well... do you?

This, too, unfolds as a narrative, shaped by the game's construction just as much as 2B's mission was. Consider the player's journey: it begins with a narrow yet stable perspective, constrained by YoRHa propaganda and the solitary window (2B) into the game's world. As the player internalizes 2B's beliefs and adopts her YoRHa-prescribed motivations, the player gains access to the viewpoint of 9S, our second playable character, and subsequently, the myriad interconnected perspectives available to him. This expansion introduces uncertainty, confusion, and instability – the fight is no longer for humanity but for what purpose? The game deliberately refrains from offering a concrete answer, allowing the question to linger heavily. The notion of "who" becomes increasingly intricate and convoluted. Within the player, 9S's memories intertwine with 2B's, enabling muscle memories to transition from one body to the next. However, these carry subtle differences, creating an uneasy continuation. Eventually, the web of identities converges, leaving only a simple icon of the player's avatar – a white triangle amidst a sea of black, battling abstract threats reminiscent of the early days when *Space Invaders* discreetly emerged in Japanese arcades in 1978. It serves as a reminder that this essence constitutes the fundamental nature of many video games even now. The narrative

concludes with an act of self-sacrifice, relinquishing the player's own save game to assist someone else. This is portrayed as a genuinely selfless deed, with the game consistently emphasizing that the player may neither like nor agree with the beneficiary and that extending this aid yields no personal advantages for the helper.

This concluding series of embedded questions prompts the player to reflect on their interactions with games and optimistically suggests channeling those feelings into positive connections with other players. Gaming does not have to be a solitary experience, you have walked through the same steps of thousands of others after all. To underscore this message, 2B's monologue is reiterated at the game's conclusion, albeit with selected modifications: "Everything that lives is designed to end. They are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death. However... life is all about the struggle within this cycle. That is what 'we' believe." The intertwining experiences of living and playing merge seamlessly, presenting yet another layer in *Automata*. These layers extend beyond the confines of this specific game, indicating how players navigate their daily lives intertwined with the media they consume.

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Not Holding The Player's Hand: Elden Ring - Wasay Qureshi

Elden Ring starts off by leaving a strong impression on the player. Immediately after a short tutorial where the player likely lost to the boss fight, the player is dropped in a vast, open world, with little guidance on what to do next. It's as if the player is lost in the world; they can go wherever they want and do whatever they want. In my own playthrough, which spanned 160 hours from start to finish, this was a sentiment that remained consistent throughout.

With its story written in collaboration with the legendary George R. R. Martin and developed by the universally acclaimed FromSoftware studios, expectations for the game were high preceding its release. This is particularly true because this was FromSoftware's first foray into the open-world genre. It's safe to say the game was a resounding success; just the PC version of the game sold 10 million copies a few weeks after launch, and the game won game of the year for 2022. Many players, including myself, praise the open-ended design of the game, and its ability to have confidence in the

player to figure things out on their own.

In this blog, I explore two parts of this open-ended design, the unique open world that stands out amongst the sea of open-world releases in recent years, and the complex combat system. I argue that this is all in service of what I'll call the "Player Discovery Principle", under which the lack of guidance in the game forces the player to figure things out on their own, making discoveries and overcoming obstacles all the more meaningful for the player. In *Playing to write*, Trea Andrea M. Russworm and Jennifer Malkowski argue that aspects of games such as difficulty and accessibility may hinder players from fully completing games (Russworm & Malkowski 109). In doing so, they specifically point to titles from FromSoftware, who developed *Elden Ring*. By the end of my analysis, I will have argued that the difficulty and general lack of accessibility in teaching the player important in-game concepts is actually motivation for some players to keep playing *Elden Ring*.

Exploration

Elden Ring features a vast open world. On its own, this is nothing special, but it is the way in which the open world is designed and how the player is able to interact with it that makes exploration stand out in the video game market from recent years. While many other games will instruct the player through quest markers, minimaps, and tutorials, *Elden Ring* allows the player to be lost in its world. There is minimal guidance, and after a brief tutorial at the very start, the player is dropped in the region of the game known as Limgrave. The first thing most players do here is marvel at the scenery — The sky is bathed in a golden light, and all around the player is lush greenery. Mountains can be seen in the distance, with the one directly in front housing a foreboding castle on top. This castle serves as the first "dungeon" for many, although the player has the ability to completely skip it and venture out to the other regions in the game. As soon as the player steps off the starting plateau, they come face-to-face with the Tree Sentinel — a boss enemy that the player will likely not be able to beat in their first few tries. From here, the player has a few options. They can either keep trying to fight the Tree Sentinel despite having just started the game, or they can try exploring Limgrave, pick off a few weaker enemies to gain experience and level up, or discover their first mini-dungeon and clear it to gain experience that way. The player may instead skip all of this and go straight to the castle they saw atop the mountain while on the starting plateau. The key point here is that it is all up to the player.



A player entering Limgrave for the first time

To put things into perspective, I had considered all of these options within the first 15 minutes of playing the game. Given this, it becomes easier to imagine the extent of player freedom I had in the 160 hours of my playthrough of the game. For the entirety of the game, the player not only has the freedom to decide, when, how, and which of the game's larger objectives to tackle, but this freedom also extends to more granular and short-term decisions the player can make. For example, if the player ventures into any of the "dungeon" levels (such as the castle on top of the mountains mentioned above), they will find that there are multiple different pathways in the dungeon. Some will take you to the final boss area of the dungeon, while others might take you to an area where a mini-boss may reside. In fact, some of these pathways might take you straight to an entirely new "dungeon" level as well. When complex level design like this exists in other games, developers want to make sure the player experiences the level design to its fullest by using things like quest markers, hero-path mode or invisible walls. In doing so, they remove all agency from the player. This is not true for *Elden Ring*. The player is not told anything about the multiple different pathways that might exist in a dungeon, and it is up to them to explore the dungeon to find such pathways. As a result, the player is granted agency to make their own choices, and it is this agency that makes the player discovery much more rewarding compared to other games.

By allowing the player freedom in choosing how they want to explore the game, it becomes easy to see the extent to which the developers are following the Player Discovery Principle. Every *Elden Ring* player will have a different story: some might start the game by exploring a biome entirely separate from Limgrave, while some may choose to only tackle specific dungeons. Others might discover some well-hidden mini-dungeons, bosses, or loot that usually elude most players.

Combat

Like its level design, *Elden Ring*'s combat is also complicated and dense, and the player is given freedom to not only engage with combat how they want, but also to discover the complexities of the combat/player stat system. It is important to briefly explain the basics of *Elden Ring*'s combat/player stats system. The player character is given a set of stats in different attributes (e.g. vigor, which controls how much health the player character has, and intelligence, which controls the strength of the player's sorceries, and also how much the player can resist enemies' sorceries). The game also features a wide variety of weapons. Some attack by launching magic at the enemy, so they can be used at a distance. Others, like melee weapons, can only be used at close distance. Some of these melee weapons are heavy. These swing slower, but do more damage to an opponent's health and stagger. Others are light, allowing players to easily weave in attacks while also giving them more freedom to move around in between attacks. Like its exploration and level design, these systems also serve to embolden the Player Discovery Principle.

At the start of the game, players are prompted to choose a class for their character. These classes decide what weapons/armor and stats (e.g. strength, vigor, and intelligence) the player starts off with. This may seem like game design that goes against the Player Discovery Principle, but this is not true. The classes are malleable; throughout the game, the player can decide which stats to allocate points to as they level up. If one starts off with the astrologer class, they will have high intelligence and low strength. If however, midway through the game the player decides they don't like this setup, they can start allocating points towards strength, and choose not to level up intelligence going forward. With a special item, the player is also able to completely reallocate all the stat points they've gathered across all the different attributes of the player character. The starting class, then, can be seen as a gentle nudge in a certain direction as opposed to a funnel that forces the player to play the rest of the game a certain way.

Similarly, a player also has flexibility in deciding what their weapon layout will be. If a player has invested in the strength or dexterity stats, they will likely want to use melee weapons, which do more damage when the player has invested the strength and/or dexterity stats. They might decide to use heavier weapons, which are slower, but do more damage compared to lighter weapons. By using heavier weapons, players can also do more damage to an enemy's stagger, which, when broken, renders the enemy immobile and vulnerable, allowing the player to perform a devastating critical hit on the enemy. Other players might value dexterity in their combat. These players do not want to be stuck swinging around heavier weapons, and want the ability to quickly launch strikes on the enemy, and be able to react when the enemy launches their own attacks. For these players, the downside of doing less damage to enemy health and stagger is an acceptable trade-off for the increased dexterity. Similarly, some players might opt not to use melee weapons at all, and instead use magical staves which can launch a variety of magic attacks at the enemy at a distance. Most players will not stick to one sort of weapon layout. Both because they may get bored of a particular layout and because different enemies have different levels of resistance to different stats/weapons. Thus, the player is encouraged to experiment with their weapon layout, but not forced into anything. Thus, when the player finds a weapon/stats layout that works extremely well, they are rewarded — they discovered this layout on their own, and the game did not force anything on them.



A player using a melee weapon build to defeat a particular boss



A player using a magic weapon build to defeat the same boss

While many fans of FromSoftware games would argue that the difficulty of the game makes it enjoyable, that does not mean that they will not seek help when needed. Built into most FromSoftware games, including *Elden Ring*, is an online cross-player message system. Players can leave “markings” on the ground that will appear in the worlds of other players connected to the internet. These “markings” can contain helpful messages including, but not limited to any secret/hidden areas that may be nearby, or if a specific weapon combination will make little work of the boss just up ahead. In “(Un)limited mobilities,” Rahul Mukherjee argues that “Mobile media produce numerous affordances for sharing and fostering a sense of community” (Mukherjee 137). With its “marking” system, *Elden Ring* can also be considered a “mobile” experience, where players across different platforms and regions can directly communicate with each other in the game. Ultimately, it is up to the player if they want to engage with the mobility provided by such a system. Some argue that guidance from other players cheapens the experience, and reduces the reward gained by overcoming something on one’s own.

Russworm and Malkowski argue “Playing a game gives us the chance to: experience the game and its attempts at creating immersive play on its own terms; grapple with all of the overt features of video games, such as interfaces and character representations; and experience some of the game’s unanticipated moments and realities, like glitches and instances of player agency” (Russworm & Malkowski 109). This is true, particularly for games like *Elden Ring*, where player guidance is minimal and players are left to grapple with the obscurity of the game’s mechanics and world. As a result, the reward for overcoming challenges and achieving goals in the game is twofold: first, that challenges were overcome and goals were met, but also second, that this happened while the player was grappling with game mechanics and the game’s world. Compared to other games, achieving the different objectives in *Elden Ring* may be much harder than in other games, and as a result, some people may be turned off from playing the game. In fact, this is something that has been acknowledged by Hidetaka Miyazaki, the Director of *Elden Ring* himself. In an interview with the

New Yorker, Miyazaki states “I do feel apologetic toward anyone who feels there’s just too much to overcome in my games, I just want as many players as possible to experience the joy that comes from overcoming hardship” (Parkin 2022). For Miyazaki, it seems that the tradeoff of losing some players due to the game’s inaccessibility to have the player discovery principle in his games is worth it. This seems to have paid off, as all of Miyazaki’s games, including *Elden Ring*, have become extremely popular.

Player discovery is emphasized in almost all aspects of the game, and combined with the very little guidance the player is given, any discoveries made by the player become all the more enjoyable.

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